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Distances and Directions

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*D*istances and Directions

Theories of how Nephite lands relate to an actual map of the western hemisphere have varied vastly in scale. Where one person has separated a certain city from another by a thousand miles, another may assign only ten. The scale of the lands obviously makes a difference in how we read the Book of Mormon account. What did Mormon believe the distances were as he authored the history? Did he make enough statements on this subject to allow us to establish an intelligent picture of how big or how little the lands of Zarahemla or Nephi were?

Mormon furnished us with a number of key pieces of information from which we can establish distances:

1. The journeys of Alma₁'s people (Mosiah 18:1–7, 31–34; 23:1–3, 25–26; 24:18–25)
2. Limhi's explorers' expedition to the land northward (Mosiah 8:7–9; 21:25–27)
3. Movements in the Amlicite war (Alma 2)
4. Alma₂'s circuit of cities preaching repentance (Alma 5–15)
5. The wars in the borders by the east sea and in the southwest quarter (Alma 43–62:42)

6. The land of Nephi as described in the Zeniffite account and that of the sons of Mosiah₂ (Mosiah 7–22; Alma 17–26)
7. The last wars between Nephites and Lamanites (Mormon 2–6)

What can we learn about distances from the story of Alma₁ and his people?

A party of a few hundred people under the leadership of Alma₁ assembled in a place called Mormon, which was “in the borders of the land” of Nephi (Mosiah 18:4). On the basis of Mosiah 18:31–34, we can infer that Mormon lay a distance of from one to three days’ normal travel (from fifteen to forty miles by foot) from the city of Nephi.²⁶ To escape pursuers sent by King Noah, the group fled at top speed (but with women and children and animal herds necessarily holding them back) eight days’ travel into the wilderness through the uplands northward from Nephi to the land they called Helam (see Mosiah 23:1–4, 19). After a few years there they had to escape again; this time it took them thirteen days to reach the land of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 24:20–25).²⁷ Adding these distances together, we arrive at a total of about twenty-two or twenty-three days’ foot travel between the city of Nephi and the city of Zarahemla. A portion of the route taken by Alma’s people is shown on map 11.

From an extensive body of accounts of ancient and modern travel under conditions like those prevailing for Alma’s people, we can be fairly confident that they traveled at a rate of about 11 miles per day, give or take a little.²⁸ The distance they covered on the ground would have been 250 miles in round numbers, including twists and turns through mountainous

country. The beeline distance between the two cities would more likely be on the order of 180 miles. Roughly half that should have taken the party to the middle of the narrow strip of wilderness—the watershed—that separated the highlands of Nephi from the drainage of the Sidon River. The actual territory inhabited by the Nephites would probably have extended no more than 75 miles upstream from the city of Zarahemla to the local land of Manti, the southernmost settled point within the greater land of Zarahemla (see Alma 58:14).

Having established this southern dimension, we can extend our map northward from Zarahemla on the basis of Moroni₁'s letter to the chief judge, Pahoran₁. Moroni₁ referred to the city of Zarahemla as being in the “heart” of the land of the Nephites (Alma 60:19, 22). That position is generally confirmed by dissenter Coriantumr₂'s daring invasion that came out of Nephi to capture the city of Zarahemla, in the “center” of the land of Zarahemla (see Helaman 1:17–18, 24–27). However, “center” may have been more conceptual than entirely literal. Coriantumr₂ burst upon the city's defenders with almost no warning, which suggests a relatively short distance from the frontier to the capital city of Zarahemla. But the invaders soon found themselves bogged down farther downstream in what was called “the most capital parts of the land” (Helaman 1:27). This terminology suggests that a stretch of additional cities and heavy population lay northerly from the city of Zarahemla for a somewhat greater distance than on the upper stretch of the river. If the upper river was 75 miles long, the stretch downstream from the city of Zarahemla might have been, say, 100 miles northward.

Northward beyond the land of Zarahemla proper (at least as the boundaries were construed at one point in time) lay an

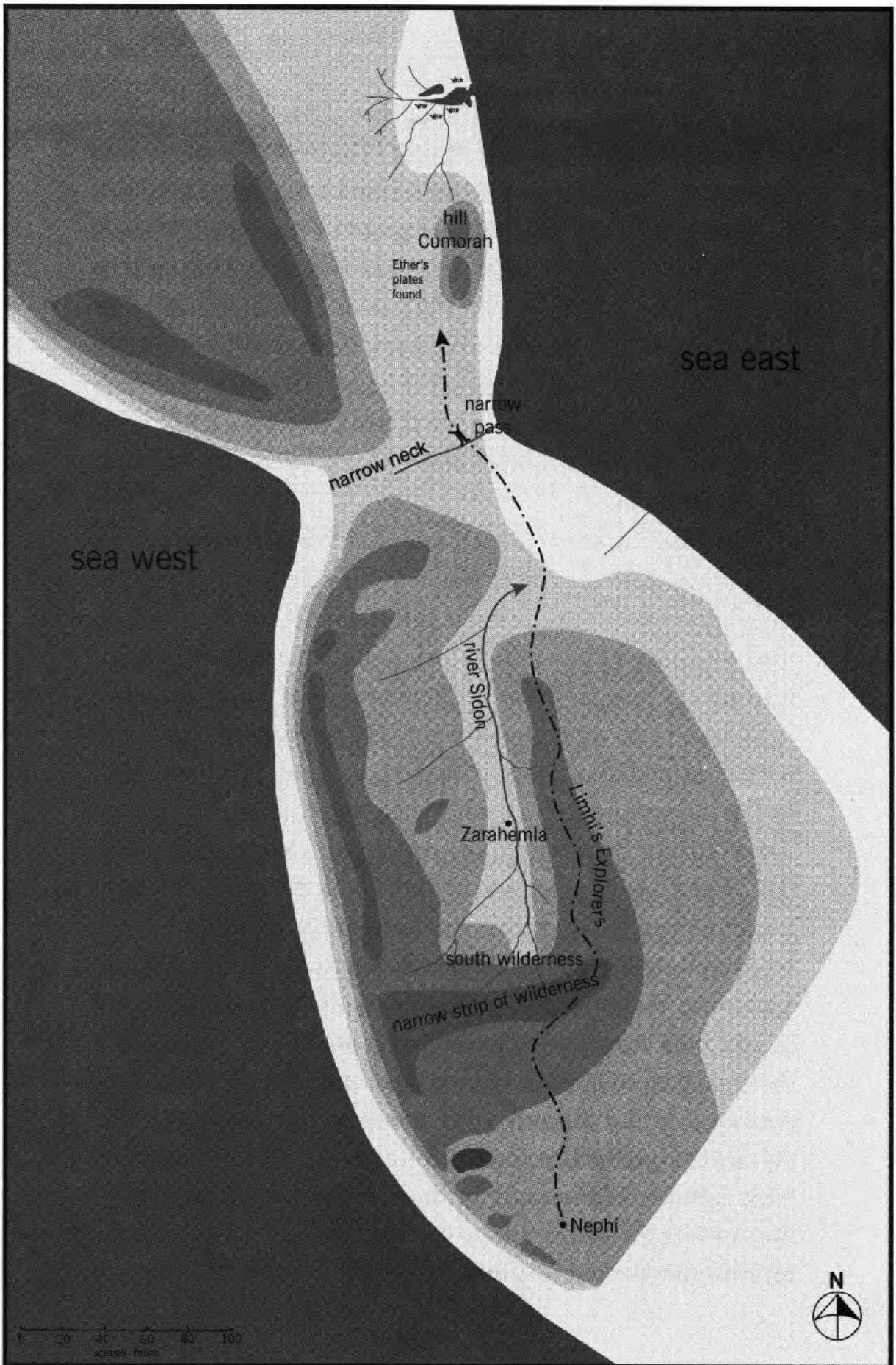
unlabeled, no doubt small, land “between the land Zarahemla and the land Bountiful” (3 Nephi 3:23). It is referred to only once. If this unnamed land and the land Bountiful were each 30 miles from north to south, then the straight-line distance from the city of Zarahemla to the boundary between Bountiful and the land Desolation—the northern limit of the land southward—adds up to a total of 160 miles. That means that from the city of Nephi to where the land northward began was roughly 340 miles on a direct line.

These are estimates, of course, yet they are not likely to be a long way off, because they are based on how fast actual groups have been able to travel in a day. Given the uncertainties that we cannot avoid when interpreting the statements in the record, it would be no shock to find someday that the numbers are off by 25 percent, but it is difficult for me to believe that they could be as much as 50 percent in error. In other words, on Mormon’s mental map, the land southward stretched only a few hundred miles in length. (Keep in mind that Palestine from Dan to Beersheba was only about 150 miles long.)

How about the distance into the land northward? Crucial information comes from the account of the exploring party Zeniffite king Limhi sent to locate Zarahemla. Their purpose was to request help from the Nephites to free Limhi’s people from Lamanite bondage. The expedition consisted of forty-three of his most “diligent” men (see Mosiah 8:7–8). It had been two generations since their fathers had come from Zarahemla, and tradition apparently did not furnish firm information about the route they should follow to reach Zarahemla. The explorers wandered for many days before discovering extensive ruins. These ruins turned out to be in the land Desolation of the Jaredites, for there the party came upon corroded artifacts and the gold plates on which the last Jaredite

prophet, Ether, had written his account of that peoples' history and extermination (see Ether 15:33). The explorers then backtracked to the city of Nephi, their homeland, bearing Ether's record and a few Jaredite relics as proof of their story. What is remarkable to us now is their conclusion that the remains they found had been left by the inhabitants of Zarahemla, who they supposed must somehow have been destroyed (see Mosiah 21:26). We now understand that the exploring party had traveled all the way into the land northward, to within a few miles of the hill Ramah/Cumorah. Map 7 shows a plausible route for their expedition.

How far had they traveled in miles? What distance can we infer it was from the city of Nephi to the place where Ether left the plates, which was near the hill Ramah/Cumorah? Surely they would have known from their grandfathers' traditions approximately how far it was to Zarahemla, so if we put ourselves in their sandals, we probably would have begun to wonder, after the estimated number of days had passed, just how much farther northward to press on. When they found no inhabited Zarahemla or, apparently, any people with whom they could talk, they must have begun to think about turning back. I can imagine them going on for perhaps twice as many days as the tradition told them it would take to get to Zarahemla, but not a lot more. We know that Nephi was separated from Zarahemla by less than two hundred miles, so it seems improbable that those diligent men would have pressed northward much more than double that distance without arguing among themselves about turning back. It looks from this incident like the final Jaredite battlefield was not much more than four hundred airline miles from Nephi. Again, these are estimates and could be off by some, but not by a major amount.



How big was the immediate territory around Zarahemla?

Consider an incident that involved territory on a much smaller scale than the distance traveled by Limhi's searchers. Alma 2:15–37; 3:2; and 4:2 inform us about the scene of a pair of battles in the immediate vicinity of Zarahemla. A people called the Amlicites, dissenters from the Nephite government who probably came from farther down the Sidon River,²⁹ gathered at the hill Amnihu, just across the river from the city of Zarahemla, to battle against the Nephite army. The loyalists under chief judge Alma₂ seemed to get the better of the fight, and the rebels headed up to the valley of Gideon (we have already seen that at that point they would have been on the preferred—and probably fastest—route southward in the direction of Manti). When night stopped the pursuit, the Nephites camped in the valley, but under cover of night and on a convenient road, the Amlicites hightailed it on southward. Alma₂'s scouts hurried back at daybreak to report dismaying news: the enemy force had got to the river Sidon, crossed it, and joined forces with a Lamanite army that had timed its invasion (surely by secret advance planning with the rebel leader Amlici) to be at that point that morning. Now the combined enemy groups were swarming down the west bank of the river toward the city of Zarahemla. This word set off a race between Alma₂'s army and the enemy to determine who could reach the city first. Alma₂ aimed straight for a crucial point, a ford across the river just upstream from the city, and started to cross just as the Lamanites showed up. In a desperate fight, the Nephites

MAP 7. LIMHI'S EXPLORERS

A wrong turn in the wilderness no doubt got this expedition on a wrong track, perhaps as shown. Returning home, they would have followed familiar landmarks back along the same route.

sent their opponents fleeing toward a nearby forest “wilderness” (Alma 2:37) called Hermounts. Within hours, the escaping force was scattered and the Nephites arrived at the city they had just saved. Map 8 represents the positions where these events took place and the distances separating them.

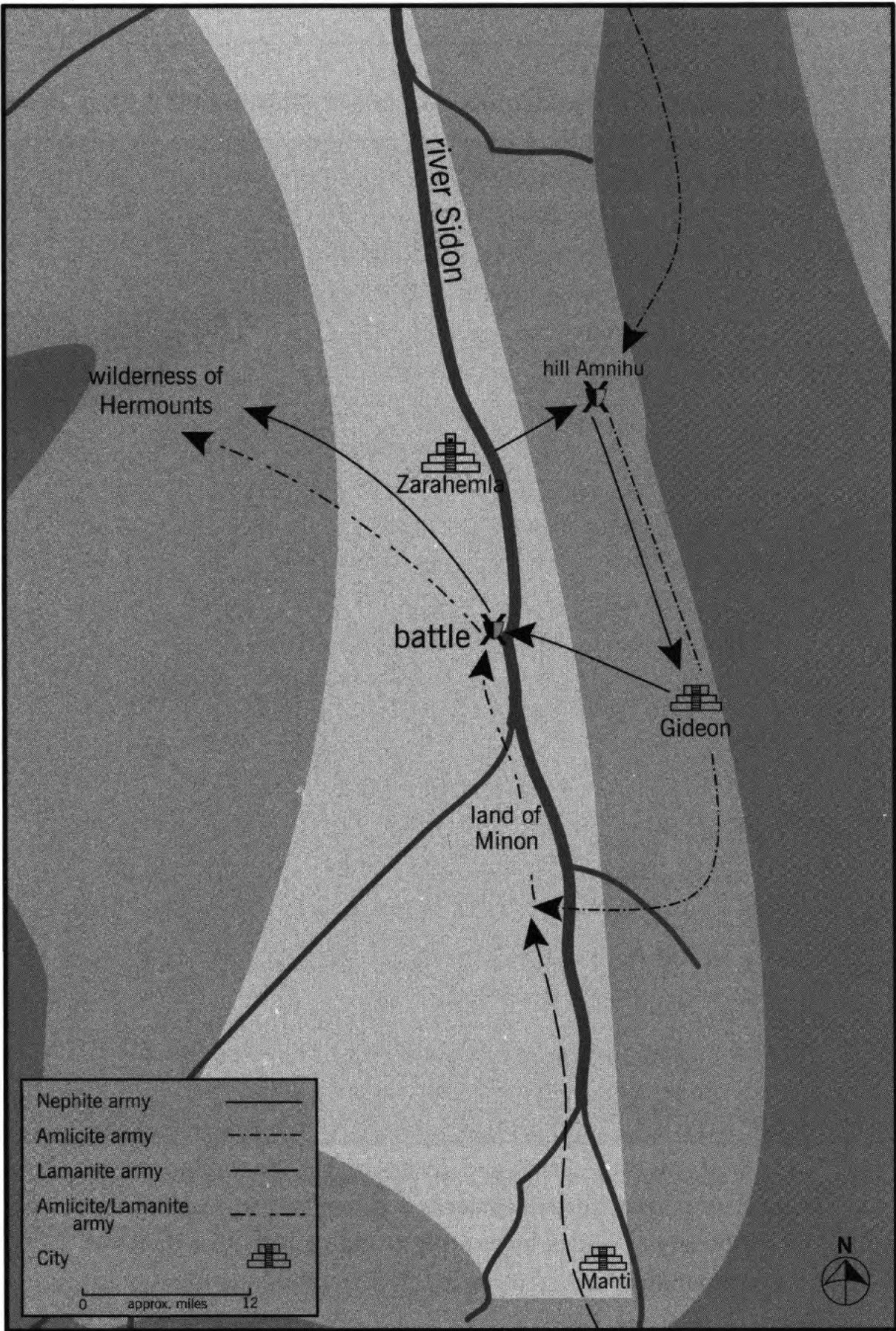
The entire episode consumed two days and one night. The distances cannot be much different than this: hill Amnihu to Gideon, no more than twenty miles; Gideon direct to the ford at the river, maybe twelve miles; Zarahemla to Minon, not over thirty-five miles; Zarahemla city to the river ford, less than ten miles; the battle scene at the river bank to the wilderness of Hermounts, not much greater than ten miles. When we analyze the detailed narrative of this thirty-six-hour period, the realities imposed by travel conditions simply do not allow much leeway in these numbers.

What dimensions are revealed by Alma₂'s missionary journey around the land?

Alma₂ set out to establish the church in areas toward the limits of the land of Zarahemla as it existed in his day. He began at Gideon, then headed to Melek, Ammonihah, and Sidom. At one point in time he also started to go to the city of Aaron but did not reach it. Finally, he returned from Sidom to his home in Zarahemla. The account yields distance figures that are not precise but are still useful (see Alma 8:3–6, 13; 15:18). To Melek from Zarahemla required significant travel: Alma₁ departed from Zarahemla “and took his journey over into the land of Melek, on the west of the river Sidon, on the west by

MAP 8. THE AMLICITE CONFLICT

All these movements took place within a thirty-six-hour period. That means that the scale of the action covered only tens of miles.



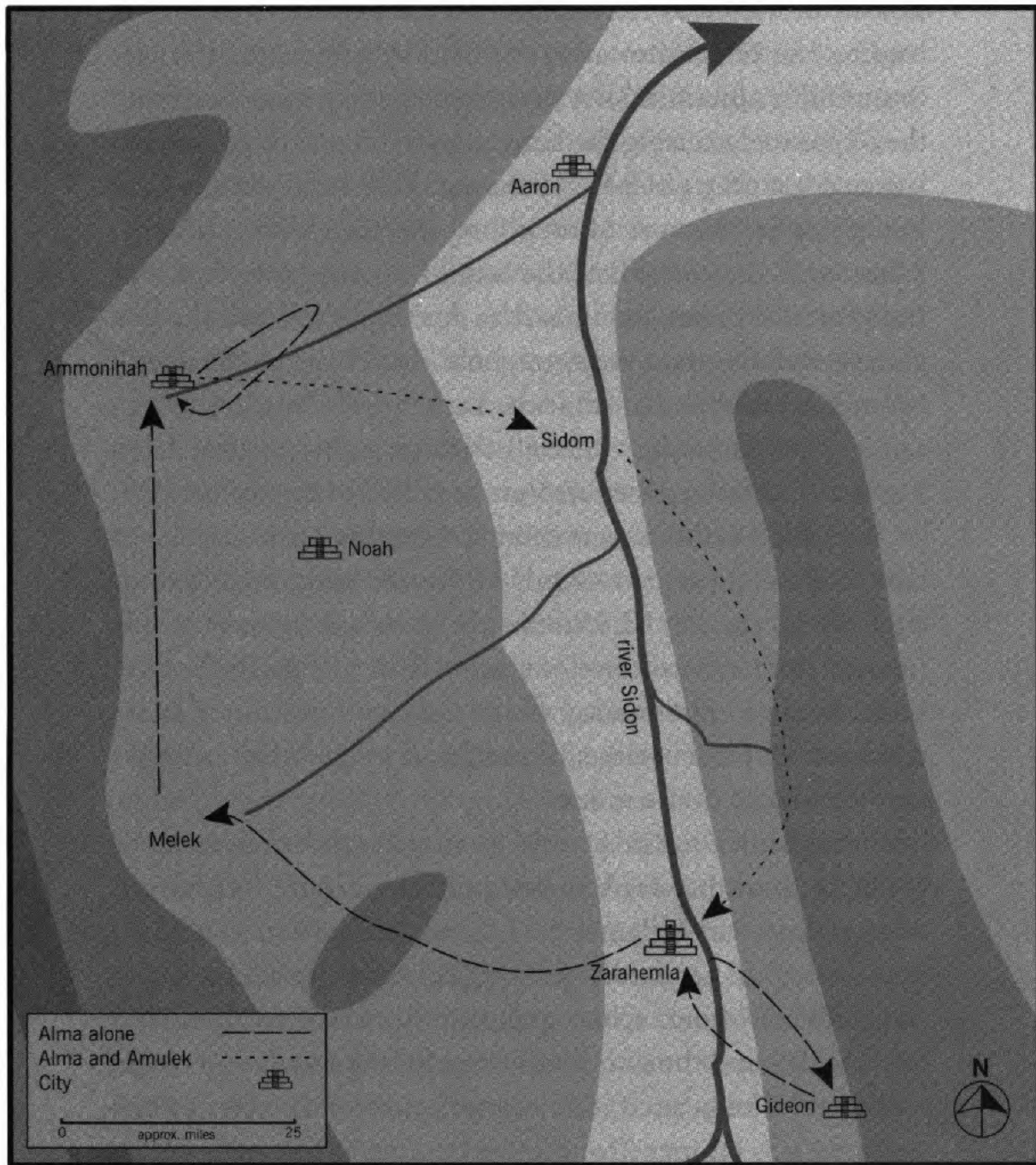
Nephite army	—————
Amlicite army	- - - - -
Lamanite army	— · — · —
Amlicite/Lamanite army	- · - · -
City	
0 approx. miles 12	

the borders of the wilderness” (Alma 8:3). This sounds rather more complicated than when he “went over upon the east of the river Sidon, into the valley of Gideon” (Alma 6:7). The Gideon trip would have taken him only one day, we have just seen from the Amlicite affair. “Took his journey over into” Melek implies greater distance. (At the end of his life, Alma₂’s last trip followed the same course; “he departed out of the land of Zarahemla, as if to go into the land of Melek” [Alma 45:18], but he was never seen again. The implication of this passage confirms that the journey was not a short, simple one.) Two or three days of travel seem called for to reach Melek, perhaps fifty miles or more. From Melek it then took Alma₂ three days’ travel northward to reach Ammonihah (see Alma 8:6), say another fifty-plus miles.³⁰ Traveling from Ammonihah to Sidom (the name suggests that it was at the Sidon River) should have taken roughly the same time and distance as a journey from Zarahemla to Melek (see Alma 15:1). And finally from Sidom to Zarahemla, back up the river, would again have roughly reversed the distance from Melek to Ammonihah—three days’ travel. All these numbers are sensible when compared with the earlier discussion of Zarahemla as being in the “center” of the land of Zarahemla. (See map 9.)

How far did the Nephite possessions stretch along the east coast in the land southward?

Details about the marches by the Nephite and Lamanite armies in the area called the borders by the east seashore can also be converted into plausible distances. We begin with Alma 52:18–31. Moroni₁, Lehi₂, and Teancum and the military units they commanded began to decoy a Lamanite army out of the fortified city of Mulek by sending a small group near the city. The Lamanites pursued them in full force, thinking they could

MAP 9. ALMA₂'S PREACHING CIRCUIT



In his travels, Alma₂ established the church “throughout all the land” (Alma 16:21), so he must have essentially circled the territory in the Sidon River basin that contained most of the Nephite population.

easily capture them. The decoy party retreated toward the city Bountiful “down by the seashore, northward” (Alma 52:23), leading the Lamanites away “until they came near the city Bountiful” (Alma 52:27). A new Nephite force from Bountiful then appeared, causing the Lamanites to stop and turn about, worried lest they not be able to reach their city because they “were wearied because of their long march” (Alma 52:28, 31; Alma 51:33 indicates that “the heat of the day” was debilitating). Part of Moroni₁’s unit had by this time overcome the tiny garrison left to guard the stronghold, Mulek, while the rest of his men hurried to confront the Lamanites. Caught between armies, the Lamanites were all slain or captured (see Alma 52:38–39), and the prisoners were marched to Bountiful.

The day’s action saw the Lamanites move from Mulek to near Bountiful (say two-thirds of the distance) and then retreat part of the way back to Mulek. Their weariness probably meant that their total travel was more than a torrid day’s travel under battle conditions, say about eighteen miles along an irregular trail. On a beeline, Bountiful to Mulek might then be on the order of twelve miles.

From Mulek to Gid should be roughly the same distance (perhaps a normal day’s walking for a merchant). However, when we compare Helaman 5:14–15 with Alma 51:26, we learn that one could as readily go from Bountiful to Gid as from Bountiful to Mulek. Consequently, Gid was directly inland from Mulek and thus no farther southward in relation to the seashore.³¹ The next city to the south that the Lamanites had captured was Omner. Insufficient data are given to figure an actual distance from Omner to Gid or Mulek, but it is reasonable that it was of about the same order, in this case let us say twenty miles. This would put Omner thirty miles southward from Bountiful, measuring along the shore.

In the next operation, Moroni₁'s army captured the city of Nephihah (see Alma 62:26), which was inland some distance from the shore (see Alma 50:14–15; compare 59:5–8). From there they immediately marched to attack the city of Lehi (see Alma 62:30). The dislodged Lamanites fled northward “from city to city” (Alma 62:32), probably including Morianton and Omner. Before they had fled far they were met by a Nephite army advancing southward from Gid and Mulek. The Lamanites had nowhere to go except to scramble along near the beach (“even down upon the borders by the seashore” [Alma 62:32]) until just before dark they reached the city of Moroni, the last city still held by the Lamanites (see Alma 62:33–35).

The text indicates that capture of Nephihah, the flight from Lehi “from city to city” northward, then turning back all the way to Moroni was a single military operation done in a single day. How far was it in miles? With their lives on the line, the Lamanites might have made twenty-five or more miles total (Alma 62:35 says that by dark, both the Lamanites and Nephites “were weary because of the greatness of the march”). Some of those twenty-five miles were seaward and some were consumed by the futile doubling back to and from the north. The total distance the Lamanites traveled southward parallel to the beach could hardly have been more than fifteen miles.

In summary, the mileages measured along the coast are as follows: Bountiful to Gid/Mulek, twelve miles; Gid/Mulek to Omner, twenty miles; the southward component of the last day's flight, maximum fifteen miles. Suppose we now arbitrarily allow an additional twenty miles for the distance between Omner and Lehi, for which we do not have a specific basis for measurement, another ten miles from Bountiful to the “line” that separated the lands Bountiful and Desolation, and finally, five miles from Moroni city to the edge (“line”) of

Nephite-controlled land. Adding the numbers together we conclude that the southward limit of Nephite possessions along the east sea was only about eighty miles from the land northward. No wonder Amalickiah, in his plan to capture the narrow neck (see Alma 51:30), chose this east shore as his prime point of attack (the distance he would have had to drive along the west coast was over 250 miles). Further, no wonder Moroni₁ put such prodigious effort into fortifying the Nephites' vulnerable east coast (see Alma 50:7–11).

How wide was the land southward?

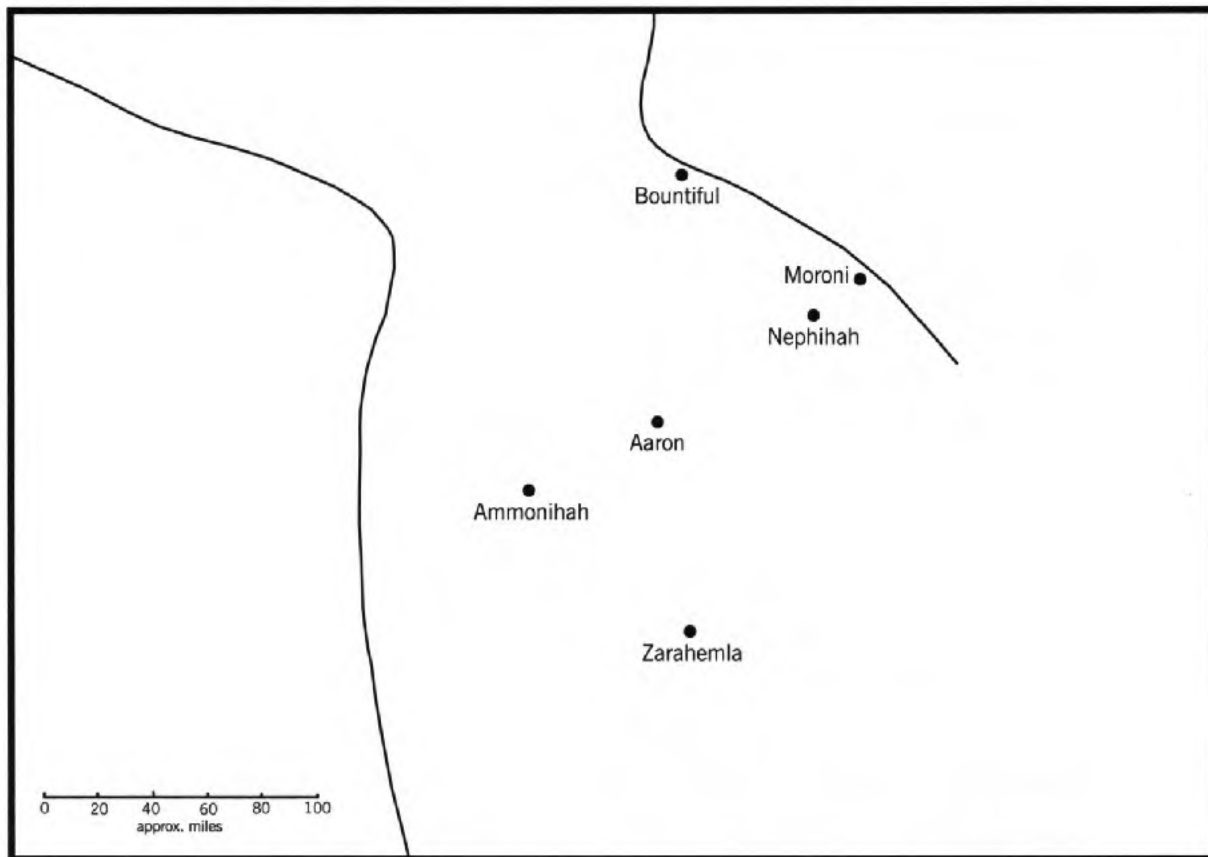
The Book of Mormon relates four local lands and their cities that spread across the land southward from east to west: Moroni, Nephihah, Aaron, and Ammonihah. The land of Moroni, a small territory near the east seashore and close to the Lamanite possessions, bordered on the land of Nephihah, which was also, broadly speaking, in the borders by the east sea (see Alma 50:13–14). The territory administered by Nephihah also abutted on the land of Aaron (see Alma 50:14).

The position of Aaron has posed a problem for some students of Nephite geography; Aaron, which on the one hand ties to Nephihah, which was near the southerly limit of Nephite holdings on the east coast, on the other hand relates to Ammonihah, which was near the west wilderness in the northerly section of the land of Zarahemla (see Alma 8:13; 16:2).³² Once we realize, however, how short the stretch of Nephite-controlled east sea coast was, the conflict that some have seen between the statements about Aaron's position is resolved. The center of the land around the city of Aaron was apparently lightly settled (no other city is ever named in that sector), so it is probable that Aaron administered a rather large area, which reached so far toward the east (probably down the Sidon River) that its

limit on the east reached the westernmost territory under Nephiah's control. When the positions of the four lands—Moroni, Nephiah, Aaron, and Ammonihah—are plotted on a map (see map 10) that allows us to compare the spread among them with other distances, the total width from coast to coast across the land southward comes out to be on the order of two hundred miles.

Only two textual passages relate directly to the question of the width of the land southward. Both bits of information are in reference to the area near the narrow neck. First, Mormon's summary geography in Alma 22:32 states, "Now, it was only

MAP 10. SPATIAL RELATIONS OF FOUR CITIES ACROSS THE LAND SOUTHWARD



The geographical relationships among the four lands that stretch across the land southward are clarified when the comparative distances separating them are carefully inferred.

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 . . . there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward." The other scripture, Helaman 4:5–7, tells of Nephite armies that were driven northward by Lamanites around 30 B.C. The Nephites were expelled completely from the land of Zarahemla and from their territory along the west coast, ultimately stopping at the south edge of the land of Bountiful (see Helaman 4:6). The Nephites no doubt retreated along the same route out of Zarahemla, via the pass near Ammonihah and the west coast, as did the Nephites under Mormon over three centuries later (see Mormon 2:5–7). At the south boundary of the land Bountiful at the west sea, they fortified a line that stretched "from the west sea, even unto the east; it being a day's journey for a Nephite, [on] the line which they had fortified and stationed their armies to defend their north country" (Helaman 4:7). This fortified line did not extend across the narrow neck of land; its purpose was only to block the west coastal plain. Thus the "day's journey," whatever it measured, had nothing to do with the width across the entire neck, for that did not begin until farther northward, on the other side of Bountiful. (See "Mormon's Map" on the inside front cover of the book.)

Alma 22:32 speaks directly about the narrow neck, but the meaning of its statement, a "day and a half's journey for a Nephite," is unclear. Both this phrase and "a day's journey for a Nephite" (Helaman 4:7) are expressions that reach us through Mormon, a military man, and may reflect some standard measure of distance familiar among Nephite military people. Furthermore, several researchers have observed that the phrase in Alma 22:32, "from the east to the west sea," allows the interpretation that the journey was measured some point short of

the actual east sea shore.³³ After all, it would be foolish for the Nephites to waste resources defending a line that reached the sea to the east of the narrow pass, since their enemies could not reach the land northward other than via the pass (see Mormon 3:5–6; 4:4, 19).

In any case, the actual distance a person can go in one day varies greatly according to setting, individual capacity, and mode of travel. Persons have been known to travel over one hundred miles per day by foot with some regularity, and of course if one went down a river in a canoe, an even greater distance could be traveled.³⁴ Such variables prevent us from establishing a definite length for the “line” at the neck, but a range of figures between 60 and 125 miles can be argued as reasonable for the “day and a half’s journey.” (Recall that the narrower one makes the neck, the more difficult it is to explain how Limhi’s explorers failed to realize that they had passed through it.)

What can we learn about distances in the land of Nephi from the story of the Zeniffites and the travels of the sons of Mosiah₂?

Events in the reigns of the Zeniffite kings Noah and Limhi shed light on distances in the local land of Nephi and its vicinity (the land and city at that time were called Lehi-Nephi, probably at the insistence of the Lamanite overlords, but for simplicity we will use the old term, Nephi). Noah “built a tower near the temple [in the city of Nephi], even so high that he could stand upon the top thereof and overlook the land of Shilom, and also the land of Shemlon, which was possessed by the Lamanites” (Mosiah 11:12). From this tower Noah spotted a Lamanite army coming up out of the land of Shemlon toward Nephi (see Mosiah 19:6). For a Zeniffite to have such a

view, the distance to Shilom could hardly have exceeded ten miles and the near border of Shemlon would have been within twenty miles. Moreover, Lamanite armies consistently came “up” from Shemlon to Shilom and Nephi, and even farther “up” to hilly land overlooking those two places (see Mosiah 7:5–6; 10:8; 20:7–9). Shilom and Shemlon seem to have been located in the same broad valley as the city and local land of Nephi.

We saw above how the information on the movements of Alma₁’s people after they fled from Noah’s Zeniffites is important in establishing distances in the Nephi highlands. We can add to that that the land of Amulon was not far from Nephi. The Lamanite army pursued the fleeing people of Limhi but lost their track after two days (under fifty miles). After wandering about trying to find their way back to Nephi, those Lamanites stumbled onto the land of Amulon (see Mosiah 22:16; 23:30–31, 35). Still confused about how to reach Nephi, after leaving Amulon they came across the land of Helam, still lost, yet both lands were no more than eighty-five miles direct from Nephi. The implication is strong from this affair that the terrain was very broken. These relationships are shown on map 11.

That the land of Nephi and its vicinity were small in dimensions is confirmed by the account of Nephi₁’s initial settling of it. When Nephi₁ and his group left the land of first inheritance on the shore of the west sea, they were penetrating raw wilderness as far as they were concerned. It was probably forested, since they were in the tropics at or near sea level, and they are not said to have had any special divine guidance about routes to take or avoid. The fact that they traveled “many days” (2 Nephi 5:7) thus need not mean a great distance (in 1 Nephi 17:4, 20–21, “many years” turns out to be only eight). They ended up in what was thereafter called the land of Nephi (see

2 Nephi 5:7–8), after traveling possibly eighty to one hundred miles. The distance would have been much shorter on a straight line. Inasmuch as Nephi₁'s people were attacked by the Lamanites within the first generation (see 2 Nephi 5:34), the land of Nephi could not have been far from the coastal land where the Lamanites apparently remained.

Many Lamanites were still living in the west coast wilderness after 100 B.C., yet by then some had moved to higher ground (see Mosiah 24:1–2; Alma 24:20). The Lamanite ruler apparently had only recently moved up to Nephi at the time when Zeniff negotiated with him (see Mosiah 9:5–8); when the exploitable Zeniffites came along, the Lamanites moved out of the decrepit old Nephite city to territory down closer to the lowlands that had been their base in earlier centuries (see Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:2–5; Mosiah 24:2). Eventually, their kings made their permanent capital in upland Nephi (see Alma 22:1).

The travels of the sons of Mosiah₂ as teachers among the Lamanites confirm the small scale of the lands in and around Nephi. For example, the brothers all got together to confer about the problem of protecting their converts (see Alma 24:5), and all the believers lived close enough together that they departed from the land as one body (see Alma 27:14). But the text does not provide information on travel times and mileage in their day.

The account of Aaron₃'s ministry in the city of Jerusalem and the village of Ani-Anti suggests something about the size of “the waters of Mormon.” When he separated from his colleagues at the beginning of their work, Aaron₃ first stopped at the city of Jerusalem, which “was away joining the borders of [the waters of] Mormon” (Alma 21:1–2). In Alma₁'s day, Mormon was considered a mere “place” (Mosiah 18:4, 16) that was adjacent to the waters of Mormon, but later the locality

was considered a “land” (Alma 5:3). At the time of the catastrophe when the Savior was crucified, Jerusalem was “sunk” and waters covered it (see 3 Nephi 9:6–7): it is plausible that Jerusalem was adjacent to the waters of Mormon and it was these waters that covered the sunken city. When Aaron₃ left Jerusalem he “came over to a village,” yet the land of Mormon is never mentioned (Alma 21:11). It appears from all this that Jerusalem and Mormon were miles apart, although they both adjoined the same body of waters. Consequently, that body seems to have been a substantial lake a number of miles across.

What can we learn about distances from the final Nephite and Jaredite wars?

Certain information on distances has already been referred to in chapter 4 on the topography of the land northward where it was essential for handling that topic.

Mormon spent his early years in the land northward, not far from where his people would meet extinction more than half a century later (see 4 Nephi 1:48; Mormon 1:2–6; 2:16–17). As a youth he moved to the land of Zarahemla, where he soon was given command over the Nephite army (see Mormon 1:6; 2:1–2). In short order, a Lamanite attack out of the land of Nephi forced the Nephite army by stages all the way to the city of Jashon, which was near Mormon’s homeland in the land northward (see Mormon 2:3–17). The retreat of a few hundred miles was across terrain with which Mormon was already familiar.

Back and forth over the same stretch of territory the conflict raged for the next several decades. Once the Nephites even regained their Zarahemla homeland, but only temporarily (see Mormon 2:27). At length Mormon ended up near his original homeland (see Mormon 3:5; 4:1–23). In Mormon’s old age the Nephites retreated farther still, to the city of Jordan and beyond

(see Mormon 5:3, 7). His people being left with few resources, Mormon had to strike a final deal with the Lamanite enemy: to meet them, by appointment, at a mutually acceptable battleground (see Mormon 6:2). Cumorah was the specified site for the climactic struggle. The Lamanites surely must have wanted to get the war over without extending their lines of supply still farther northward, while the Nephites hoped not to lose what territory (including the land of Cumorah) they still controlled. (Further, Cumorah must have been close to, if not actually at, where Mormon had grown up. Perhaps by fighting on territory with which he was intimately familiar, he “had hope to gain [tactical] advantage over the Lamanites” [Mormon 6:4].) The Cumorah rendezvous spot logically would have been on the boundary separating the two parties at that moment.

What all this retreating and advancing means for our consideration of distances is that the Nephites fought out their last decades on familiar ground, none of which was much farther north than the land of Cumorah. We have already established from the story of Limhi’s explorers how far that was from the narrow neck. Mormon’s personal record thus confirms that the last Nephites never retreated northward much more than one hundred miles north of the narrow pass.

That also means that the lands they possessed were within the same general area where the Jaredites fought their final wars. (As a matter of fact, the successor people in the area, the apostate Nephites, may have considered themselves fated to have the decision about their future decided in the same manner as their predecessors’, in battle at the same hill, and perhaps at a related calendrical point—hence the appointed date with the Lamanites. Consider Alma 46:22: “We shall be destroyed, even as *our brethren* in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression.”) The area of the Jaredites’ last wars was

sufficiently restricted that in some manner it was possible for Ether to go “forth viewing the things which should come upon the people” and complete the remainder of his record (see Ether 13:13–14). The general geographic position of the final Jaredite battles was the eastern portion of the land northward (see Ether 14:12–14, 26; 15:8, 10–11). Moroni₂ specifies that some of that area was indeed where the Nephites later operated (see Ether 7:6; 9:3, 31–32; 10:19–21; 15:11, 33). The information we can glean from the record of Ether agrees that the distances involved in the Jaredite wars were similar to those we find in Mormon’s record of the Nephites’ final decades.

Incidentally, the territories the Nephites colonized via the narrow pass seem to have borne a name of their own in the record: “north countries” or “north country.” Mormon and Moroni₂ use one of these expressions five times (see Helaman 4:7; Mormon 2:3; Ether 1:1; 9:35; 13:11). Only once does the counterterm “south countries” occur (Mormon 6:15). “North country” and “north countries” seem to me from the contexts to be applied only to the inhabited lowland portions of the land northward that were reached from “the south countries” overland via the narrow pass. But neither “north countries” nor “north country” is used in regard to the colonies along the west sea coast, which are described strictly as being in the “land northward.”

Summary on distances

In Mormon’s mind, the scene of the Nephite, Lamanite, and Jaredite activities was of limited size. Main lands, minor lands, mountain ranges, plains, valleys, rivers, and oceans are all referred to in a manner that indicates that Mormon not only knew about those geographical elements from the records of his ancestors, but he knew much of the scene personally and

intimately. The dimensions are small, although hardly tiny. The promised land in which the Nephites' history played out was on the order of five hundred miles long and over two hundred miles wide, according to Mormon's mental map. That is still considerably larger than the stage on which most Old Testament events took place.

Were Nephite directions the same as those we are familiar with today?

The real question is, what concepts of direction were our primary historian-editor, Mormon, using? We have already seen that he had his own framework for thinking and writing about distances. His ideas of how far apart sites were seem to be consistent even though they are not the same as the scale that governs our thinking in a day of jet travel and worldwide information. "Many days" of travel probably elicited for Mormon a rather different mental image of distance than it would for us. (For that matter, among ourselves the expression brings forth varying ideas.) Similarly, we might ask, would "year" have meant the same to him as it does to us? Lasting how long? Beginning and ending when? Composed of what seasonal variations in climate?

When we examine the text of the Book of Mormon carefully, we can detect numerous places where cultural assumptions that were second nature to the Nephites are quite different than those we hold. We Latter-day Saints may have become so used to "liken[ing] all scriptures unto us" (1 Nephi 19:23) that we assume we understand ideas in them that actually are foreign to our experience. For example, Mosiah 19:20 describes King Noah's being executed "by fire" at the hands of some of his disgusted, angry subjects. Verse 24 goes on, "After they had ended the ceremony, . . . they returned to the land of Nephi."

Not a word in the record sheds light on this or any other ceremony connected with death. To the record keeper, the need for and nature of the ceremony was so obvious that there was no need to explain further. Another instance of unexplained culture is a statement in Mosiah. Alma₂, the high priest over “the church” (Mosiah 26:8), put a question of religious policy to King Mosiah₂, and the king then “consulted with his priests” on the matter (Mosiah 27:1). Who were these priests? They were not part of the church structure that Alma₂ headed, and nowhere else is there an indication that Mosiah₂ had his own set of priests. Furthermore, we discover that at other points, Nephite and Lamanite notions, like many Israelite concepts in the Old Testament, varied profoundly from the ideas we hold today. For example, why would a king bow himself in front of his own people and “plead” (Mosiah 20:25) with them for what he desired? What were “dragons” (Alma 43:44)? How did Nephite concepts of “heaven” or “hell” (for example, see Alma 54:11) relate to ones we accept? What did they think the outer zone above the earth (our “space”) was like?

There are many points of similarity, of course, between their concepts and ours. Much of the thought and experience conveyed in the ancient records relates sufficiently to the symbols and meanings familiar in our culture that we can learn much from studying them. But differences need to be recognized, not ignored.

Direction is one such concept. The world’s varied cultures have produced remarkably diverse models of spatial dimensions on the face of the earth. For example, certain Inuit (Eskimos) who lived north of the Arctic Circle, where the sun is not visible for a good part of the year, used alternative terminology in place of our east, west, north, and south, which were essentially useless to them. They spoke of directions as “above

versus below,” in reference to local elevations, and spoke of “inside versus outside,” an arbitrary contrast that makes sense only in terms of their traditions.³⁵ In ancient Mesopotamia, the Sumerians based their directions on the prevailing winds, which they considered to blow from what we call northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest; following that tradition, the later Babylonians oriented their maps so that northwest was at the top.³⁶ In ancient Mesoamerica, “Maya spatial orientation to the four corners of their universe is not based upon our cardinal directions of N, S, E, W, but probably either upon inter-cardinal points (i.e. NE, NW, SW, SE) or upon two directions in the East and two directions in the West (i.e. sunrise at winter solstice, sunrise at summer solstice [which are 50 degrees apart] sunset at winter solstice and sunset at summer solstice).”³⁷ Such varied examples are everywhere.³⁸ To those who share a particular culture, their way of labeling invariably seems “obvious” and does not require explanation, while all other schemes seem to them strange.

One thing we learn from studying this material is that the cardinal directions—east, west, south, north—have not been basic to the directional schemes of most of the world’s cultures. What our culture has taught us, that the cardinal directions are obvious, is not true historically.

We may be tempted to think automatically that “northward” and “southward” label directions that are the same as “north” and “south.” But “northward” signals a different concept than does “north,” something like “in a general northerly direction.” By their frequency of using the *-ward* suffix, we can infer that Mormon and his ancestors used a somewhat different cultural scheme for directions than we do.³⁹ However, we cannot tell from the Book of Mormon text exactly how their

concepts differed from ours, because all we have to work with is the English translation provided through Joseph Smith.

The subtlety directional matters can show is displayed in a system of contrasts that most of us may have missed in Mormon's account. These contrasts are in the use of the terms "came" and "went." For example, in the first Lamanite attack on the city of Ammonihah, the text says that the Lamanites had "come in" to the land (Alma 16:2; compare 49:6, "come upon"), but when the same incident was related later, the text says they "went over" (Alma 25:2). Similar differences between "came" and "went" are shown repeatedly. Nobody has yet analyzed this word usage systematically, but a reasonable guess to explain it is that the distinction had to do with the location of the historian at the time he wrote his record. In the case of the attack on Ammonihah, the version of the story that used "come" was part of the Nephite record prepared and kept in Zarahemla, while the second report was from the record of, and thus from the point of view of, the sons of Mosiah¹, who at that time were dwelling in the land of Nephi.

These examples suggest that we still have a ways to go before we even know all the right questions about Nephite direction systems that we should ask of the text. At this stage in our study of Mormon's record, we will do well to take advantage of the caution *caveat lector*, or "let the reader beware." Beware of making assumptions about meanings that may prove to be misleading because they spring from modern-day assumptions rather than from ancient ways. The Book of Mormon text, like all scripture, is subtle; full understanding of it demands extensive and intensive study that uses all the tools at our disposal. Relying on our own ethnocentric interpretations is not an approach to be recommended.