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How Can We Arrive at Mormon's Map?

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How Can We Arrive at Mormon's Map?

To start at the beginning seems like a good plan in solving any problem. The beginning in addressing Book of Mormon geography is the text of the Book of Mormon itself. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith put the principle well for Latter-day Saints: “The teachings of any . . . member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them.”¹⁷ Whatever the Book of Mormon says about its own geography thus takes precedence over anything commentators have said of it.

The nearest thing to a systematic explanation of Mormon's geographical picture is given in Alma 22:27–34. In the course of relating an incident involving Nephite missionaries and the great king over the Lamanites, Mormon inserted a 570-word aside that summarized major features of the land southward. He must have considered that treatment full and clear enough for his purposes, because he never returned to the topic. Overall, over 550 verses in the Book of Mormon contain information of geographical significance: the account is steeped with information about the where of Nephite events. If we

wish to learn what Mormon knew about the geography of his lands, we will have to flesh out the picture on our own, often by teasing the information out of the stories the ancient compiler presented.

When we examine the text, does a consistent geographical picture emerge?

Any story that is securely based on historical events demonstrates its genuineness by how consistently it refers to places. If an author or editor fails to have a specific setting in mind, discordant details will appear in statements about location, and inconsistencies in the fiction will become apparent. A large portion of the Book of Mormon was selected and phrased by just one man, Mormon, so the degree of consistency should be largely unmarred by the lapses of memory or slips of the pen (or stylus) that tend to accumulate in records handed down through multiple generations. My personal experience with the text of the Book of Mormon is that all the geographical information does prove to be consistent, so I conclude that Mormon possessed an orderly “mental map” of the scene on which his people’s history was played out.¹⁸

We could wish for more detail than he gives us, but his information is still substantial. We both have the advantage of and are limited by what is found in the pages of the Book of Mormon. Some fifteen lands are named therein, and their positions are noted, connoted, or implied. The positions of forty-seven cities are more or less characterized (thirteen of these forty-seven are mentioned only once, and that limited data fails to provide enough information to relate the thirteen to the locations of other cities or lands). Mormon leaves no evidence of confusion about geography; he easily persuades me that he could have told us more had he chosen to do so. Even

when particular lands or cities are mentioned at widely separated places in the text, the statements fit comfortably together into a plausible whole. He never hints that he did not understand the geography behind the records of his ancestors that he was abridging; rather, his writing exudes an air of confidence. That probably came in part from his own life experiences. According to his account (see Mormon), he personally traveled through much of the Nephite lands. In fact, he was a military leader and strategist who was accustomed to paying close attention to the lay of the land, and he may also have had actual maps to which he could refer.

Is there any reason why we should not try to reconstruct Mormon's map?

How could there be? The book that Mormon left us challenges us, its readers, to approach it with all our heart, might, mind, and strength. No one should object to more rigorous examination if through it we are able to discover new truth. We seek only the truth, and the truth will come out. We are not adding anything to the text, but simply combing it from a different point of view in order to exhaust what it has to tell us.

Still, some may argue that we cannot hope to attain clarity because of the great destruction that took place at the time of the Savior's crucifixion. They may feel that that event so changed everything that what could be seen of the landscape in former times would not be recognizable afterward. Mormon lets us know that this concern is unfounded. He prepared his record in the fourth century A.D., centuries after the famous natural catastrophe, yet he was not confused about geographical changes that had occurred at the meridian of time. Note the continuities: Zarahemla was destroyed but was soon rebuilt in the same spot (see 4 Nephi 1:8), next to the same river Sidon.

The Lamanites renewed warfare in Mormon's time in the same area of the upper Sidon where their predecessors hundreds of years earlier had typically attacked (compare Mormon 1:10; Alma 2:34; 3:20–23). The narrow pass was still the strategic access point for travelers going into the land northward, as much for Mormon's defending army around A.D. 350 as it had been in Morianton's day more than four hundred years before (compare Mormon 3:5; Alma 50:33–34). The Jaredite hill Ramah was called by the Nephites the hill Cumorah (see Ether 15:11), but it was exactly the same hill. Even at Bountiful, a few months after the vast storm and earthquake, while survivors were wondering at “the great and marvelous change which had taken place” in their surroundings (3 Nephi 11:1), their city and temple were still in place, their homes remained (see 3 Nephi 19:1), they obviously had a continuing food supply, and their communication networks were still in place (see 3 Nephi 19:2–3). The catastrophe had changed the “face of the land” (3 Nephi 8:12), but a changed face apparently did not mean that most of the basic land forms and ecological conditions had been rendered unrecognizable.

In any case, the test is in the doing. If we find that the Nephite record permits us to make a map that works both before and after the crucifixion, then we can be assured that the giant destruction does not make it necessary to picture one pattern of geography before and a very different one afterward. We will see that this is so.

How might we proceed to discover the map in Mormon's mind?

We must, as indicated earlier, intensively examine the text Mormon left us (of course, we have access to it only as it has been transmitted to us in English through Joseph Smith). We

must discover as many of the geographical clues he included as we can. But before we undertake that task, we need to spell out some assumptions that will undergird our search through his record:

1. The expressions “up,” “down,” and “over,” when used in a geographical context, refer to elevation. (It turns out that they are used consistently and make sense in terms of elevation.)
2. Nature worked the same anciently as it does today. For example, we can be sure that the headwaters of rivers were at a higher elevation than their mouths, and a river implies the presence of a corresponding drainage basin. (This may seem too obvious to deserve mentioning; however, some students of Book of Mormon geography seem to have missed the point.)
3. Ideas in the record will not necessarily be familiar or clear to us. There was some degree of continuity in Nephite thought and expression from the Hebrew/Israelite roots of Lehi₁'s time, but it was only partial. Mormon could read and compile from his people's archive of traditional records, so his patterns of thought and terminology still followed with sufficient continuity from his predecessors that he was part of a continuous scribal tradition passed down through the preceding nine centuries. That tradition may have required special training to master the old script and records.
4. Book of Mormon terminology will not necessarily be clear to us, even in translation, because language and cultural assumptions change. According to Moroni₂ in Mormon 9:34, major changes in language occurred over the Nephite generations, for “none other people knoweth our language.” Furthermore, English has changed between 1829

and 2000. We must seek to overcome any problems this causes us by striving to think, feel, and see as if we were Mormon, rather than supposing that we can read the text “literally” (which actually turns out to mean “according to unspoken assumptions of our current culture”).

5. Finally, when we are combining fragments of geographical information from the text into sensible wholes, we should avoid needlessly complicated synthesis. If two explanations occur to us for solving a geographical problem, the simpler solution—the one with the fewest arbitrary assumptions—is probably better. For example, we should resist the temptation to suppose that there were two cities with the same name simply because we have not yet determined how the correct placement of a single city would resolve any apparent confusion.

Now we are ready to begin poring over the Book of Mormon text to glean all the geographical information we can. If we are fortunate enough to accommodate every statement in the text into one geographical model, then our map can be considered definitive: we can then assume that we have discovered and reconstituted Mormon’s map. If we are still left with some uncertainties that we cannot manage logically, then we will just have to settle for the optimal solution, the one that leaves us with the least number of the book’s statements rationally unaccounted for.

Our search will be simplified if we split up the problem into separate tasks. The remaining chapters in this book divide the labor into six segments. Each segment is discussed in a chapter that lays out key passages from the Book of Mormon that shed light on topics like these:

- The overall configuration of the lands
- Topography (land surfaces) and hydrography (streams, lakes, and seas)
- Distances and directions
- Climate, ecology, economy, and population
- The distribution of the civilization
- Nephite history in geographical perspective

It is impossible in this short treatment to deal with all the scriptural passages that contain information about this subject. Besides, a nearly exhaustive analysis has already been published.¹⁹ Here we will review mainly the most decisive and clearest statements. A series of questions will be used to frame subtopics.