

Critique of a Limited Geography for Book of Mormon Events

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DURING THE PAST FEW DECADES, a number of LDS scholars have developed various "limited geography" models of where the events of the Book of Mormon occurred. These models contrast with the traditional western hemisphere model, which is still the most familiar to Book of Mormon readers.

Of the various models, the only one to have gained a following is that of John Sorenson, now emeritus professor of anthropology at Brigham Young University. His model puts all the events of the Book of Mormon essentially into southern Mexico and southern Guatemala with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the "narrow neck" described in the LDS scripture.¹ Under this model, the Jaredites and Nephites/Lamanites were relatively small colonies living concurrently with other peoples inhabiting the rest of the hemisphere.

Scholars have challenged Sorenson's model based on archaeological and other external evidence, but lay people like me are caught in the crossfire between the experts.² We, however, can examine Sorenson's model based on what the Book of Mormon itself says. One advantage of

1. John L. Sorenson, "Digging into the Book of Mormon," *Ensign*, September 1984, 26-37; October 1984, 12-23, reprinted by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS); *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985); *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990); "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 391-521.

2. See, e.g., Deanne G. Matheny, "Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 269-328. Matheny, who holds a Ph.D. in anthropology, criticizes Sorenson's model for skewing directionality (essentially, west is north) and ignoring the Yucatan peninsula, and she examines the

this approach is that this internal evidence is fixed, readily available, and easily verifiable, unlike external evidence, which is always subject to change and is not always easily accessible for verification. My own conclusion is that the internal evidence not only favors a western hemisphere model, but challenges *any* limited geography model.

THE TRADITIONAL WESTERN HEMISPHERE MODEL

Sorenson notes that the Book of Mormon's most obvious geographical requirement is that of a "narrow neck of land" or isthmus separating "a 'land northward' from a 'land southward,' in the general shape of an hour-glass."³ This narrow neck of land has traditionally been considered Panama (the Isthmus of Darien), which separates Central and North America (the land northward) from South America (the land southward).⁴

Under this hemispheric model, Lehi landed on the western coast of South America;⁵ the Book of Mormon events took place in South America with the Nephites occupying the northern portion of South America by the narrow neck and the Lamanites occupying the land to their south; the Nephites eventually expanded into North America as well; and the final war occurred in what is now New York State where Moroni deposited the plates in the Hill Cumorah.⁶

lack of evidence for metallurgy, tents, old world plants, named animals, and the advanced Jaredite culture as well as problems with correlations between archaeological and Book of Mormon sites. Sorenson vigorously defends his model and challenges Matheny's scholarship and logic in John L. Sorenson, "Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!" in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 1, ed. Daniel C. Peterson (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994): 297-361

3. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 6.

4. James E. Smith, "How Many Nephites? The Book of Mormon at the Bar of Demography," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 260.

5. The Reverend M.T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible; or, The Book of Mormon, Is It From God?* (New York: Ward & Drummond, 1887), 100 (photomechanical reprint of the original edition by Modern Microfilm Co., Salt Lake City), cites a revelation to Joseph Smith that Lehi landed 30 degrees south latitude in Chili. But Kenneth Godfrey, "What is the Significance of Zephi in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 76, writes that B.H. Roberts came to doubt the validity of the "landed in Chile" statement attributed to Joseph Smith. Much later Frederick Williams III showed that the statement did not originate with Joseph Smith. And even if it could be attributed to the Prophet, then he must have altered his views on the subject because in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 he said that Lehi's party landed "a little south of the Isthmus of Darien," which is two thousand miles from Chile. Even this change still puts the landing site in South America whereas Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 178, puts the landing site near the Guatemala-El Salvador border, which is north of the Isthmus of Darien.

6. James E. Smith, "Nephi's Descendants? Historical Demography and the Book of Mormon," in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 6, no.1, ed. Daniel C. Peterson (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994): 264-65.

According to LDS scholar Melvin Thorne, "Joseph Smith himself seems to have believed, at least in the early years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, that the events recorded in the Nephite account covered all of North and South America."⁷ This accords with Joseph Smith's account of Moroni's first visitation, in which Moroni "said there was a book deposited written upon gold plates, giving an account of *the former inhabitants of this continent* and the source from which they sprang."⁸

Sorenson agrees that the early Mormons believed in the hemispheric model:

But a tradition did originate among Smith's first followers and has endured persistently in popular Mormon thinking. There is every reason to suppose the originators of this tradition were following Smith's lead in the matter of geography, as they were in just about everything else in the new religion. The essence of this popular view of where the Nephites were located was that the entire Western Hemisphere was populated by Nephites and Lamanites, and that their wars and travels encompassed the whole of it.⁹

7. Melvin J. Thorne, "Complexity, Consistency, Ignorance, and Probabilities," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 182-83.

Joseph Smith's belief in the western hemisphere model seems to have persisted, however. In Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 213-20, is a letter Joseph Smith wrote on 1 March 1842 to John Wentworth, a twenty-six-year-old Chicago editor, who had requested a "sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints." In it, Joseph Smith wrote:

In this important and interesting book [of Mormon] 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 America in ancient times has been inhabited by two distinct races of people. The first were called Jaredites and came directly from the tower of Babel. The second race came directly from the city of Jerusalem, about six hundred years before Christ. They were principally Israelites, of the descendants of Joseph. The Jaredites were destroyed about the time that the Israelites came from Jerusalem, who succeeded them in the inheritance of the country. The principal nation of the second race fell in battle towards the close of the fourth century. The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country (Ibid., 215).

8. Jessee, *The Personal Writings*, 203 (emphasis added). The statement is included in the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon following the testimonies of the three and eight witnesses. Moroni visited Joseph Smith again in short order, relating "the very same things which he had done at his first visit, without the least variation"; returned again to "rehearse or repeat over again to me the same things as before"; and finally returned for a fourth visit the next day, relating "unto me all that he had related to me the previous night," so it seems unlikely that Joseph Smith got it wrong.

In his Wentworth letter, Joseph Smith elaborates on what the angel Moroni told him:

I was also informed concerning *the aboriginal inhabitants of this country*, 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 made known unto me (Ibid., 214, emphasis added).

9. Sorenson, "Mesoamerican Record," 393. Sorenson notes, "It is plausible that Smith

Sorenson notes that “while the statements that exist from early Saints about geography fail to spell out this model transparently, all that is said is consistent with the idea that this is what they believed.”¹⁰

As for the position of the church, LDS scholar James Smith notes that Orson Pratt’s traditional hemispheric views on Book of Mormon geography were “incorporated into his footnotes for the 1879 LDS edition of the Book of Mormon,” and “although the historical footnotes were not an official Church interpretation of the book, they represented and reinforced what had become the prevalent hemispheric view of Book of Mormon history.” Smith relates that “after the 1879 edition was published, there were lively discussions about Book of Mormon geography, but the Church did not offer any official interpretation” and has not done so to date, so that “when the new edition of the Book of Mormon was published in 1920, it omitted historical and geographical footnotes—a practice that has continued since,” although “the hemispheric interpretation seems to remain the most commonly held view among the general readership of the book.”¹¹

THE LIMITED GEOGRAPHY MODEL

Sorenson has identified 70 models of Book of Mormon geography, more than half of them developed within the past five decades although,

and his associates *assumed* this interpretation of the geography from their first reading of the Nephite account and for years failed to imagine there could be an alternative” (ibid., 394, emphasis added). Sorenson can more easily challenge Joseph Smith if Smith simply assumed a hemispheric geography rather than learning of it by revelation, as he arguably did from the angel Moroni.

Also, Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 9, cites four revelations to Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants and notes that nothing in them gave the early Saints “reason to question their *assumptions* of Lamanite/Indian homogeneity and hemispheric unity” (emphasis added). In fact, it is arguable that the revelations actually confirm their “assumptions.” At D&C 28:8, the Lord tells Oliver Cowdery to “go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them”; and at D&C 32:2, the Lord tells Parley P. Pratt to “go with my servants, Oliver Cowdery and Peter Whitmer, Jun., into the wilderness among the Lamanites.” In these revelations, God does not distinguish the Lamanites from other Native Americans, arguably because all Indians were Lamanites. At D&C 54:8, the Lord tells Newell Knight to go “into the regions westward, unto the land of Missouri, unto the borders of the Lamanites.” Here God is more specific about the location: Missouri borders the Lamanites; apparently the Indians west of Missouri were Lamanites. The fourth revelation cited by Sorenson, at D&C 49:24, says simply that “before the great day of the Lord shall come. . .the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose.” Again no differentiation is made, as if all Indians were Lamanites.

10. Sorenson, “Mesoamerican Record,” 393-94.

11. Smith’s “How Many Nephites?” 261-62. Writing in 1984, George Smith, “Is There Any Way to Escape,” 95, noted that the traditional hemispheric view “is still widely held; within the last few months, the *Church News* identified the estimated 177 million Indians of North and South America and Polynesians as Lamanites.” Even today, the introduction to the Book of Mormon describes it as “a record of God’s dealings with *the* ancient inhabitants of *the Americas*” (emphasis added). It also states that the Lamanites are “the principal ancestors of the American Indians.”

as Sorenson notes, some of them are probably sufficiently close that they could be lumped into "families-with-variants."¹² Even before 1938 there were attempts to limit the geography of the Book of Mormon since in that year, according to LDS scholar Noel Reynolds,

Joseph Fielding Smith spoke out against those who argued for a Book of Mormon geography that limited its people to small regions in the New World, and open discussion of such matters became more difficult. The efforts of Jakeman, Ferguson, and Franklin S. Harris Jr., to open the question of locating the Nephite Hill Cumorah outside of New York were greeted with suspicion and hostility.¹³

This seems to have changed in 1984, however, since in that year, as Reynolds reports,

a noteworthy event reopened and expanded discussion on the subject. The *Ensign* published a cautious, two-part précis of John L. Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, published in full in 1985. To the present day, the Church maintains a hands-off policy on the scientific or scholarly elements of these unofficial studies and publications. While Sorenson's limited Book of Mormon geography has attracted broad support among students of these questions, including many General Authorities, no official view of Book of Mormon geography has been adopted by the Church.¹⁴

Sorenson may have been motivated by nothing more than a scholar's desire to develop the best model possible based on the data since he is critical of some of the "scholarly study of Book of Mormon archaeology" by "zealous believers in the Book of Mormon"¹⁵ and notes that "no solution stands out as sufficiently persuasive to rally consensus behind it."¹⁶ He thus starts over with the basics by identifying every statement in the

12. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 3, 38-41. Of the 70 models, nine are internal only, and 11 are RLDS originated.

13. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *Brigham Young University Studies* 38:2 (1999): 33. Sorenson notes, *A Source Book*, 23, that "since nothing had been published on this matter for some time, we can suppose that it was unpublished work in progress which triggered his statement."

14. Reynolds, "Coming Forth," 33-34.

15. John L. Sorenson, "Instant Expertise on Book of Mormon Archaeology," *Brigham Young University Studies* 16, no. 5 (Spring 1976): 429-32.

16. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 3. After reviewing the history of attempts to locate the geography of Book of Mormon events and all seventy models, Sorenson, *ibid.*, 209, notes that "everything done so far in studying the geography of Book of Mormon events has been inadequate by reason of incompleteness, if not of real errors. . . . [E]xamination reveals that every single model has failed to deal successfully with certain geographical data in the scripture."

Book of Mormon that bears on its geography¹⁷ and proceeds to construct a geography that meets all the requirements of the Book of Mormon. But certainly his limited geography answers some of the questions that have been raised about the hemispheric model.¹⁸ For example, critic Robert Anderson mentions the “careful naturalistic examinations of the Book of Mormon which began in 1887” with Lamb’s *The Golden Bible*:

Lamb demonstrated problems and inconsistencies in Book of Mormon geographic descriptions, travel implausibilities, and population exaggerations. While no Mormon acknowledgment has been forthcoming, Lamb’s book was probably the impetus for the “new geographic theory” of the Book of Mormon which puts Cumorah in Central America and limits the whole Book of Mormon history to a geographic diameter of 400 miles.¹⁹

Anderson thus identifies three of the problems with the traditional hemispheric model recognized by LDS scholars themselves. First, the geographical clues in the Book of Mormon do not match a hemispheric geography. For example, Sorenson notes that “the promised land was quite surely located in the tropics since no indication of cold or snow is given in the text, while heat is.”²⁰ Second, the distances inferred from the travel times mentioned in the Book of Mormon imply a limited geography. For example, Thomas Ferguson, one of the early proponents of the limited Mesoamerican model, concluded that “since a group including women and children (mentioned in Mosiah 23-24) traveled from one place to the other in only twenty-one days, the distance from Nephi to Zarahemla

17. Sorenson, *A Source Book*.

18. David Wright in “Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in the Search for Religious Truth,” *Sunstone* 16 (September 1992): 38n59, opines that Sorenson’s attempt to “reduce the geography of the Book of Mormon peoples” is “a partially critical attempt to make sense of the Book of Mormon’s lack of concord with general ethnological, linguistic, and other cultural evidence from ancient America.” William Hamblin insists, however, in “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/3 (1993): 182-83, reprinted by FARMS, that “the driving force behind these developments [of a limited geography] was by no means an attempt to ‘remove these inherent improbabilities and protect the credibility of the Book of Mormon as authentic history’ as [critic Luke P.] Wilson asserts [in “The Scientific Search for Nephite Remains,” *Heart and Mind: The Newsletter of Gospel Truths Ministries* (Fall 1992): 3a] (again without any evidence), but because a careful reading of the internal geographical data in the Book of Mormon requires such an interpretation.”

19. Robert D. Anderson, “The Dilemma of the Mormon Rationalist,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 83n49. With respect to Lamb’s influence, Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 19, has “found no evidence that any students of the geography topic before or after [Brigham H.] Roberts’ single mention of Lamb in 1909 paid any attention to what that critic had had to say.”

20. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 49.

was most likely only 200 to 300 miles."²¹ Third, the large explicit and implied population sizes in the Book of Mormon suggest that other peoples were already in the western hemisphere and mixed with the immigrant Israelites.

One hundred years later and with the benefit of new knowledge, critic George Smith identified two additional problems:

Sorenson's articles attempt to solve the most obvious archeological problem of the Book of Mormon—its contradiction with overwhelming evidence that the Indians were descended from nomads who began to migrate from Asia across the Bering Strait more than 20,000 years ago. Considering that there were up to 1,500 Indian languages at the time of Columbus, Sorenson observes that it would be "impossible to suppose that all those languages could have derived from the Hebrew presumed to be the speech of the Nephites and Lamanites." To resolve these conflicts between scientific evidence and religious doctrine, Sorenson sees the Book of Mormon peoples as a small Hebrew culture confined to a limited geographical region in Central America, isolated from widespread Indian populations to the north and south of them.²²

Thus, two additional problems with the hemispheric geography addressed by LDS scholars are, first, the evidence that the Indians are descended from nomads who crossed the Bering Strait from Asia to North America thousands of years before the Jaredites arrived and, second, the 1,500 Indian languages that could not all have derived from Lehi's Hebrew in only 1,000 years.²³

21. Stan Larson, "The Odyssey of Thomas Stuart Ferguson," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 59.

22. Letter to the editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 5-6. Smith's letter was challenged by later letters in *Dialogue* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 8-10, and *Dialogue* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 11-12.

23. LDS scholars as well as critics recognize these problems with a hemispheric geography. For example, Sorenson in "Digging into the Book of Mormon," 29, notes that

For a long time, few people seemed to see any difficulty in setting the Book of Mormon in all of North and South America. The geography seemed so obvious—a continent northward and a continent southward, joined by a narrow isthmus. Eventually, however, accepting that view of the Book of Mormon lands became difficult in light of new information. For example, by the early twentieth-century, research had found that as many as 1,500 languages had been in use in the New World at the time of European discovery. And new knowledge about the process of language stability and change made it impossible to suppose that all those languages could have derived from the Hebrew presumed to be the speech of the Nephites and Lamanites. Archaeology also began revealing a bewildering diversity of cultures, reinforcing the idea that many groups had lived in the Americas.

Sorenson here describes what no one, including Joseph Smith, knew in 1830. The next year in *An Ancient American Setting*, 74, he elaborated on the number of languages:

One way to handle these and other problems inherent in a hemispheric model is to do as Fletcher Hammond did early on. As a lawyer who spent more than a decade studying the geography of the Book of Mormon, he frankly notes that "no part of South America, as presently constituted, fits in with Book of Mormon geography" and asserts that there is not a country in Central America "that well resembles the countries, the cities, the hills and the places mentioned in the Book of Mormon." He believes this is because "the entire face of the land of Central America has been changed since the destruction of the Nephites about 400 years after the crucifixion of Christ." He further believes that the reason "the Lord has changed the Book of Mormon lands since the extinction of the Nephites" is that if the narrow neck of land, the river Sidon, the hill Cumorah, and other geographical landmarks "could be ascertained with certainty, knowledge of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon would come without faith."²⁴ Thus, "it is next to impossible to make the geography of the Book of Mormon fit modern maps," and accordingly he thinks it "proper to avoid speculation on Book of Mormon geography, and confine our geography of that book to the book itself."²⁵

Hammond's way has not been the way of most other LDS scholars, however. They have addressed the problems with a hemispheric geography by proposing a limited, Mesoamerican model that accommodates other peoples in the Western Hemisphere, predating the Jaredites and accounting for the large populations and variety of languages. Sorenson notes that "by the sixties the increasing number of people working with the geography question had settled on Mesoamerica as the only plausible candidate area in the New World," and that

certain basic issues appeared to be settled for those who had paid close attention: (1) the area in which the story took place was far smaller than a continent, (2) the hill in New York could not be the scene of the final battle be-

About 200 languages were spoken in Mesoamerica alone, and at least ten times that many were used throughout the Americas at the time the European discoverers reached America. Some of the languages were as distinct from each other as Chinese and English. The Hebrew and Egyptian tongues were not found among them.

He observes, *ibid.*, 81. Clearly the hundreds of languages in Mesoamerica are only slightly, if at all, linked with western Asiatic tongues that Book of Mormon migrating groups might have brought. The large majority of the languages and the peoples speaking them simply have to be accounted for in another way.

24. Fletcher B. Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Company, 1959), 18, 122, 125.

25. Fletcher B. Hammond, "Where is the Hill Cumorah?" Address delivered on March 25, 1964, to the Campus Chapter of the University Archaeological Society, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 7.

cause of statements in the text itself, and (3) only some place within the high civilization area called Mesoamerica could qualify.²⁶

Sorenson wrote a forceful brief for the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the "narrow neck of land." He identifies the "land northward" with southern Mexico, including the states of Oaxaca and southern Veracruz; the "land southward" with southern Guatemala and the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco; the Sidon river with the Grijalva river; the hill Cumorah with Cerro El Vigia in the Tuxtla Mountains in southern Veracruz; and many Nephite and Jaredite cities, lakes, and other geographic features with ancient counterparts.²⁷ According to Sorenson, "the events in America about which [the Book of Mormon] tells directly were confined to a space perhaps 600 miles long and 200 wide."²⁸ His particular model seems to be the only one to have gained a following.²⁹

One question arises immediately with a Mesoamerican geography. If all Book of Mormon events took place in Central America, how did the plates get buried in a hill in New York State? Sorenson suggests that Moroni may have taken them to New York to get away from the Lamanite-controlled war zone in southern Mexico:

The Book of Mormon never tells us where, nor when, the plates of Nephi were buried by Moroni. Strong arguments can be adduced to suggest that he did not place them in the hill Cumorah of the final battle. (He would have had to hang around in the midst of the Lamanite-controlled hill territory for at least 35 years to do that, something most unlikely.) Hence that Joseph Smith obtained the plates from the hill in New York tells us nothing, either way, about where the battleground was.³⁰

26. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 28.

27. *Ibid.*, 178.

28. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 49.

29. William Hamblin in "Methodological Problems," 171n34, considers the "four most important recent" LDS works on Book of Mormon geography to be Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting* and *A Source Book*; John E. Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 20-70; and David Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981).

30. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 352-53. The limited geography theorists all seem to agree that Moroni carried the plates from Mesoamerica to New York. David Palmer in "Why Search for Cumorah?" FARMS reprint of Chapter 1 from *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1992), 20, speculates that he transported them possibly even hundreds of years later as a resurrected being. Sorenson agrees with this possibility in "Digging into the Book of Mormon," 30. Hammond in his *Geography*, 89, suggests that Moroni carried them to New York as a convenience to Joseph Smith. He believes that Moroni had read in First Nephi about Columbus and the Gentiles who came to the land of promise and somehow "knew that Joseph Smith would be among these Gentiles who would live on the Atlantic seaboard"; that Moroni saw "it would be almost next to impossible, at least in a physical sense, to require Joseph to

A powerful aspect of the limited geography model is its accommodation of other, pre-existing peoples in the Western Hemisphere. This major weakness in the hemispheric model is noted by Brigham Madsen, who writes that with the widely-accepted evidence of the first peopling of the Americas over eleven thousand years ago, one wonders how LDS church members today reconcile the Book of Mormon narrative of New World settlement by the Nephites around 600 B.C.E. as being the means by which the New World was occupied by the ancestors of the American Indians.³¹

Sorenson recognizes that "abundant evidence from archaeological and linguistic studies assures us that such people were indeed present," but solves the problem with his limited geography model.³² The presence of native populations would also "explain the presence of 200 Mesoamerican languages" that "it is impossible to explain. . . on the basis of Book of Mormon groups alone."³³

travel from New York to Central America once a year for three years to view the plates and on the fourth visit to obtain them"; and that Moroni concluded "it would be much better if he should, himself, go to what is now New York and there deposit the plates, so as to make access to them easy for Joseph."

Hamblin even describes the possible transportation means and route in "Methodological Problems," 178 (citations omitted):

An examination of a map of North America shows that it is possible to sail along the coast of Mexico, up the Mississippi River, and then up the Ohio River to within less than one hundred miles of the New York hill where the plates were buried. Trails and waterways along these major rivers have existed for several thousand years. Sorenson provides a sixteenth-century example of someone walking a similar route in less than a year; Moroni had thirty-five years between the final battles of the Nephites and when he buried the plates. Thus, the plates could have been transported by canoe to New York, along well-used waterways of the Hopewell Indians (who flourished c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 400).

31. Brigham D. Madsen, "Reflections on LDS Disbelief in the Book of Mormon as History," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 92. There were four responses to Madsen's article in the Summer 1998 edition of *Dialogue*, vi-xv, at least three of which argue that the Book of Mormon peoples occupied only a limited geography in Central America and that other populations were already here.

32. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 146-47. Sorenson's position is reflected in Frank Johnson's letter to the editor of *Sunstone* 14 (December 1990): 5, which responds to John Kunich's study of population sizes in the Book of Mormon, "Multiply Exceedingly: Book of Mormon Population Sizes," *Sunstone* 14 (June 1990): 27-44:

Among modern Book of Mormon scholars, no one that I am aware of maintains that the new world was empty when Lehi arrived, or that the Nephites and Lamanites multiplied in "splendid isolation." Certainly that is not an official LDS church position.

33. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 86. William Hamblin in "Methodological Problems," 179-80, agrees that a limited geography which accommodates indigenous peoples solves all these problems:

Indeed, a careful reading of the Book of Mormon text indicates that there must have been other, non-Book of Mormon peoples in the land [citing John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 1-34].

Finally, Sorenson agrees with Hugh Nibley that some of the people encountered by the Nephites were surviving Jaredites:

Considerable indirect evidence exists within the Book of Mormon that survivors from the time of the Jaredites lived on down into Nephite times and strongly influenced the latter group. Hugh Nibley has drawn attention to some of the evidence [in *Lehi in the Desert*, 238-42].³⁴

Sorenson notes that when Mosiah found "the people of Zarahemla," or Mulekites, they "could well have been a mixed bunch, including many descendants of Jaredite-period ancestors," and that Nibley had detected, on philological grounds, "Jaredite influence reaching the Nephites through Mulekite channels."³⁵ Thus a native population of surviving Jaredites would account for the apparent Jaredite influence on the Nephite culture, as reflected, for example, in their common names (Aaron, Coriantumr, Gilgal, Morianton, Nehor, Noah, and either Shiblom or Shiblun [there are both a Shiblom and a Shiblun in the Nephite history but only a single person with both names in the Jaredite history]).

In summary, the traditional view of Lehi's party coming to the western shores of South America soon after 600 B.C.E., spreading over the entire and otherwise empty western hemisphere during the next 1000 years, and giving rise to all Native Americans with their variety of languages is rejected by LDS and non-LDS scholars alike. LDS scholars do not see this as a weakness in the Nephite record but in our understanding of it, so that

by the mid-twentieth century, most authors believed Book of Mormon history took place primarily within the more limited confines of Central America. Today almost all writers on Book of Mormon geography agree that Lehi's landing place, the narrow neck of land, the lands northward and southward, and Mormon's Hill Cumorah were situated somewhere in Central America.³⁶

This limited geography accommodates native populations, which solves at least four problems. First, it accepts that people migrated across the Bering Strait land bridge thousands of years before the Jaredites. Sorenson believes that the Nephites fit "biologically into the picture we

Thus, the alleged problems of population levels, genetics, and languages of modern Native Americans are largely irrelevant, since the Book of Mormon allows for, and in many ways insists upon, the existence of other inhabitants of the Americas.

34. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 84.

35. *Ibid.*, 86.

36. Smith's "How Many Nephites?" 263-64.

now have of Mesoamerican populations" if "we see them as a relatively small group living among surrounding peoples who ultimately mixed with and absorbed their descendants."³⁷ Second, native peoples who mixed with the immigrant Israelites explain the large implied populations of Nephites and Lamanites that could hardly have descended from Lehi's small party alone. Third, native peoples account for the variety of languages among Native Americans that could not have evolved from Lehi's Hebrew language alone within such a short time. And fourth, surviving Jaredites explain the common names among the Jaredite and Nephite peoples and other cultural similarities between them.

CRITIQUE OF THE LIMITED GEOGRAPHY MODEL

The Book of Mormon itself challenges two major aspects of the limited geography model: first, the validity of any model smaller than a hemispheric model; and second, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the narrow neck of land. The internal evidence also challenges the survival of Jaredites and the presence of other peoples to mix with the Nephites and Jaredites. This casts further doubt on the limited geography model but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Hemispheric Geography: There is no identification in the Book of Mormon of a city, a sea, or any other place with a counterpart on a modern map. There is no prophecy, for example, that the Sidon river would be known in the latter days as the Grijalva. Nor are there, apparently, any names of places in the Book of Mormon surviving in the archaeological record to date.³⁸ We are limited to whatever geographical clues we can find in the Book of Mormon, and Sorenson has found many. Not only are

37. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 89.

38. William Hamblin in "Methodological Problems," 170 (bracketed material added), identifies many problems with trying to identify Book of Mormon geography from Mesoamerican toponyms (place names). He concludes:

Taken together, all of these problems mean that we will most likely never be able to learn the Pre-Classic [before A.D. 300] names for most ancient Mesoamerican sites. Barring further discoveries, we will therefore never learn from inscriptional evidence how the names of Mesoamerican cities were pronounced in Book of Mormon times.

The reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography thus faces several difficulties not found in biblical geography. In Mesoamerica there is a discontinuity of toponyms, whereas there is strong continuity in Palestine; inscriptional evidence from Mesoamerica uses symbolic glyphs for cities rather than phonetic transcriptions of the names, whereas inscriptional evidence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine usually contains a phonetic component; and finally, there is no Pre-Classic onomasticon (place-name list) for Mesoamerica, whereas Palestine has Eusebius's detailed *Onomasticon*, as well as those of later pilgrims. These items allow historians to create a map grid based both on names and distances between sites for key biblical toponyms. As noted above, a more accurate comparison to Book

there rivers, lakes, seas and seashores, cities, mountains, wildernesses, a "narrow neck of land," and such, but geographical directions like north and south; topological indications like up, down, and over; distances implied in days of travel; and other clues such as climate and animals. Using these clues, Sorenson has rejected a hemispheric model and superimposed all Jaredite and Nephite events on a Mesoamerican location.

Since the Book of Mormon provides no distances whatever, they must be calculated by how long it took to travel from one place to another. Sorenson's firmest calculation is the distance between the Nephite city of Zarahemla and the Lamanite city of Nephi. While a number of days' travel time between these two places occurs twice, the distance between no other two places is defined by a specific number of days' travel time except for the one or one and a half days' journey across the narrow neck (Alma 22:32; Hel. 4:7; see *The Narrow Neck of Land* below), and the meaningless distance of three days' travel time between Melek and Ammonihah (Alma 8:6). With these two exceptions, all other distances of any appreciable length that are specified in days of travel in both the Nephite and Jaredite records in the New World are measured by "many days" of travel (2 Ne. 5:7 (twice); Mosiah 8:8; 9:4; 22:13; 23:30-31; Alma 17:9; Ether 9:3).

Ammon and his search party of 15 other strong men left Zarahemla and wandered in the wilderness for 40 days before finding a hill near Nephi (Mosiah 7:1-5). Coming the other way, Alma and his followers escaped from the waters of Mormon, which was an unknown distance from Nephi (Mosiah 18:4-8), to Helam, traveling eight days in the wilderness (Mosiah 23:3), and then from Helam to Zarahemla, traveling first one day (Mosiah 24:18, 20, 22) and then twelve days (Mosiah 24:25), for a total of 21 days.

Sorenson finds Alma's journey "more helpful" than Ammon's journey in calculating the distance between Nephi and Zarahemla. Based on other travel accounts, he assumes Alma's party traveled about 11 miles per day, or 231 miles. Because of other factors, he thinks the "actual trail or road mileage between Zarahemla and Nephi" was "on the order of 250 miles," but "the distance as the crow flies would be more like 180."³⁹

Sorenson uses this distance and other clues to calculate, with increasing speculation, how far it was between other places such as Zarahemla and the northern limit of the land southward at the narrow neck (another

of Mormon geography is that of Bronze Age western Anatolia, where similar problems of reconstruction exist. Thus, while [critic] Wilson's point that biblical geography is better documented than Book of Mormon geography is readily conceded, that point by no means proves that the Book of Mormon is ahistorical, as Wilson concludes.

39. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 8-10.

180 miles), beyond which lay the land northward. Significantly, he relies on one journey of "many days" to locate the final battlefield at Cumorah near the narrow neck. Two generations before Ammon's journey to Nephi, Zeniff had taken a group of Nephites from Zarahemla to reclaim the land of Nephi. His grandson Limhi was the third and last king of the Nephites in the land of Nephi, and they were in bondage to the Lamanites. Limhi sent a search party to find Zarahemla to ask for help, but, as described by Sorenson,

unfortunately, their route somehow bypassed Zarahemla, took them through the "narrow neck of land" without their even realizing it, and brought them to the final battleground of the earlier people, the Jaredites. There they found ruins and a set of 24 gold plates left by the last Jaredite prophet, Ether (Ether 15:33; Mosiah 21:25-27). Sorrowfully, the explorers returned to their home in Nephi to report to Limhi, mistakenly, that the remains they had found must have been those of Zarahemla destroyed.⁴⁰

We then come to Sorenson's calculation of the distance to Cumorah:

The exploring party would have known approximately how long it had taken their fathers to travel from Zarahemla to Nephi only two generations earlier, so by the time they had gone, say, twice as far as the normal distance to Zarahemla, they must have wondered about their position and probably would not have gone much farther.

From Nephi to Zarahemla, on a direct line, was about 180 miles. Twice that distance would have taken them to the "line" . . . separating Bountiful from Desolation, the beginning of the land northward. At such a distance from home they would have thought of turning back. Surely diligent men such as the king would have sent on this mission would not have pressed on much farther. So it is unreasonable that the battleground of the Jaredites where Limhi's explorers ended up would have been more than 100 miles into the land northward from the "line" at the neck.

The hill Ramah, where the Jaredites destroyed themselves, was the same hill as Nephite Cumorah (Ether 15:11). This whole affair tells us, then, that the total distance from the city of Nephi to the last battlefield at Ramah or Cumorah is unlikely to have been more than 450, or perhaps 500, miles. . . . any increase in the dimensions would make the story of Limhi's explorers more difficult to handle. The hill Ramah/Cumorah seems, then, to have been within 100 miles of the narrow neck of land, and this is consistent with the Nephites' naming the southern-most portion of the land northward "Desolation," which included the last battlefield, strewn with bones and rusting weapons (Alma 22:30-31).⁴¹

40. *Ibid.*, 14.

41. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

This is how Sorenson places Cumorah near the narrow neck and not in New York State.

Sorenson's calculations are not unreasonable, but they do not at all preclude a hemispheric geography. Most of the Nephite history does indeed take place within a relatively confined area south of the narrow neck where missionaries can preach and armies can skirmish from city to city. Indeed, the Nephites have little to do with the land northward except for their eventual expansion into it and their final battle at Cumorah. The issue is whether the land northward is the entire North American continent standing empty and available for the Nephite expansion and final battle or whether, as Sorenson insists, the land northward was limited to southern Mexico with indigenous peoples living beyond that area. Sorenson is right, of course, that indigenous peoples were living throughout the western hemisphere, but whether the internal evidence accommodates other peoples will not be explored in this paper. The matter to be explored here is the extent of the land northward.

The extent of only the land northward is the issue because the southern extent of the Lamanite land of Nephi is completely undefined, and there is nothing to preclude equating the land southward with the whole of South America. As for the land northward, Nephi and Lehi, as well as the Jaredites, include North America as part of their promised land. To paraphrase Sorenson, while they may fail to spell this out transparently, everything in the Book of Mormon is consistent with North America being the land northward.

To begin with, the Jaredites would have been the first people in the western hemisphere under the literal, biblical account of history, which is embraced by the Book of Mormon. God leads the Jaredites from the tower of Babel to the New World, "into a land which is choice above all the lands of the earth" (Ether 1:42). God promises to bless them in this "land which is choice above all the lands of the earth" and to make of them "a great nation," indeed, the greatest nation on earth (Ether 1:43). This hardly describes the Jaredites as a colony in southern Mexico. Spread throughout North America, however, "as numerous as the hosts of Israel" (Mosiah 8:8), they were arguably the greatest nation on earth, although isolated from and unknown to the rest of the world.

That North America rather than Oaxaca and southern Veracruz was their promised land is further suggested by repeated descriptions of this land as "choice above all other lands," the same language used by Nephi and Lehi in more specifically describing North America (see below). In his abridgment of the Jaredite account, Moroni calls this land of promise "choice above all other lands" and declares that whatever nation possesses it "shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven" if they serve God (Ether 2:8-12, 15; 10:28).

Even Sorenson recognizes that something other than Mesoamerica is meant. Discussing Ether 13:2-4, 6, 8, Sorenson observes that

were "this land" taken in a narrow ("literal") sense as that where the Nephites and Jaredites of the record lived, the New Jerusalem would have to be near the narrow neck of land, but there is no LDS expectation of anything like that. The alternative is that Moroni, or Ether, is here speaking in general terms of the whole continent, which accommodates the prophecies in the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴²

In short, after the biblical flood, the Jaredites were the first people to arrive in the western hemisphere. They occupied the choicest land on earth, on which the New Jerusalem would someday be built. They were to become the greatest nation on earth. This is all consistent with a continental geography but hardly descriptive of a colony in southern Mexico surrounded by earlier arrivals.

Once the Jaredites are destroyed, the Israelites appear and the real history begins. Their promised land is even more clearly North America although, once Mesoamerica is transcended, the entire western hemisphere follows easily. The Lord tells Nephi while he is still in the Old World that if he keeps the Lord's commandments, he will be led to a "land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands" (1 Ne. 2:20). Presumably this is the same "land which is choice above all other lands" that the Jaredites were given, even though the Jaredites lived in the land northward and the Nephites, for most of their history, in the land southward. The promised land is, thus, more than either of their immediate lands.

Nephi later describes more specifically this "land which is choice above all other lands." While Nephi is en route to the promised land, he beholds in a vision a "man among the Gentiles" [Columbus] who "went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren [Native Americans], who were in the promised land" (1 Ne. 13:12). He foresees other Gentiles going "forth out of captivity, upon the many waters

42. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 312. There are other Book of Mormon references to the "New Jerusalem" that are consistent with "this land" being North America rather than Mesoamerica. Following his crucifixion, Jesus, in Bountiful between the lands northward and southward, said to the multitude that "this people will I establish in *this land*, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem" (3 Ne. 20:22, emphasis added). And Jesus later told the same multitude that if the Gentiles "repent and hearken unto my words. . . they shall come in unto the covenant and be numbered among this the remnant of Jacob, unto whom I have given *this land* for their inheritance; and they shall assist my people, the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of the house of Israel as shall come, that they may build a city, which shall be called the New Jerusalem" (3 Ne. 21:22-23, emphasis added).

[pilgrims]" and "many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise," who "scattered" and smote the Lamanites (1 Ne. 13:13-14; cf. 15, 17, 19).⁴³ The angel tells Nephi that after the Book of Mormon comes forth, if the Gentiles "harden not their hearts against the Lamb of God. . . they shall be a blessed people upon the promised land forever" (1 Ne. 14:2; cf. 22:7-8). These passages all clearly, if not explicitly, identify the promised land with North America.

At the conclusion of his voyage, Nephi relates: "And it came to pass that after we had sailed for the space of many days we did arrive at the

43. Sorenson believes, *An Ancient American Setting*, 97, that "the Spanish conquistadores (were) the earliest 'Gentiles' from across the ocean whom Nephi had seen in vision (1 Nephi 13:13-15)." This view is hardly credible. Nephi's vision at 1 Ne. 13:12-19 describes popular American history as Joseph Smith would have known it. More specifically:

At 1 Ne. 13:12, Nephi sees "a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters," and who, being "wrought upon" by the Spirit of God "went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land." In popular history, Columbus but hardly Cortes, the conqueror of the Aztecs with his conquistadores, was "wrought upon" by the Spirit of God.

Also, if 1 Ne. 13:12 describes Columbus rather than Cortes, as it seems to do, Columbus never made it to the seed of Nephi's brothers in southern Mexico or Guatemala. According to *The World Book Encyclopedia* 4 (1970): 690-97, he made it to many islands in the West Indies, including Hispaniola, Cuba, and Jamaica, set foot in Venezuela, and explored the coast along Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Since according to the Book of Mormon, Columbus came to the seed of Nephi's brothers in the promised land, the promised land would have to extend beyond the site of Sorenson's Book of Mormon geography to include some if not all of the places visited by him.

1 Ne. 13:13 then describes "other Gentiles" who were "wrought upon" by the Spirit of God and who "went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters." This would seem to describe the pilgrims seeking religious freedom in popular history, rather than the conquistadores seeking gold.

1 Ne. 13:14 describes "many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise" and the "wrath of God" upon the seed of Nephi's brothers, who were "scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten." This could arguably describe either the conquistadores or the pilgrims, although "many multitudes" sounds more like the waves of pilgrims than the small invading party of Cortes. Also, if 1 Ne. 13:13 describes the pilgrims, then mentioning the conquistadores in 1 Ne. 13:14 would be recounting history backwards, since the conquistadores preceded the pilgrims by about one hundred years.

1 Ne. 13:15 describes the "Spirit of the Lord" upon the Gentiles, who were white, fair, and beautiful, and prospered and obtained the land for their inheritance. In context, Nephi's vision does not describe two sets of Gentiles, the conquistadores who conquered Mexico, and the pilgrims who came to North America, but one set, the white English pilgrims who were guided by God to the promised land, and who scattered and slew the dark, unbelieving savages who were the seed of Nephi's brothers.

1 Ne. 13:16-19 describes the Gentiles who humbled themselves before the Lord, whose power was with them; their "mother Gentiles" who gathered upon the waters and the land to battle against them; the power of God with the Gentiles and the wrath of God upon those who were against them; and the victory of the Gentiles. This clearly is the Revolutionary War.

promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents, and we did call it the promised land" (1 Ne. 18:23). The Lord himself had led them to the "promised land" and told them that after they had arrived at the "promised land," they would know he was God (1 Ne. 17:13-14), so Lehi's people were not deluding themselves that they had arrived at the promised land, even though they landed south of the narrow neck. Clearly their promised land was not limited to Mesoamerica.

Lehi reinforces this point when he speaks to his sons "concerning the land of promise, which they had obtained" (2 Ne. 1:3). Again, they were south of the narrow neck but were in the promised land, which was at least the North American continent. With respect to this land of promise, Lehi says,

we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands;⁴⁴ a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a

44. Here again the land of promise is "choice above all other lands." If the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith's thinking as an author, he was obviously enthusiastic about his country. His enthusiasm as well as his piousness may also be reflected in Lehi's statement that "this [promised] land" is consecrated to them whom the Lord brings, and if they serve the Lord, "it shall be a land of liberty unto them" (2 Ne. 1:7). This choice land of promise was promised by the Lord to Lehi and his children and everyone who is led out of other countries by the Lord. Indeed, Lehi writes that *only* those brought by the hand of the Lord shall come to "this land" (2 Ne. 1:6), which could reflect Joseph Smith's naive belief that the pilgrims and all subsequent immigrants were led to this country by God.

The reasons for his enthusiasm for this choice land of promise where gentiles would prosper (1 Ne. 13:14, 20, 30) seem obvious. He lived in the second generation after the Declaration of Independence, which declared as a self-evident truth that all men are created equal, and that they have unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Revolutionary War, which threw off the yoke of a foreign monarchy, was recent enough that both his paternal grandfather, Asael Smith, and maternal grandfather, Solomon Mack, were veterans of it. The Constitutional Convention following the war drafted a constitution that provided for elections and checks and balances. Its Bill of Rights guaranteed the freedoms of religion, speech, and assembly.

All these civil rights and the novel political experiment in representational democracy were the culmination of a long history of humankind's hunger for personal freedom. They reflect the ideas of the great thinkers and writers of the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, from whom Jefferson, himself an enlightenment thinker, and the other founding fathers borrowed liberally. Those were apparently heady times. LDS scholar Richard Bushman notes in "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution" in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1982): 191-92, Joseph Smith's probable exposure to politics:

There is little reason to doubt that however the book originated, Joseph Smith must have absorbed the ordinary political sentiments of his time. The air was thick with politics. The Revolution, by then a half-century old, still loomed as the great turning point in American and world history. Americans annually celebrated the nation's birthday with oratory, editorials, and rounds of toasts. In 1824 and 1825, Lafayette, who had been absent from the United States for thirty-eight years, toured all twenty-four states with his son George Washington Lafayette. The following year, 1826,

land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord (2 Nephi 1:5).

Thus, Lehi's seed will inherit at least the North American continent, which would equate the Lamanites with the American Indians.

Lehi continues with respect to his own times, that "it is wisdom that this [promised] land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations" or other nations would overrun it (2 Ne. 1:8); the Lord promises that if those whom he "shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves" (2 Ne. 1:9); but "when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief," the Lord "will bring other nations unto them, and he shall give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten" (2 Ne. 1:10–11). This surely sounds like North American history from a Euro-American perspective, in which the Lamanites (Indians) lived by themselves but because of their unbelief, other nations came and took the land and "scattered" and "smote" them.

In short, while Lehi and Nephi are in the land southward, they are still in the promised land, which includes North America. There is no differentiation between where they are and the promised land they describe; it is all one. No one writes of living in one small part of a vast continent. Their thinking is continental, if not hemispheric.⁴⁵

was the jubilee anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and Fourth of July orators exerted themselves as never before. A few days after the celebration, news spread that on the very day when the nation was commemorating its fiftieth birthday, two of the most illustrious heroes of the Revolution, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, had died within six hours of one another. A new round of patriotic rhetoric poured forth to remind the nation of its history and the glories of republicanism. All this was reported in the *Wayne Sentinel*, Palmyra's weekly, along with coverage of yearly electoral campaigns and debates on current political issues. Joseph Smith could not easily have avoided a rudimentary education in the principles of American government and the meaning of the American Revolution before he began work on the Book of Mormon in 1827.

Even though Joseph Smith was little-educated, he apparently absorbed the enlightened political ideas of his time, many of which are found in the Book of Mormon, including the appointment of leaders by the voice of the people; the rule of law; a system of checks and balances for dealing with errant judges; majority rule; a land of liberty and equality; men possessed of rights (Mosiah 29:25-32); and religious freedom (Mosiah 27:2-3; Alma 1:17; 30:7).

45. There are other, scattered references later in the book that confirm this hemispheric perspective. Jacob speaks, while in the land southward, of the Gentiles being blessed upon "this land," which "shall be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles" with no kings, a "choice land. . . above all other lands" (2 Ne. 10:10-11, 19). Alma tells Helaman that the ball, or director, brought their fathers to the promised land (Alma 37:38, 44-45), even though they arrived south of the narrow neck. And in Helaman's account, in about 46 B.C.,

All other references to the land northward are consistent with its being North America. For example, Bountiful "bordered upon the land which they called Desolation, it being *so far northward* that it came into the land which had been peopled and been destroyed, of whose bones we have spoken" (Alma 22:30, emphasis added); "so far northward" seems to describe the distance to Cumorah in New York at least as well as Sorenson's calculated one hundred miles to Cumorah in southern Mexico. Sorenson's calculation is based on Limhi's story that his search party was "lost in the wilderness for the space of many days" and "traveled in a land among many waters, having discovered a land which was covered with bones of men, and of beasts, and was also covered with ruins of buildings of every kind, having discovered a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel" (Mosiah 8:8). A journey from Panama to New York seems no more problematical than Limhi's story on which Sorenson relies. In this story, it is not clear why the 43 men in the search party never did find Zarahemla, either going or coming; nor why they apparently came across no one else during their many days of wandering (which suggests there was no one else around); nor why they did not follow the Sidon river up or down to Zarahemla if, indeed, they came to the Sidon; nor why they did not apparently run into the sea, since the land southward was nearly surrounded by it, unless they somehow hit the narrow neck precisely both going and coming; nor why they thought Cumorah was Zarahemla with the Sidon river nowhere around.

There are a few other references to the land northward in the Nephite history. For example, in the first century B.C., 5400 men, with their wives and children, "departed out of the land of Zarahemla into the land which was northward" (Alma 63:4), and thus the Nephite expansion into the land northward began. At about the same time, Hagoth built "an exceedingly large ship" and "launched it forth into

the people "did multiply and spread, and did go forth from the land southward to the land northward, and did spread insomuch that they began to cover the face of the whole earth, from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east" (Hel. 3:8). This describes the hemisphere well but does not fit Mesoamerica, which has a sea on either side but not on either end.

Even Jesus seems to confirm the hemispheric geography. He tells the survivors of the great destruction at the time of his crucifixion: "And the Father hath commanded me that I should give unto you this land, for your inheritance" (3 Ne. 20:14). From what follows, "this land" seems to be more than Mesoamerica, because he says that the Gentiles "shall be a scourge unto the people of this land. Nevertheless, when *they* shall have received the fulness of my gospel. . . ." (3 Ne. 20:28, emphasis added). "They" are the Gentiles receiving the Book of Mormon, and they will scourge the natives of "this land," i.e., North America, where "they" are.

the west sea, by the narrow neck" with many Nephites, and they sailed northward (Alma 63:5-6). The next year "many people went forth into the land northward" (Alma 63:9). Just a few years later, "there were an exceeding great many who departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and went forth into the land northward to inherit the land"; "they did travel to *an exceeding great distance*, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers"; "they did spread forth into all parts of the land"; and "they did multiply and spread, and did go forth from the land southward to the land northward, and did spread insomuch that they began to cover the face of the whole earth, from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east" (Hel. 3:3-8 emphasis added).⁴⁶

This describes North America far better than southern Mexico. And at the very end, Mormon wrote to the Lamanite king requesting that "we might gather together our people unto the land of Cumorah, by a hill which was called Cumorah, and there we could give them battle"; and when the Lamanite king agreed, "we did march forth to the land of Cumorah, . . . and it was in a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains" (Morm. 6:2-4). This and previous references to waters and rivers certainly describe the Palmyra area, with the finger lakes and the Great Lakes nearby, as well as the Ohio, St. Lawrence, Susquehanna, and Hudson rivers and their tributaries.

Sorenson does not take into account in his construction of a limited geography either the Book of Mormon's reflection of biblical early world

46. In evaluating and preferring Sorenson's limited geography over Hauck's, John Clark in "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 64, notes that the reference to the north and south seas in Helaman "may have been meant in a metaphorical rather than a literal way":

I am convinced that the reference to a north sea and a south sea is devoid of any concrete geographical content. All specific references or allusions to Book of Mormon seas are only to the east and west seas. Any geography that tries to accommodate a north and south sea, I think, is doomed to fail.

William Hamblin agrees in "Methodological Problems," 189.

B.H. Roberts, on the other hand, *B.H. Roberts: Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Urbana and Chicago University of Illinois Press, 1985), 204, notes that Mr. Orson Pratt in his marginal footnotes on this verse [Hel. 3:8] interprets "the land southward," to mean "South America"; "the land northward," to mean "North America." "The sea south," he interprets to mean the "Atlantic, south of Cape Horn"; and the "sea north" is the "Arctic, north of North America"; the "sea west" and the "sea east" are the "Pacific" and the "Atlantic," respectively. . . . His interpretation has been, and doubtless is, the general understanding of the Mormon people.

Roberts, of course, subscribed to a hemispheric geography, whereas Clark subscribes to Sorenson's limited geography and must therefore explain this reference to north and south seas.

history as context or Nephi's and Lehi's descriptions of the promised land.⁴⁷ Since Sorenson's construction of a limited geography based on the clues he uses is not unreasonable, it might appear that Nephi's and Lehi's grand continental or hemispheric perspective conflicts with Mormon's more particular clues appearing in the stories of wars and missionary travel. This, however, is not the conflict; the bulk of Nephite history did not take place throughout the hemisphere but within a much smaller area below the narrow neck as described by Sorenson. The conflict is between the *availability* of an empty hemisphere for eventual expansion by the Nephites and Lamanites, on the one hand, and, on the other, Sorenson's insistence that "the maximum distance of Nephite penetration" into the land northward was "on the order of a couple of hundred miles,"⁴⁸ with the rest of the hemisphere being inhabited by indigenous peoples speaking a great variety of languages. If it were not for the need to accommodate the scientific facts of Asian peoples long antedating the Jaredites in the western hemisphere as well as the lack of archaeological support for anything like the Nephite civilization just below Panama,⁴⁹ Sorenson may well have left the Nephites in South America.

He begins with the conviction that the Book of Mormon is actual history.⁵⁰ Based on his conviction, he believes that all the geographical clues are internally consistent⁵¹ and mines the text to support his posi-

47. One of Sorenson's few references to the "promised land" occurs in his comment on Ether 6:12 in *A Source Book*, 307:

Moroni here considers the Jaredite landing point, which has to have been in the land northward, part of the same promised land considered "promised" by the Nephites. The same phrase occurs in v. 16 and 7:27.

In disregarding Nephi's and Lehi's perspective on the promised land as well as the biblical history context, Sorenson would seem to act contrary to his own sound scholarly advice, *ibid.*, 210 (emphasis his), that "we must 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."

48. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 347.

49. Sorenson writes, "Mesoamerican Record," 397: "When all the options within the Americas are matched against the text, it turns out that only one place qualifies as Nephite territory—Mesoamerica, or some part of it. Only that region fits the geographical conditions specified or implied in Mormon's record."

50. He writes in *An Ancient American Setting*, xv, that neither through his early college courses in the sciences or later "did I have to ask, 'Is this volume true?' I never asked external support for the private confirmation I already enjoyed."

51. Sorenson notes in "Mesoamerican Record," 396, that "the hundreds of statements and allusions about geography demonstrate that the volume's chief author, Mormon, held

tion.⁵² In making everything fit—and as we have seen with his calculated distances, there is much freedom to make everything fit—he ends up, as other LDS scholars do, finding complexity where none necessarily exists. As for apparent inconsistencies, anachronisms, anomalies, and other difficulties, he fashions answers that are “plausible,” or calls for further study, which he does time and again in *An Ancient American Setting*.

If, as it appears, the Book of Mormon embraces the traditional geographic model of a hemisphere empty before the Jaredites arrived and later to be filled by surviving Israelites, LDS scholars, including Sorenson, have not only challenged this model, but created an alternative model unsupported by the internal evidence, creating a real dilemma for believers.

The Narrow Neck of Land: In trying to identify the “narrow neck of land” on a map of the western hemisphere, Sorenson notes that

few possible “narrow necks” are worth considering. The oldest view supposed Panama to be the narrow neck of the Book of Mormon, with South America, or some portion of it, the land southward. The dimensions of Book of Mormon lands alone rule out the whole continent, while any attempt to consider just a part of South America as the land southward runs afoul of a number of points in the text (for example, Alma 22:32, “nearly surrounded by water”).⁵³

The much cited Alma 22:32 in geographical inquiries provides:

And now, it was only the distance of a day and a half’s journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful and the Land Desolation, from the east to the west sea; and thus the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were nearly

a mental map of Nephite lands that was consistent throughout, but its scale was limited to hundreds, not thousands, of miles.” Nevertheless, Sorenson does recognize some apparent inconsistencies. Three short examples in *A Source Book*, 268, 291; 273; 299, among several: First, he recognizes that the city of Gid seems to be south of the city of Mulek in Alma 51:26 but reversed in Hel. 5:15. To resolve this, he supposes “Mulek to have been seaward and Gid inland” even though Alma 51:26 states they were both “on the east borders by the seashore.” Second, he recognizes that Moroni’s recapturing the city of Mulek “in the land of Nephi” is “an evident error (mental slip) by the original scribe or Mormon,” since Mulek was in the land of Zarahemla. Third, he recognizes that at 4 Nephi 46, the Gadianton robbers were “spread over all the face of the land,” but at Morm. 1:18, the robbers “were among the Lamanites,” and states that it is unclear what Mormon means by “among the Lamanites.”

52. “Where we must begin,” he writes in *A Source Book*, 210, “is with the words of Mormon and his associates who kept the original records. From their words we must derive every scrap of meaning; I assume that their knowledge of geography was so integral and holistic that meanings are tucked into their records at a level below intention. We must sift for these.”

53. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 29.

surrounded by water, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward.

Both the Lamanite land of Nephi and the Nephite land of Zarahemla were in the land southward. The land of Zarahemla was in the northern part of the land southward just below the narrow neck, and the land of Nephi may have comprised all the rest of the land southward although most of the Nephite/Lamanite history took place within a few hundred miles of the narrow neck. If South America was the land southward, it meets the requirements of Alma 22:32 precisely. It is surrounded by water except where Panama, a narrow country, links South America to Costa Rica and the rest of Central and North America. Thus, South America is “*nearly* surrounded by water, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward,” which alone prevents it from being *completely* surrounded by water. It is as if Joseph Smith all but named South America as the land southward.

What is puzzling is why Sorenson believes southern Guatemala and southern Mexico meet these requirements at all. Both have the Pacific Ocean on one side; southern Mexico has the Gulf of Mexico (more specifically, the Gulf of Campeche) on the other side, and southern Guatemala the Caribbean Sea, although it is not clear that Sorenson extends the land of Nephi in southern Guatemala all the way to the sea. In any case, neither individually nor together are they “*nearly* surrounded by water.”⁵⁴

Sorenson rules out, however, all attempts by others to locate the Book of Mormon events elsewhere, whether in North or South America or elsewhere in Central America, and he essentially ignores even the Yucatan peninsula.⁵⁵ He concludes that “the only ‘narrow neck’ potentially acceptable in terms of the Book of Mormon requirements is the Isthmus

54. Sorenson himself describes his Book of Mormon geography in “Mesoamerican Record,” 396 (emphasis added), as “just a few hundred miles in length and width, *bounded on two sides by oceans*.” In his summary of criteria in *A Source Book*, 329, he recognizes that the land southward must be “*nearly* surrounded by water” without explaining how his Mesoamerican location meets this criterion.

55. Bruce Warren, in his review in *Brigham Young University Studies* 30:3 (Summer 1990): 134, of both Richard Hauck’s and John Sorenson’s books on Book of Mormon geography, notes that the Yucatan Peninsula remains a “sore thumb” for both Sorenson and Hauck and all other students of Book of Mormon research. The base of the peninsula has two of the biggest archaeological sites in Mesoamerica dating to the latter part of Book of Mormon history, El Mirador, Guatemala, and Calakmul, Mexico. Sorenson considers this region to be part of the “east wilderness full of Lamanites,” and Hauck ignores the region.

Sorenson writes in *An Ancient American Setting*, 35-36, that “We must also ignore the Yucatan Peninsula and adjacent lowlands, for we noted earlier that the Nephite-controlled portion of the coast along the east sea was short and that the entire area eastward from the city of Nephi is undescribed in the scripture.”

On his map, *ibid.*, 37, Sorenson labels the Yucatan Peninsula the “east or south wilderness.”

of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico."⁵⁶ But the Gulf of Tehuantepec hardly pinches the southern coast of Mexico enough to form what anyone would describe as a neck, let alone a "small" or "narrow" neck either absolutely or relative to the lands on either side of it (its total width is "120 miles on a straight line"⁵⁷). It has no length at all, as necks do. It seems doubtful that what can hardly be described as a "neck" on a map would be considered a "neck" by the Nephites, let alone a "narrow" neck when it is 120 miles wide.

Sorenson defends 120 miles as "narrow" by calculating that it was a day and a half's travel for "a (presumably lone) Nephite" across the narrow neck of land which they fortified; up to five miles per hour, that is, up to 180 miles [$36 \times 5 = 180$], on the basis of rate alone. [But on the additional basis of use of the word "narrow," a figure approaching 180 miles is absurd; 100 seems not absurd.]⁵⁸

Sorenson further defends his 120-mile-wide "narrow neck of land" as the distance a Nephite, or perhaps a messenger relay, could travel in a day and a half, not necessarily from sea to sea but from garrison to garrison some miles inland:

56. *Ibid.*, 29.

57. *Ibid.*, 32. It is not clear whether a Nephite would traverse the isthmus in a straight line or whether the actual route of travel would be somewhat more than 120 miles. Sorenson notes, *ibid.*, 36, that "the 120-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec is just within the range of plausibility we established for the width of the 'narrow neck,'" so if a Nephite could not traverse it in a straight line, the 120-mile-width would seem to be outside Sorenson's range of plausibility.

58. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 397 (bracketed material his). It would seem that Sorenson's 120-mile-wide "narrow" isthmus conflicts with his calculation that Cumorah was about 100 miles from the narrow neck. Alma 22:32 states that it was "only the distance of a day and a half's journey" across the isthmus. Just two verses earlier, Mormon describes Desolation (or Bountiful, which Sorenson, *ibid.*, 245, believes "it" in Alma 22:30 refers to) as being "so far northward that it came into the land which had been peopled and been destroyed, of whose bones we have spoken" (Alma 22:30). It seems incongruous for Mormon to describe the 120-mile distance across the Isthmus as "only" a day and a half's journey while describing the 100-mile distance to Sorenson's Ramah/Cumorah, where the Jaredite bones were found, as "so far northward." On the other hand, these verses well describe narrow Panama and a great distance northward into New York.

Sorenson's 120-mile wide "narrow" isthmus may also conflict with Helaman 3:3-4, in which many Nephites left Zarahemla for the land northward, traveling "to an exceeding great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers." Sorenson, *ibid.*, 289, calls the italicized phrase a "vague, relative expression," which of course it is. But for him, *ibid.*, 348, the "land covered with large bodies of water" was "sufficiently near the land Bountiful that it could have combined politically with it." More specifically, although "absolute distances cannot be inferred," it probably included "the lands of waters, rivers and fountains around Cumorah, which would place it on the order of a hundred miles from the narrow neck." It thus seems incongruous for Mormon to refer to the 100-mile distance to the land covered with large bodies of water as an "exceeding great distance" but to the 120-mile wide isthmus as "only" a day and a half's journey.

This language [Alma 22:32] is unclear; opinions among Latter-day Saint readers of this text have differed widely. "From the east to the west sea" seems to me probably the equivalent of "from the east *sea* to the west sea," particularly when we pay attention to the end of the sentence: "thus the [greater] land of Nephi and the [greater] land of Zarahemla [together constituting the land southward] were nearly surrounded by water." The day and a half's "journey for a Nephite" then likely was effectively all the way across (although it would be silly to demand that it mean from salt-water to salt water; perhaps from garrison coastal settlement to a similar defense point on the other, which could be a number of miles from actual shore). However, without more information, such as an explanation of "a journey for a Nephite," we cannot specify the distance with confidence. [But logic allows us to bracket the distance. When we know on the one hand that Limhi's exploring party passed through the isthmus without even realizing it⁵⁹ (Mosiah 8:7-9; 21:25-26), we see that it was of substantial width. On the other hand, that the neck was *relatively* narrow was clear to knowledgeable Nephites.] A width as low as 50 miles seems too small; a more likely minimum is 75, while "a day and a half's journey" could range up to 125 miles, depending on who traveled how (e.g., a messenger relay?).⁶⁰

59. Sorenson's argument is that if the search party sent by King Limhi had recognized it was going across a narrow neck of land, it would have recognized that the destroyed civilization was not Zarahemla, which was in the land southward and not northward. Therefore, the narrow neck must have been wide enough not to be recognized as a narrow neck. But it is not clear that the neck had to be more than 40 miles wide for the search party to go through it without recognizing it was going through a narrow neck, especially one like Sorenson's with no length. After all, this is the search party that could not find Zarahemla either going or coming.

60. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 247-48 (bracketed material his). In the earlier *An Ancient American Setting*, 17, Sorenson simply noted that

Of course we don't know how long the "day's travel" might have been. . . . Possibly "the distance of a day and a half's journey" was a standard length. The Nephites may have understood that a "day and a half's journey" meant so many miles. . . . Or the phrase "a Nephite" might imply that a special messenger was the one doing the traveling, for the statement occurs in the context of military defense. And what means of transportation might have been employed?

In this same book, in another context, Sorenson seems to define a day and a half's journey as about 40 air miles, and this "under pressure." At *ibid.*, 175-76, he puts "the waters of Mormon 'in the borders of the land' of Nephi" at Lake Atitlan, so that "Nephi at Kaminaljuyu [Guatemala City] would be approximately 40 air miles from Lake Atitlan," which is "approximately two days of routine travel, or one and a half under pressure." Should we assume from this that the "narrow neck of land" should be about 40 miles wide at most, which is about the width of Panama, rather than 120 or 125? In the later *A Source Book*, Sorenson conjectures in several instances on the likely distance traveled in a short time. None of his conjectures approaches 120 miles in a day and a half. He refers to a distance of "more than one but less than three days normal travel, say between 20 and 40 miles afoot or two-thirds that on a straight line," Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 224; "at a distance of two hard days pursuit. . . perhaps forty miles," *Ibid.*, 226; "eight days' journey at a speedy pace ('fled') but with flocks limiting the pace through broken country. . . (Airline distance of perhaps 65 miles?)," *Ibid.*, 226-27; "three days journey to the north brought Alma to Ammonihah, perhaps 35-40 miles," *Ibid.*, 234; "the maximum plausible distance they could

In interpreting Alma 22:32, Sorenson does not mention that it was “*only* the distance of a day and a half’s journey” across the neck. This is the only distance in the Book of Mormon modified by “*only*,” and seems to emphasize that the neck was indeed “*narrow*.”⁶¹

Such a narrow neck of “*substantial width*” raises another problem, which Sorenson himself raises:

Another geographical question that keeps coming up as one reads the Book of Mormon is the nature and location of the “*narrow passage*” referred to in Alma 50:34 and 52:9 and Mormon 2:29 and 3:5. It’s apparent from these verses that the pass is not the same as the narrow neck itself. Rather, it is some kind of specific feature *within* that neck area. Alma 50 tells how Teancum intercepted Morianton’s fleeing group just as they arrived at a very spec-

travel in one day under hot, fatiguing conditions (v. 31 and 51:33) would be about 20 miles,” *ibid.*, 272; “the more than two days full-tilt flight must have been more or less along the mountain crest,” and “the headlong flight/pursuit northward into the wilderness would have gone on the order of thirty or forty miles,” *ibid.*, 277; “the journeying in the wilderness had to have taken from, say, mid-morning to dark (v. 14ff) at full speed, on a curving path, so the distance traveled must have been at least 20 miles,” *ibid.* 279. He has at least one reference, *ibid.*, 409, to “many days”: “Incidentally, the ‘many days’ is about 75 miles, through jungle.”

61. There is an account in Helaman 4 that arguably reduces the travel time to “a day’s journey for a Nephite.” In the account, the Lamanites capture “the land of Zarahemla; yea, and also all the lands, even unto the land which was near the land Bountiful” (Hel. 4:5). The Nephites are “driven even into the land of Bountiful” (Hel. 4:6). There they “fortify against the Lamanites, from the west sea, even unto the east; it being a day’s journey for a Nephite, on the line which they had fortified” (Hel. 4:7).

Bountiful was the northern terminus of the land southward and abutted Desolation, which stretched far into the land northward (Alma 32:29-30). The line between Bountiful and Desolation extended “from the east to the west sea” and took a Nephite a day and a half to travel (Alma 22:32). The Nephites “inhabited the land Bountiful, even from the east unto the west sea,” thus hemming in the Lamanites in the land southward so they could not get into the land northward, thereby giving the Nephites “a country whither they might flee” (Alma 22:33-34).

It would be easy to consider the line the Nephites fortified in the Helaman 4 account the same line between Bountiful and Desolation, and thus the distance of a day or a day and a half’s journey for a Nephite. After all, the fortified line stretched “from the west sea, even unto the east” (Hel. 4:7), just as the line between Bountiful and Desolation went “from the east to the west sea” (Alma 22:32). It is not clear that the two lines are the same, however, because neither the narrow neck nor Desolation is mentioned.

Sorenson argues that they are not the same, possibly in part because he would not want the narrow neck to be traversed in one day, which would narrow its width and thus challenge his isthmus of Tehuantepec as the narrow neck. The fortified line at Hel. 4:7, he writes in *A Source Book*, 290-91 (bracketed material his), was from the west sea “even unto the east. [Not the same as to the east sea. Likely the line was more or less in the same sector centuries later called the land of Joshua—Mormon 2:6. Cf. Alma 22:32, where a line from the east sea is mentioned. The difference in times indicated between these two—day vs. day and a half—shows that they are not the same.]”

His reasons are not persuasive. First, “from the west sea, even unto the east” at Hel. 4:7 hardly differs from “from the east to the west sea” at Alma 22:32. In neither is the east

cific point, "the narrow pass which led by the sea into the land northward, yea, by the sea, on the west and on the east."⁶²

Thus, the problem is that the Nephites had to defend the narrow neck against an incursion into the land northward, but if the narrow neck is too wide, this is difficult to do. Sorenson's solution is to require the Nephites

sea "mentioned," contrary to what Sorenson states, although he thinks it is *implied* in Alma 22:32, *ibid.*, 247. In commenting on Alma 22:32, he notes, *ibid.*, that "'from the east to the west sea' seems to me probably the equivalent of 'from the east sea to the west sea,'" thus having to interpret this language because the east *sea* is not "mentioned." If Sorenson believes Alma 22:32 means "from the east sea to the west sea," it would seem that Hel. 4:7 should also mean "from the west sea, even unto the east sea." Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, this same abbreviated form is used at Alma 50:8 ("the land of Nephi did run in a straight course from the east sea to the west"). Here the west *sea* is clearly implied, since the land of Nephi extended from the sea east to the sea west (Alma 22:27).

Second, Sorenson would apparently have the fortified line of the Nephites extend to the indefinite east rather than to the east *sea*. But this would hardly "defend their north country" (Hel. 4:7); the Lamanites would simply skirt the line farther east.

Third, Sorenson would put the line "in the same sector centuries later called the land of Joshua." But Sorenson puts the land of Joshua in the land southward "in the borders west by the seashore" (Morm. 2:6). It is doubtful that the fortified line was in the land southward, since "the Lamanites had obtained all the possession of the Nephites which was in the land southward" (Hel. 4:8), so there would have been no place in the land southward for the fortified line.

Finally, it does not necessarily follow that "the difference in times indicated between these two—day vs. day and a half—shows that they are not the same." Traveling could have been easier along a fortified line, or Joseph Smith could have forgotten that more than one hundred pages earlier, he had dictated "a day and a half's journey" rather than "a day's journey."

Sorenson's "neck" without any length creates another problem. Because the neck has no length, he must put the land of Bountiful in the land southward adjoining the land of Desolation in the land northward. They meet at the narrow neck. The Book of Mormon is not clear on whether the land of Bountiful is in the land southward, but since the Nephites were "driven even into the land of Bountiful" (Hel. 4:6) and the Lamanites had "obtained all the possession of the Nephites which was in the land southward" (Hel. 4:8), it seems to follow that the land of Bountiful is not in the land southward. But the land of Bountiful could hardly be in the land northward, because its boundary with the land of Desolation is at the narrow neck which divides the land southward from the land northward.

One solution to this problem is that of Fletcher Hammond. In his *Geography*, map opposite page 72, he puts the land of Bountiful in the narrow neck, which has length. He also has two lines across the narrow neck, one at each end with the shorter one of one day's journey on the south end of the neck, and the longer one of one and a half day's journey on the north end of the neck. But he also confusingly puts the land of Desolation in the narrow neck with the land of Bountiful to begin the land northward.

The fact is that the geography at the narrow neck and elsewhere is confusing. Sorenson, however, regards the Book of Mormon as wonderfully complex, possibly in part because it is so difficult to make sense of it, but which he does to his satisfaction. If the book is simply poorly written, however, the perceived complexity may lie in the difficulty of fitting all the pieces together.

62. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 42-43.

to defend only a narrow pass within the narrow neck. The fact that the narrow pass within the narrow neck had to lead by the sea on both the west and the east is apparently met by the topography in the area:

An irregular sandstone and gravel formation appears as a ridge averaging a couple of miles wide and rising 150 to 200 feet above the surrounding country running west from the lower Coatzacoalcos River. It provides the only reliable year-round route from the isthmian/east coast area "northward" into central Veracruz. A great deal of the land on either side of this ridge is flooded periodically, as much as 12 feet deep in the rainy season. At times during that season the ridge pass would indeed lead "by the sea, on the west and on the east" (Alma 50:34), for the water in the flooded basins would be on both sides of the ridge and would have barred travel as effectively as the sea, with which the floodwaters were continuous.⁶³

It is not "apparent" that the narrow pass is different from the narrow neck. None of the passages Sorenson cites, nor anything else in the Book of Mormon, suggests that the narrow pass differs from the narrow neck. They seem to be used interchangeably, with "narrow pass" generally being used when the story is about passing across it from the land southward to the land northward or vice versa, and "narrow neck" when describing the geography. Nowhere are they differentiated from each other or referred to together, let alone as one within the other.⁶⁴ If the narrow pass and the narrow neck are the same, then the problem that Sorenson identified remains: the Nephites would have a much harder time defending the 120-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec than they would the much narrower Panama, which argues against the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the narrow neck.

There is still another problem with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the narrow neck: the orientation of the "land northward" and the "land southward" on either side of it is more west and east than north and south. Sorenson recognizes this "major anomaly,"⁶⁵ and argues that what

63. *Ibid.*, 43. Sorenson's narrow pass averaging a couple of miles wide within the narrow neck as the only reliable passage year round does not help his argument that Limhi's search party passed through the narrow neck without knowing it because it was so wide. Sorenson could argue, however, that the search party passed through the narrow neck and back again during the dry season and by another route, from which they could not see the sea on either side of them, whereas the Morianton affair occurred during the rainy season when he was limited to one route through the narrow neck. But if there were other routes through the narrow neck, the Lamanites had only to wait for the dry season to attack at the narrow neck to reach the land northward. Also, nothing is said in the Book of Mormon about a dry or rainy season.

64. There are seven references to either the "neck" or the "pass": Alma 22:32; 50:34; 52:9; 63:5; Mormon 2:29; 3:5; and Ether 10:20.

65. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 36.

the Nephites called north and south was more west and east by our compass directions, thereby accommodating the nearly west-east orientation of his Mesoamerican setting to the Book of Mormon's north-south orientation.

"We realize with a little thought," he notes,

that direction terminology in the text is not perfectly clear-cut. . . . At the least we must realize that in the Nephite record "northward" is not the same concept as "north." The Book of Mormon English edition refers to "land north" five times but to "land northward" thirty-one ("land south" five and "land southward" fourteen). So, I must suppose that there is significant ambiguity in many of the translated directional terms.⁶⁶

There is little in the Book of Mormon from which to determine what the directional model is. Like a hemispheric geography, however, the directional system may not be transparent, but everything in the text is consistent with "north" meaning our north. First, the "land northward" and the "land southward" match North and South America so well, as do the east and west seas the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, that readers assumed a hemispheric geography from the beginning.

Second, Lehi's party seems to have used our directional system when it left Jerusalem. When Lehi's party broke camp near the Red Sea (1 Ne. 2:5-6), it traveled in "nearly a south-southeast direction" near the Red Sea (1 Ne. 16:13-14), which matches the orientation of the Red Sea under our directional system. Thence it traveled "nearly eastward" (1 Ne. 17:1), which LDS scholars have consistently taken to mean our eastward.

Third, the Lamanite kingdom in the land of Nephi, which Sorenson puts in the highlands of southern Guatemala, stretched from the east sea to the west sea.⁶⁷ Under Sorenson's skewed directions, where Nephite east is our north, there is no east sea for the land of Nephi. Nephite east (our north) of southern Guatemala is northern Guatemala, then the Yucatan Peninsula, and then water. Sorenson identifies the Bay of Campeche as the sea east, but it is Nephite northeast of the land of Nephi and should be called the sea eastward. No such terminology, however, is used for the sea east in the Book of Mormon. As applied to a hemispheric geography, however, seas east and west apply nicely to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

66. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 216. Sorenson's count is correct except for "land southward," which occurs 15 rather than 14 times; he may have missed one because it occurs twice at Morm. 2:29. In addition, "land which was northward" occurs three times, at Alma 50:29 (twice) and 63:4; and "land which was northward of the land Bountiful" occurs once, at Alma 50:11.

67. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 227-28; *A Source Book*, 178; Alma 22:27.

Fourth, the Jaredites and the Nephites seemed to have had the same directional system. Like the Nephites with reference to the same lands, the Jaredites referred to the “land northward” (Ether 10:21) and the “land southward” (Ether 9:31, 32; 10:19, 21), implying that “north” was the same for both peoples.⁶⁸ To have the same directional system, they would probably have used the sun or the stars rather than some terrestrial landmark for orientation, as Sorenson argues below. Thus their east (rising sun) or north (Polaris) would be the same as ours.

Finally, in the Jaredite history, Omer “came over and passed by the hill of Shim, and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed, and from thence eastward, and came to a place which was called Ablom, by the seashore, and there he pitched his tent” (Ether 9:3). “The place where the Nephites were destroyed” was at the hill Cumorah. If the hill Cumorah was in New York State, Omer could clearly have traveled from there eastward to a place called Ablom on the Atlantic coast. Sorenson, however, identifies Cumorah as Cerro El Vigia in the Tuxtlas Mountains of southern Veracruz.⁶⁹ On his study maps, Sorenson shows these mountains right on the shore of the Bay of Campeche.⁷⁰ Traveling Nephite east (our north) from the Tuxtlas Mountains would put Omer in the water.⁷¹

68. Like the Nephites, whose history was predominantly in the “land southward” but referred to the “land northward” three times as often, the Jaredites, whose history was predominantly in the “land northward,” referred to the “land southward” four times as often.

It is possible that Moroni, in abridging the Jaredite record, used the Nephite directional system. For example, if the Jaredite north was our north and therefore skewed up to ninety degrees from Sorenson’s Nephite north, and the Jaredites were in the Sorenson Mesoamerican setting, Ether may have written “land eastward” as we would rather than “land southward” as Sorenson believes the Nephites did. Moroni may then have imposed the Nephite directional system on the text and recorded “land southward” rather than “land eastward.” Moroni was somehow able to correlate Jaredite geography with Nephite geography. He wrote at Ether 7:6 that “the land of Moron, where the king dwelt, was near the land which is called Desolation by the Nephites”; at Ether 9:3, that Omer “passed by the hill of Shim [a Nephite place, see Morm. 1:3; 4:23], and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed”; at Ether 9:31, that the Jaredite flocks “began to flee. . . towards the land southward, which was called by the Nephites Zarahemla”; and at Ether 15:11, that “the army of Coriantumr did pitch their tents by the hill Ramah; and it was that same hill where my father Mormon did hide up the records unto the Lord.”

69. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 178.

70. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, initial map of Mesoamerica; Map 2, p. 11; Map 3, p. 20; Map 4, p. 24; Map 5, p. 37.

71. If this were indeed the geographical layout, Ether would presumably have written “from thence down to the shore to a place called Ablom” rather than “from thence eastward” and “came to a place,” which suggest at least some distance. But Sorenson notes in *A Source Book*, 310, simply that “the hill was in the easterly part of the land northward, so the distance to Ablom, on the coast, should not have been very great, and the wording here [in Ether 9:3] does not disagree.” Sorenson’s position is not implausible if his hill Cumorah is

The Nephite directional system is not transparent, but what there is consistent with our directional system. Sorenson's sole argument based on Book of Mormon text is the predominance of the suffix *ward* to refer to the "land northward," which he considers an important "semantic point," noting that it signifies "tending or leading toward."⁷² This argument, however, could work against Sorenson's position as much as for it. If Nephite north was our west northwest, they should have used "land north" more often than "land northward," since it is oriented to their north, or our west northwest.

Sorenson seems to have our north in mind when he concludes:

If all this business sounds a little complicated, we can still be grateful for one thing. Mormon and Joseph Smith, who gave us the text of the Book of Mormon, could have made things worse by being "literal." Imagine reading over and over of the "land northwest by west," or perhaps the "sea which is southwest of Zarahemla but southeast of part of the land northwest"! That would have been literally accurate in our terms, but impossibly awkward.⁷³

Sorenson's gratefulness that the directions are not literally accurate is a red herring; if Nephite north were our north, Sorenson's Mesoamerican setting would require no such impossible awkwardness. The "land northward" would be the "land westward," the "land southward" would be the "land eastward," the "sea east" would be the "sea north," and the "sea west" would be the "sea south." The descriptions used in the Book of Mormon fit a hemispheric geography nicely.

With nothing in the Book of Mormon text to support his need to skew the directions nearly 90 degrees, Sorenson notes that

Labeling directions has always presented linguistic and cultural challenges to the world's peoples. Like other customs the whole business is actually quite arbitrary rather than logical, as modern people would like to think. We in the European tradition say that "east" is "where the sun comes up"; but in the arctic, the sun unconcernedly rises in the south. Even in middle latitudes sunrise is precisely to the east only two days of the year. A knowledge of our own and other cultures can help disabuse us of the notion of one single or "right" or "obvious" way to label directions.⁷⁴

Sorenson then reviews the practices in a number of cultures, including that of the Israelites in Palestine:

actually back a little way from the seashore, but this is not what his study maps indicate. In any case, it is not clear who was there before Omer to name the place Ablom.

72. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 41-42.

73. *Ibid.*, 42.

74. *Ibid.*, 38.

The Israelites of Palestine, in their most common mental framework, derived directions as though standing with backs to the sea, facing the desert. *Yam* ("sea") then meant "west," for the Mediterranean lay in that direction, while *qedem* ("fore") stood for "east." Then *yamin* ("right hand") meant "south," while *semol* ("left hand") denoted "north." In Palestine, this model coincided nicely with nature (the coast runs nearly north-south) and also proved neatly translatable to our European uses of the terms east, west, north, and south. (This was not the only model of directions in use among the Israelites, but it was the most fundamental, being deeply embedded in the language.)⁷⁵

He argues that Lehi's party, upon arriving on the Pacific coast of

75. *Ibid.*, 38-39. It is not at all clear that the model Sorenson describes was "the most fundamental." According to *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 204:II, "most Semitic peoples used the rising of the sun for the primary direction and bearing." It elaborates:

Orientation is the means by which persons determine direction. From earliest antiquity, there seem to have been the 4 cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west (N, S, E, and W). This is true of Hebrew, Akkadian, and Sumerian culture. . . . Often astronomical or terrestrial features served as the basis for orientation. Astronomical features would make use primarily of the sun for one's point of reference; secondarily, specific stars or constellations might play a role in getting bearings. The rising and setting of the sun served as primary indicators of E and W in Mesopotamia and in Syria/Palestine.

Thus, both the Jaredites in Mesopotamia and the "Lehites" in Palestine would probably have used the rising and setting sun for orientation and brought that model with them to the western hemisphere.

This is not the end of it, however, since, as the *Dictionary* notes and Sorenson would agree, "terrestrial features such as mountains and seas served as indicators of direction." The Hebrew word for "sea," referring to the Mediterranean, was one indicator of "west," just as the Akkadian word for "mountain" was an indicator for "east." But in other instances, once the primary bearing was determined, the individual faced that direction and used the body as a simple compass to locate other directions (when one faces N, the right hand is to the E, and the left to the W, south is behind). Since the development of the magnetic compass, N has been the primary direction. Yet the very words *orientation* and *orient* point to the E, probably using the rising sun, as the primary reference point. From the OT itself, there are numerous indicators that E served as the primary direction for bearings.

Still according to the *Dictionary*, in biblical Hebrew there is a related word group that literally meant "in front, before," although it appeared most frequently for "east." "Thus E was the direction in front of one, the direction by which one gained one's orientation and bearings." Similarly, a Hebrew word group for "west" literally meant "back" or "behind," and was used with "sea" to refer to the western or Mediterranean sea. Hebrew also used "the left hand" to indicate north and "the right hand" to indicate south.

Finally, not all cultures "used the same pattern of orientation as the Hebrews":

The Egyptians, for example, had S as their primary reference point, probably because it was the direction of the source of the Nile, their lifeblood. Although they also used the body as a compass, different directions resulted from a different orientation.

Thus, facing south, the right hand indicated west and the left hand indicated east.

Sorenson would agree, *A Source Book*, 405-6, that the Jewish directional system included a solar orientation, but he seems to emphasize the terrestrial or environmental indicators used for orientation:

Central America, which runs west-northwest/east-southeast, "in the absence of a conscious group decision to shift the sense of their Hebrew direction terms by 45 degrees or more. . . would have fallen into a new directional language pattern as their Semitic-language model encountered the new setting."⁷⁶ Thus, the sea behind the newly arrived Israelites on the Pacific coast of Central America would be "west," or our south-southwest; inland would be "east" or our north-northeast; and their left hand would be "north," or our west-northwest. It is not clear, however, that the Nephites would long have oriented themselves to the seashore as they moved inland into mountainous terrain and could not see the shoreline or even the Pacific Ocean.⁷⁷ Nor would this explain why the Jaredites somehow had the same directional system.

Sorenson includes an entire appendix on directions and hopes that someday, "diligent, inspired students may bring order and rationality to our understanding of how Israelite, Nephite, and American terminological systems for directions were articulated and are represented in our present text," and he warns "against the trap of ethnocentric naiveté or

The Egyptian notion that the direction a person faces is key in a directional model is also found among virtually all speakers of Semitic languages. In Hebrew the terminology had one facing east, which was then called "fore" or "rising," while west was signified by words meaning "sea," "behind," or "setting." South was "right" or "desert" or the purely directional expression *daron*. North was signified by words meaning "mountains," "lefthand," or the directional word *sapon*. . . .

It should also be pointed out that while the Hebrew terms for "rising" or "fore" are glossed in English as "east," that probably obscures the precise meaning. . . . There is a good chance that Hebrew "rising," concerning the sun, refers to the sunrise point on the horizon at new year's day. . . . but that would not have been cardinal east.

The use of several overlaid conceptual schemes. . . seems indicated by the multiple terms employed in Hebrew. For instance, the terms "desert," "mountains," and "sea" suggest a very old environmentally-derived scheme of thought, while the words "rising" and "setting" are clearly solar.

Sorenson prefers the environmental model over the astronomical (solar) model presumably because it enables the Nephites to skew east to the north by orienting themselves with their backs to the sea (see text).

76. *Ibid.*, 39.

77. Sorenson believes, *An Ancient American Setting*, 138-39 (bracketed material added for clarification), that the first Nephite settlement in the wilderness was not far from the sea:

When Nephi's party fled. . . [“the place of their fathers' first inheritance” near the seashore] in fear of his elder brothers, they traveled “many days,” ending up at a site where they named their settlement for their leader, Nephi. They were still not far from the coast (2 Nephi 5:7-8). That suggests that the city Nephi was not directly inland from the first landing spot (had they traveled “many days” straight inland they would have ended up far from the sea; so I infer they must have moved northward along the coastal strip and then went inland).

It is not clear why Sorenson thinks the Nephite settlement was “not far from the coast.” His citation of 2 Ne. 5:7-8 says nothing about being close to the coast, and indeed, says they traveled “in the wilderness” for many days, not along the coastal strip.

inadequate scholarship manifest when someone insists that 'north must mean where the north star lies' or that 'rotating the Nephite directions' is something that interpreters now do in violation of the text."⁷⁸ "The Book

78. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 414-15. Sorenson warns, *Ibid.*, 353, against uninformed interpretations of the Book of Mormon text:

The text we have of the Book of Mormon being a translation from a drastically different language and culture, we must not [sic] suppose that our current ethnocentric readings of the English terms having geographical significance can misleadingly control our interpretation. We need to discover, if possible, what the original terms meant to the writers (e.g., "elephant," "great city," "north," "dragons"), realizing that the author's meanings are not be obvious [sic] from the English as we naively construe it. Thus models must not depend critically on culturally uninformed interpretations of terms in the text.

David Palmer may be the kind of student Sorenson encourages. In his review of Joseph Allen's *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem, Utah: S.A. Publishers, 1989), in *Brigham Young University Studies* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 136, Palmer notes that Allen's "discussion of the ancient Nephite directional system is inadequate and leads to questionable conclusions, particularly those regarding the location of the city Bountiful." Palmer, a senior researcher at Amoco Chemical Co. and past leader of two expeditions to Mexico, writes, *ibid.*, 138, that Allen, "not a professional archaeologist," has "learned a great deal from archaeologists such as John L. Sorenson" and others and places all Book of Mormon events within Mesoamerica, essentially agreeing with Sorenson and others, except "for Moroni's trip to the Palmyra, New York, area." Allen's placement of some specific locations, "assuming that Nephite north was true north," disagrees with Sorenson's, and Palmer believes that "the main argument against Allen's view" is that it "requires a shift in the Nephite coordinate system." Palmer elaborates, essentially agreeing with Sorenson's view of Nephite north:

The question of directional systems in the Book of Mormon is vital to a correct understanding of Nephite geography, for the difference in directional systems is the distinguishing difference between truly different geographies. Was Nephite north aligned with the North Pole or not? If not, where was it? Was it a specific direction? Allen proposes that Nephite north is true north. This position requires that the cities designed to defend the entrance to the land northward be placed in Belize. But is that site reasonable?

My own study of the directional systems employed during the Nephite time period suggests that use of true north for orientation was rare. Because of the twenty-five millennia precession of the axis of the earth (it wobbles like a top), Polaris was not a pole star in Lehi's time. Instead, it described a circle of about twenty-four degrees in the night sky. In the absence of a visible pole star, directions would have been difficult to determine from just the sun's rising and setting, which vary by fifty degrees over the course of a year. Serious investigation of Mesoamerican ruins built before the time of Christ suggests that the inhabitants based their directions on the solstice readings, the extremes of the sun's travel on 21/22 June and 21/22 December. That solstitial direction is sixty-five degrees west of true north and was probably used as "Nephite north."

Palmer goes on to defend his thesis, *ibid.*, 139, based on the orientation of "many of the important preclassic sites in Mesoamerica," which were "deliberately placed so that the solstice could be measured when the sun passed over nearby peaks. Basically. . . many, but not all, sites in Guatemala and Mexico are aligned sixty-five degrees west of north." And Palmer concludes, thus, that "we cannot assume that Nephite north was true north as we know it today."

William Hamblin also agrees with Sorenson on cultural differences in directional systems in "Basic Methodological Problems," 188:

of Mormon," he says, "is the authority on the Book of Mormon. Our problem is to discover what it is saying to us."⁷⁹ I agree.

And in fact, on the basis of what the Book of Mormon itself says together with a map of the western hemisphere, Sorenson's Isthmus of Tehuantepec theory fares poorly. It is hardly a "neck" at all; it is hardly "narrow"; it does not connect a land northward with a land southward "nearly surrounded by water"; there does not appear to be a separate "narrow pass" through the "narrow neck" to make it narrow enough to defend; and it is oriented askew. Panama, on the other hand, satisfies the criteria of the Book of Mormon perfectly.

The fundamental question involved here is that the Limited Geography Model requires that the directions "northward" and "southward" be considered slightly different from "true" north as recognized by today's geographers. As Sorenson and Hamblin have demonstrated, ancient peoples conceived of north and south based on orientations and landmarks which frequently do not coincide with modern geographical concepts. Since geographical orientation and terminology is a relative cultural matter, not a universal absolute, it is perfectly reasonable for ancient peoples to conceptualize their geography much differently from ours.

In Sorenson's appendix, *A Source Book*, 405, Hamblin suggests another directional scheme. He notes, *ibid.*, 413-14, that Nephi uses "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Ne. 1:2). "The Egyptian model for naming directions was based on a person facing upstream toward the head of the Nile, south in our terms." That direction was "face," our north was "back," and our east and west were "left" and "right" respectively. According to Hamblin, "the Hebrews, like most Semitic peoples, oriented themselves by facing east, toward the rising sun." The Hebrew east was "front," south was "right," north was "left," and west was "behind." Hamblin notes that "if you adjust the Hebrew way of thinking to match the Egyptian. . . , you find in fact that Hebrew west (behind) has basically the same semantic meaning as Egyptian north (back of the head); Hebrew east (front) equals Egyptian south (face); Hebrew north (left) matches Egyptian east (left); with Hebrew south (right) being Egyptian west (right)." Under this scheme, directions are skewed essentially 90 degrees in the Book of Mormon, so that "if Nephi used the Egyptian terms with Hebrew meanings in mind, and if Joseph Smith translated these terms literally, you end up with a remarkable coincidence. . . . [Y]ou find the conceptual geography of the Hebrew universe must be 'distorted' in relation to the Egyptian vocabulary in precisely the same way that Nephite geography is 'distorted' in relation to Mesoamerica." Hamblin seems to suggest that the Nephites oriented themselves, like other Semitic people, by facing east toward the rising sun but used the Egyptian terminology or language, which would be south rather than east, thus skewing directions by ninety degrees.

These are interesting theories but raise some questions. If both theories are correct, do we then add Hamblin's ninety degree skewing because of the Egyptian language to Palmer's sixty-five degree skewing because of the twenty-five millennia precession of the axis of the earth and end up with directions skewed 155 degrees so that north becomes south/southwest? If either theory is correct, why did Nephi use our directional system when he wrote that Lehi's party traveled in "nearly a south-southeast direction" near the Red Sea, and thence "nearly eastward"? And neither theory explains why the Jaredites apparently used the same directional system as the Nephites.

79. Sorenson, *A Source Book*, 415.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A limited geography model could solve other problems raised by the Book of Mormon text, including, as mentioned at the outset, the presence of large populations of other peoples that cannot be explained by reproduction rates of the Book of Mormon peoples alone. It relieves the Nephite text of dealing with Asian migrations across the Bering land mass long before the Jaredites arrived thousands of years later. These migrations in turn explain the 1500 or so Indian languages that could not all have derived from Lehi's Hebrew in a mere thousand years. These earlier settlers become the pre-existing peoples that the Nephites and Lamanites encounter and incorporate (but without scriptural mention) thereby accounting for the large implied populations in the Book of Mormon. A limited geography located in Mesoamerica also satisfies the clues in the book about distances, climate, terrain, directions, and other geographical factors. Indeed, LDS scholars can even correlate archaeological findings with cities, rivers, mountains and other geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon. These issues have certainly never been reconciled with the traditional understanding of hemispheric scope.

Critics of the Book of Mormon have challenged the limited geography model on various grounds, but so far as I know, no one has challenged it based just on what the Book of Mormon itself says. And, in fact, what the book says seems to have been largely disregarded or misconstrued by the limited geography theorists. The Book of Mormon seems directly to assert that the entire Western Hemisphere, and most especially North America, was the promised land given to Lehi and his descendants. It describes a narrow neck of land connecting a land northward with a land southward that fits Panama and North and South America, but not the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and southern Mexico and southern Guatemala

Sorenson and other LDS scholars have recognized that the traditional hemispheric model no longer works, but their solution of a limited geography model does not work either. Sorenson's model requires contorting terminology and text to make a case riven by esoteric complication. His model wanders far afield from what the Book of Mormon straightforwardly describes. It solves many problems with the hemispheric model but only at great cost to the Book of Mormon's internal reliability as scripture, as a book that presumably means what it says.