



Type: Book Chapter

Part 3: The Resulting Problem and How to Proceed

Author(s): John L. Sorenson

Source: *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*

Published by: Provo, UT; FARMS, 1990

Page(s): 207-211



Part 3
The Resulting Problem
and How to Proceed

The Resulting Problem and How to Proceed

Parts 1 and 2 have shown that 160 years of ad hoc modeling or interpretation of the geography of Book of Mormon events have failed to settle much about the question of where were the lands in which Book of Mormon events took place. My reading of the models leaves me discouraged even while granting that some things of enduring value have been distilled through this haphazard historical process.

If we are serious about answering the question—and I at least am—what should we do that is different? Well, the question itself has two sides to it. Our goal has to be to construct an equation involving the two sides:

Nephite locations A, B, C, etc. = New World locations X, Y, Z, etc.

We cannot work on the whole equation without first attaining thorough definition of the variables on either side of the equal sign. Equipping ourselves with that thorough knowledge demands different capabilities on the one side and on the other. For the external world, we cannot substitute knowledge of scripture for knowledge of climate, topography, hydrography, etc. Unavoidably, we must have a profound grasp of the elements of the physical and cultural scene in its own terms—without any reference to the scripture. Most people offering models show that they have limited knowledge of that world. On the other side, we must know all there is to know about the statements in the Book of Mormon on the matters at hand—without any reference to external geography, archaeology, or history.

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. All the models reviewed in Part 2 have been partial and many are pitifully naive. On the textual side, examination reveals that every single model has failed to deal successfully with certain geographical data in the scripture. As for the external world, most of the models again have failed to provide convincing evidence that the model maker understands such things as actual rates of travel over several types of ancient American terrain, or medical, ecological, and economic factors involved in population growth and stasis. We have all simply not been careful enough, by far. So at this time there is no way convincingly to argue where the equal sign in the equation should be placed. That will continue so long as we are ignorant about either or both sides of the equation.

Of course it is truism that studies of an ancient text should begin with the text itself. Yet most studies in fact neither begin nor end so. For example, the Bible text. Works on this record typically begin with *assumptions* about the Bible (as well as about documents in general, the nature of humans, the cosmos, etc.). The text then becomes a source of fragments which are considered in the light of the initial assumptions, usually employed to justify

the assumptions. Was there ever a study which began assuming that the Old Testament text was composed by combining two, or three, or four ancient sources (traditions or manuscripts) which did not at the end conclude that indeed there were two, or three, or four such elements? Or, where is a Christian evangelical exegete who has failed to identify and support his own brand of theology through his writings about the Bible? Many purport to “let the text speak for itself,” but that is nonsense. For practically all of us, our anxiety to *hear* what we want to hear almost invariably overwhelms the other voice(s) the text conceivably may be directing toward our ears.

My own book cites Book of Mormon verses over 960 times. But even so many citations does not mean that the text is “speaking for itself.” For who can doubt that I *chose* those verses and the interpretations I provided for them while omitting others. Other people too have chosen their verses and their interpretations. We cannot get far if mere opinion determines which set of verses we rely on, whether it is 1000 or 10.

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

If we are to progress in this task, we must chop away and burn the conceptual underbrush that has afflicted the effort in the past. We must stop asking, as so many do, what have the Brethren said about this in the past? It is clear enough (see Appendix A) that none of them knew the answer (which is what some of them have said often enough). And equally we must stop asking, what civilization known to the archaeologists must the Nephites have participated in? This is completely irrelevant at the present stage of study. Where we must begin 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. We cannot omit any of them, for crucial clues may occur in or between words or lines where we had not seen them before.

To summarize, the following steps are necessary, and no other set of steps nor any other order for accomplishing them can solve our problem:

1. Purge our minds as far as possible of preconceptions about where the Book of Mormon lands were.
2. Analyze as freshly and completely as possible every geographical fact and sound inference which the texts require or make likely.
3. Realizing that in fact we cannot completely rid ourselves of preconceptions or make inferences without some factual or logical

errors, we should guard against hidden biases or errors by displaying for examination by other students as much of our mental processing as we are able. This requires writing out our work in detail; only written communication permits the careful examination by others that such work demands. (The resulting volume of writing may seem tedious to those not sufficiently motivated to the task.)

4. Mutual criticism (again ideally in writing) is essential to reveal points where different students can agree or where they need to improve their thinking or information. This criticism need not be uncharitable, although truth must be the ultimate standard.
5. By this repetitive process all should move toward consensus. However, the end result may be a conclusion that the text does not provide enough information, as read at this time, to come to full consensus on a single-text based model. That can only be learned by trying.
6. So far as a single model emerges from this effort, then one-half—the prerequisite half—of the equation has been prepared. Only after this has happened can a definitive search for external correlations be carried out. Until then anything said about external geography, archaeology, linguistics or the like for any location in America can only be prejudicial to the suspension of opinion that we ought to maintain.

In Part 4, I undertake to make my contribution to step 3 above. I provide a nearly exhaustive (to this moment) analysis and commentary on what the statements in the Book of Mormon text involving geography mean to me. My intent is to open up step 4. I look forward to careful, written critiques which will convince me where I have misinterpreted.

Part 8 consists of a map summarizing much of what I consider to have been learned in Part 4.

Parts 5 and 6 are simply helps—indexes and summary—for dealing with Part 4; however they do not do justice to the former because of their lack of detail.

Part 7 is another summary of the results from Part 4 put in the form of a “report card.” With this anyone interested could grade (in the manner of a teacher) any of the models in Part 2. I am personally not interested in rehashing the old models in this much detail. Most of them are manifestly inadequate; any grading of them at this point in time is of little value for future effort.

I emphasize that the question of external correlation is of no concern in this present work. We first have to get straight about the textual geography. That is my entire concern here. Someday, those who live long enough may engage in the test of external correlation, but now that is premature.