Heartland as Hinterland: The Mesoamerican Core and North American Periphery of Book of Mormon Geography

Author(s): Mark Alan Wright

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, Volume 13 (2014), pp. 111-129
Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

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INTERPRETER

A Journal of Mormon Scripture

Volume 13 · 2015 · Pages 111-129

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Offprint Series

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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Abstract: *The best available evidence for the Book of Mormon continues to support a limited Mesoamerican model. However, Alma 63 indicates that there was a massive northward migration in the mid-first century BC. I argue that these north-bound immigrants spread out over the centuries and established settlements that were geographically distant from the core Nephite area, far beyond the scope of the text of the Book of Mormon. I introduce the Hinterland Hypothesis and argue that it can harmonize the Mesoamerican evidence for the Book of Mormon with Joseph Smith's statements concerning Nephite and Lamanite material culture in North America. Archaeological and anthropological evidence is used to demonstrate that migrations and cultural influence did in fact spread northward from Mesoamerica into North America in pre-Columbian times.*

I have been trying to avoid the topic of Book of Mormon geography for several years now, for it is a messy and oftentimes ugly endeavor. The Church, of course, has no official position on where the Book of Mormon took place. Nevertheless, there have been heated debates concerning its geography for the better part of the last century. Currently, the bitterest divide is between those who advocate for a Mesoamerican setting and those who believe that the "Heartland" of the United States is the true location. Despite what my somewhat inflammatory title may suggest, this paper is actually an attempt to synthesize

some aspects of these two models and build a bridge between the two camps insofar as possible.

My basic thesis is this: The core locations and events detailed in the text of the Book of Mormon took place in Mesoamerica, but many Nephites and Lamanites migrated and established settlements far northward of the core area and are thus simply outside the scope of the text. I am certainly not the first to make this argument or to note the significance of this northward migration; but from countless conversations I have had about Book of Mormon geography over the past few years, I have found that many people are unfamiliar with the ideas. I am admittedly doing little more than repackaging previous research and giving it a catchy name — which brings me to the Hinterland Hypothesis.[1]

The term *hinterland* is used in reference to regions that are remote from urban areas. They are at the outer fringes or periphery of a core urban population. Large-scale migrations from the core out to the periphery and beyond are not uncommon due to population pressures or other causes. In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, for example, city-states often organized migrations to establish military garrisons or trading posts at the periphery of their domains.[2] As Latter-day Saints, we, of all people, should understand the function of migrations, as our history and identity are largely defined by movements from Kirtland to Missouri to Nauvoo and the exodus west. As soon as the Saints were established in the Salt Lake Valley, colonies began springing up in the hinterlands: southern Utah,

1 See, for example, John L. Sorenson, "Mesoamericans in Pre-Columbian North America," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1992), 218–20; Tyler Livingston, *The Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican Travels "Northward,"* from the Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum website, http://www.bmaf.org/articles/mesoamerican_travels_northward__livingston (accessed 25 August 2014).

2 Susan Toby Evans and David L. Webster, eds., *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 368.

Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, California, as far north as Canada, and even as far south as Chihuahua, Mexico.[3]

In the Book of Mormon, massive migrations were due to persistent Lamanite encroachment from the south, which caused Nephite populations to be perpetually driven northward, beginning with Mosiah_1's flight from the city of Nephi to Zarahemla (Omni 1:12–15) and culminating centuries later at the Hill Cumorah (and we will return to the Cumorah question a little later).

One of the first to highlight the significance of the northward migration in the Book of Mormon was John E. Page, who had been one of the Twelve Apostles under Joseph Smith.[4] In 1848 he noted, "All who are familiar with the Book of Mormon are probably aware of the fact that the whole account of the history of the fore fathers of the American Indians, called the Nephites, Lamanites and Zoramites, is confined to Central America entirely until the 394th page."[5]

John Page is here referring to northward migrations discussed in Alma 63 that occurred in the 37th and 38th years of the reign of the judges, around 55 BC. Alma 63:4 informs us that "five thousand and four hundred men, with their wives and their children, departed out of the land of Zarahemla into the land which was northward." That's 5,400 men, plus their wives, plus their children. Even if each couple had only one to two children, the migration would have been composed of between 16,000 to 22,000 individuals.

That same year, Hagoth built and launched two ships from the west sea, "and they took their course northward"

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3 Richard L. Jensen, "Colonization," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Doctrine, and Procedure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:290–94.

4 In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that John E. Page was excommunicated for apostasy on 26 June 1846 for supporting James Strang as the rightful successor to Joseph Smith. His excommunication was wholly unrelated to his views on Book of Mormon geography.

5 John E. Page, "Collateral Testimony of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon. — No. 3," *The Gospel Herald*, 3/90 (14 September 1848), 123.

(Alma 63:5–6). Hagoth was not on either of the first two ships, incidentally, and the following year he built more ships, at which point "the first ship did also return, and many more people did enter into it; and they also took much provisions, and set out again to the land northward" (Alma 63:7).[6] That third ship was "never heard of more," and yet another ship that set sail that same year suffered the same fate. We also read that in the 38th year "there were *many* people who went forth into the land northward" in addition to the previously mentioned groups (Alma 63:8–9). The point is that Alma 63 describes an era of northward movement and migration sometime in the mid–first century BC, away from the Nephite core area and thus outside the scope of Nephite history. My argument is that these Nephite migrants continued to expand northward throughout the centuries — often due to Lamanite pressure from the south. During this expansion, both Nephites and Lamanites established settlements, or colonies, or outposts, or whatever you want to call them. I believe that every statement made by Joseph Smith or his contemporaries concerning Nephites or Lamanites in North America can be accommodated by the Hinterland Hypothesis.

To be clear, I am not arguing for a return to a "hemispheric" model of Book of Mormon geography. Hemispheric models take specific, named cities in the Book of Mormon and disperse them far and wide across the whole of North and South America. I am very much a proponent of a more limited geography, and I believe that the best available evidence places the core narrative of the Book of Mormon squarely in Mesoamerica. Now, as to which specific Mesoamerican geography is correct — the Grijalva model versus the Usumacinta model — I frankly don't care. The preponderance of evidence always has and always will favor a Mesoamerican setting, to the point where for me to even talk about it here feels like beating a dead horse (or a dead tapir, as it were). What I am suggesting is that there were likely

6 Although common in Mormon folklore dating back to George Q. Cannon's mission to Hawaii (1851–54), there is little evidence to support the belief that Hagoth himself or the ships he sent out ended up in Polynesia.

countless Nephite and Lamanite settlements spread across the continent, including within the so-called "Heartland," whose history is not contained in the Book of Mormon; they are simply external to the text. It does not make them any less Nephite or Lamanite; it just means that their history is not recorded in that book.

Prophets from Jacob to Moroni lamented that they could not include even a hundredth part of their proceedings, meaning that we have less than one percent of Nephite history to work with.[7] Nephite authors, by their own admission, are able to give only abbreviated accounts of events in their core area or, at best, from their fairly limited sphere of interaction. As to those who went northward in the mid–first century BC, they were part of the 99% of the proceedings that did not make the cut — out of sight and out of mind.

I believe that we do ourselves a disservice with the "either/or" mentality when it comes to issues of geography in the Book of Mormon. And I am afraid that we often play the dangerous game of "General Authority chess": "Elder so-and-so said this!" "Oh yeah? Well, President such-and-such said that!" And so we go, pitting the words of one early Saint against another, chasing each other around the chess board trying to check each other but never really able to end the game.

To the Saints of Joseph's day, any and all evidence from anywhere on the continent was deemed proof of the Book of Mormon. Within a single editorial paragraph from the 15 July 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons*, the editor rejoices in both the North American evidence gleaned from Josiah Priest's *American Antiquities* and the Mesoamerican evidence put forth by John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. After quoting extensively from Josiah Priest, the editorial reads:

> If men, in their researches into the history of *this country*, in noticing the mounds, fortifications, statues, architecture, implements of war, of

7 See Jacob 3:13; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 3 Nephi 26:6; Ether 15:33.

> husbandry, and ornaments of silver, brass, &c. — were to examine the Book of Mormon, their conjectures would be removed, and their opinions altered; uncertainty and doubt would be changed into certainty and facts; and they would find that those things that they are anxiously prying into were matters of history, unfolded in that book. They would find their conjectures were more than realized — that a great and a mighty people had inhabited *this continent* — that the arts sciences and religion, had prevailed to a very great extent, and that there was as great and mighty cities on *this continent* as on the continent of Asia. Babylon, Ninevah, nor any of the ruins of the Levant could boast of more perfect sculpture, better architectural designs, and more imperishable ruins, than what are found on *this continent*. Stephens and Catherwood's researches in Central America abundantly testify of this thing. The stupendous ruins, the elegant sculpture, and the magnificence of the ruins of Guatamala [*sic*], and other cities, corroborate this statement, and show that a great and mighty people — men of great minds, clear intellect, bright genius, and comprehensive designs inhabited *this continent*. Their ruins speak of their greatness; the Book of Mormen [*sic*] unfolds their history. — ED [emphasis added]

This editorial makes it clear that the early Saints embraced *all* evidence for the Book of Mormon, regardless of whether it came from across the continent. So how can we suggest that the core area of the Book of Mormon is in Mesoamerica and relegate North America to the periphery? Let us take a look at Joseph Smith's statements that are typically used by proponents of the Heartland Theory and see if they can be accommodated by the Hinterland Hypothesis.

Let us start with Zelph. The version of the Zelph story used by proponents of the Heartland Theory relies on the *History of*

the Church as its source, which is problematic because that work is merely a composite created by piecing together a number of different accounts.[8] There are six primary source accounts written by men who were present, none of them Joseph himself. For those unfamiliar with the story, it goes something like this: While on the Zion's Camp march in June of 1834, some men dug into a large mound and found a skeleton a foot or two below the surface. Either Joseph was there when it happened or they brought him there later — perhaps even the next day — and he proclaimed that the skeleton was that of a righteous Lamanite warrior named Zelph who served under the command of a chief or a king named Onandagus, who was known from the eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains. Zelph had been killed in battle, as evidenced by the arrowhead found lodged in his ribcage; but who exactly battled against whom is unclear. It may have been Nephite versus Lamanite, or it may have been Lamanite versus Lamanite; the accounts are conflicting on this detail, as well as on many others. One important detail that the *History of the Church* gets wrong is the statement that Onandagus was known from the Hill Cumorah to the Rocky Mountains. None of the primary sources indicates that Joseph made that claim.[9]

Although Joseph himself never mentions Zelph in any of his journals or letters, he did write (or, more precisely, dictate) a letter to Emma the next day. It was actually penned by James Mulholland and then signed by Joseph.[10] In the letter, he mentions the satisfaction he felt while "wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionaly the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once

8 Kenneth W. Godfrey, "What Is the Significance of Zelph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 74–75.

9 Godfrey, "What Is the Significance of Zelph?" 70–79. The single account that speaks of the fame of Onandagus dates from 1893, nearly 60 years after the fact and so cannot be considered a primary source.

10 See "Source Note" for Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834, in The Joseph Smith Papers website, at http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/letter-to-emma-smith-4-june-1834?p=#!/paperSummary/letter-to-emma-smith-4-june-1834&p=1 (accessed 25 August 2014).

beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as proof of its divine authenticity."[11] To proponents of the Heartland Theory, this is an open-and-shut case. Joseph makes it plain that this was Nephite territory. Mesoamerican proponents, on the other hand, have suggested that perhaps Joseph was simply conjecturing or sharing his opinion rather than declaring that this information was received by revelation.

I believe that the Hinterland Hypothesis can reconcile a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon while accepting that Joseph's statements were revelatory. How so? The individuals and geographic features that are named in these accounts are nowhere to be found in the text of the Book of Mormon. They are external to its history. There is no Zelph and no Onandagus named in the Book of Mormon. As the apostle John A. Widtsoe suggested, "Zelph probably dated from a later time when Nephites and Lamanites had been somewhat dispersed and had wandered over the country."[12]

Likewise, the "plains of the Nephites" are never mentioned in the Book of Mormon. To be sure, there are "plains" mentioned between the cities Bountiful and Mulek in Alma 52:20, and we read of the "plains of Nephihah" in Alma 62:18, but the general term "plains of the Nephites" is absent from the Book of Mormon. Because there are multiple plains attested to in the text, the general phrase "plains of the Nephites" is too vague to be of any use in pinpointing it geographically. Even among the Jaredites, we read of the "plains of Heshlon" (Ether 13:28) and the "plains of Agosh" (Ether 14:15); but significantly, never just "the plains of the Jaredites." Mentions of plains in the text of the Book of Mormon are always attached to a specific city. Those in Joseph's letter to Emma are not.

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11 Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834, in The Joseph Smith Papers website, beginning at http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/letter-to-emma-smith-4-june-1834?p=#!/paperSummary/letter-to-emma-smith-4-june-1834&p=2 (accessed 25 August 2014).

12 John A. Widtsoe, "Evidences and Reconciliations: Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?" *Improvement Era* 7/53, July 1950, 547.

The Altar at Adam-ondi-Ahman

A few years after the Zelph incident, Joseph led a number of expeditions up to Daviess County, Missouri, to survey potential settlement locations for the Saints.[13] On 19 May 1838, George W. Robinson, who was serving as general church recorder and clerk for the First Presidency at the time, recorded in the Scriptory Book:

> The next morning we struck our tents, and marched crossed Grand river at the mouth of Honey Creek at a place called Nelsons ferry. … We next kept up the river mostly in the timber for ten miles, untill we came to Col. Lyman Wight's who lives at the foot of Tower Hill, a name appropriated by Prest smith, in consequence of the remains of an old Nephitish Alter an Tower, where we camped for the sabath.[14]

The *History of the Church* account mistakenly refers to this as a "Nephite" altar. The original source material quoted here clarifies that Joseph Smith referred to it not as a "Nephite" altar but rather a "Nephitish" altar. What is the difference? Here we can only speculate. Although we find the term "Lamanitish" twice in the Book of Mormon (both times in reference to royal servants among the Lamanites), [15] the term "Nephitish" never appears. In fact, as far as I know, that altar is the only thing ever to have been described as being "Nephitish." As for Joseph's description of the altar, some have suggested that the Prophet was merely speculating rather than claiming inspiration as to its origin, relying on Joseph's own statement that "a prophet

13 Alexander L. Baugh, "Joseph Smith in Northern Missouri, 1838," in Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 303–307.

14 George W. Robinson, journal entry for 18 May 1838, transcribed online in The Joseph Smith Papers website, http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/journal-march-september-1838?p=29 (accessed 5 September 2014).

15 See Alma 17:26; Alma 19:16.

was only a prophet when he was acting as such."[16] But what if he was "acting as such" in this instance? What if it was revelation? Does that require that Tower Hill in Missouri was the location of a known Book of Mormon city? No, not at all. Joseph does not link the altar to any named Nephite city;[17] he merely generalized it as *Nephitish*. According to my hypothesis, this Nephitish altar would have been built by the migrant Nephites of Alma 63 — or, more likely, by their descendants many generations later. Joseph's statement, then, can be considered revelatory without precluding a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon or requiring a North American one.

Cumorah

Let us turn our attention now to the Cumorah question. If any specific Book of Mormon site is known for sure, it must be the Hill Cumorah, right? We know that Moroni buried the plates in Cumorah anciently and that Joseph Smith dug them up there. Or do we? To be clear, Moroni never says that he buried the plates in the Hill Cumorah, and there are no firsthand accounts indicating that Joseph Smith ever referred to the hill in New York by the name Cumorah. In fact, a careful reading of Mormon 6:6 makes it clear that all of the Nephite records were buried in Cumorah *except* the abridgment that would become the Book of Mormon. Mormon explains:

> And it came to pass that when we had gathered in all our people in one to the land of Cumorah, behold I, Mormon, began to be old; and knowing it to be the last struggle of my people, and *having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites*, (for the Lamanites would destroy

16 *History of the Church*, 5:265.

17 The only physical altars that are ever explicitly mentioned among the Nephites are at the city of Sidom, in association with their sanctuaries (Alma 15:17).

> them) *therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni.*

A few years earlier, when the Nephites were being pushed northward toward Cumorah in their never-ending battles with the Lamanites, Mormon informs us, "And now I, Mormon, seeing that the Lamanites were about to overthrow the land, therefore I did go to the hill Shim, and did take up *all* the records which Ammaron had hid up unto the Lord" (Mormon 4:23). This was actually contrary to Ammaron's instructions. When Mormon was just a 10-year-old lad, Ammaron sat him down and said,

> When ye are about twenty and four years old I would that ye should remember the things that ye have observed concerning this people; and when ye are of that age go to the land Antum, unto a hill which shall be called Shim; and there have I deposited unto the Lord all the sacred engravings concerning this people. And behold, ye shall take the plates of Nephi unto yourself, and the remainder shall ye leave in the place where they are; and ye shall engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed concerning this people. (Mormon 1:3–4)

Why did Mormon decide to take *all* of the records instead of just the plates of Nephi, as he was instructed? It is because the land was being overrun by Lamanites and, with the plates being deposited in the Hill Shim, he feared that they would fall into Lamanite hands and be destroyed.

In Mormon 8, Moroni laments the destruction of his people at Cumorah and speaks only vaguely of his plan to "hide up the records in the earth" (v. 4), a comment he made more than twenty years before he actually buried them. In Moroni 1, written many years later, he states, "I wander whithersoever I can for the safety of mine own life" (v. 3). In other words,

he is long gone from Cumorah. He also makes the interesting comment that the Lamanites continue to put to death any Nephite that will not deny the Christ, making it clear that not all Nephites had been destroyed at the time of the "final" battle. As Hugh Nibley explains, "to destroy is to wreck the structure, not to annihilate the parts."[18] By analogy, the Jews have been "destroyed from generation to generation" (2 Nephi 25:9), which would make little sense if *destroy* meant to utterly annihilate.

So where were these remnant Nephites that the Lamanites were putting to death? They must have been north of Cumorah, for we read in Mormon 8:2 that "after the great and tremendous battle at Cumorah, behold, the Nephites who had escaped into the country southward were hunted by the Lamanites, until they were *all* destroyed" (emphasis added). By implication, the only Nephites that were left were those in the northward colonies in the hinterlands that had been established by migrants several centuries prior.

The New Jerusalem/"This Land"

The Lord revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith that the New Jerusalem will be built in Jackson County, Missouri (D&C 84:1–4), and the Book of Mormon explicitly states that it shall be built upon "this land" (3 Nephi 20:22; Ether 13:4–6). Proponents of the Heartland Theory have taken this to mean that the core area of the Book of Mormon must have been located in North America. However, Matthew Roper has compiled literally dozens of statements from Joseph Smith and his contemporaries that make it abundantly clear that the expressions "this land," "this country," and "this continent" are used to refer to the entire western hemisphere.[19] The

18 Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 239.

19 Matthew Roper, "Joseph Smith and the Question of Book of Mormon Geography" (presentation, FAIR annual conference, 5 August 2010); transcribed online at http://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2010-Matthew-Roper.pdf (accessed 5 September 2014).

quotation previously discussed from the 15 July 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons* referred to both "this county" and "this continent" while touting both the North American and Mesoamerican evidence. But what about the "prophecies and promises" concerning the mighty Gentile nation? Surely that can only mean the United States of America? Statements by contemporaries of Joseph Smith make it clear that they believed that the whole of the Americas was the land of promise. For example, Brigham Young taught in August of 1852, "The land of Joseph is the land of Zion; and it takes North and South America to make the land of Joseph."[20] George J. Adams, an ardent believer in the Book of Mormon, wrote in 1844,

> We come now to inquire where has the seed of Joseph gone to? If they had taken up their residence in any part of what is technically called the old world would not history have informed us of the fact? There is no place except North and South America to which they could have gone, if the old world furnishes no trace of them. The Continent of America is the only place where the prophecies concerning Joseph and his seed could be fulfilled.[21]

In yet another example, we have a written debate between a pair of elders named Wharton and Appleby and a critic named Amos Wickersham in 1843. Elder Appleby declares, "[Wickersham] says 'there were ruins known to exist in Central America,['] (the lands he says, I said belonged to Ephraim, &c. but I contend that it is North and South America both that includes the promised land to the branches of Joseph)."[22]

The early Saints understood that the whole continent of North and South America, not just the United States, was

20 Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:296 (15 August 1852).

21 G. J. Adams, *A Lecture on the Authenticity & Scriptural Character of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: J. E. Farwell, 1844), 17.

22 W. I. Appleby, *Mormonism Consistent! Truth Vindicated, and Falsehood Exposed and Refuted: Being a Reply to A. H. Wickersham* (Wilmington, DE: Porter & Nafe, 1843), 17.

the promised land. The assertion that the United States alone is the land of promise is actually a fairly modern construct. I am afraid that we often suffer from presentism, which is the uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes and especially the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts. The United States of our day is not the same as it was in Joseph Smith's day. When the Book of Mormon came forth in 1830, there were only 24 states. Does that mean that the 26 states added since then are outside the scope of the prophecies and promises? Notably, when the Saints headed west toward the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1846, it and all the territory south of Oregon and west of the Continental Divide to the Pacific coast was still part of Mexico; by the time they arrived in 1847, the Mexican War had made it all part of the United States. However, the Territory of Utah did not become a state until 1896; were the Saints cut off from the prophecies and promises for nearly 50 years? And who is to say that the United States will not take over the rest of Mexico, or even Canada at some point, in our quest to eradicate the twin relics of barbarism — soccer and ice hockey — that lure our children away from the divinely inspired sports of basketball and football? All joking aside, borders change over time, but God's promises do not. The prophecies and promises given in the Book of Mormon to those who inhabit the promised land are extended to all who repent and come unto him, regardless of where they live.

Evidence for Migration? How Righteous Were the Migrants?

One perhaps unanswerable question, but one that must be considered, is in regard to the faithfulness of the migrants who left in Alma 63. The Lamanite wars had only recently ended, and "because of the exceedingly great length of the war between the Nephites and the Lamanites many had become hardened" (Alma 62:41). These people had grown tired of endless conflict with the Lamanites, and they were likely seeking to put some distance between themselves and the enemy — the farther the better. Their timing was good; the window of peace was short

lived, a few years at best. Not long after they left, some Nephite dissenters joined with the Lamanites and another large battle ensued in Nephite territory (Alma 63:14–15).

Why does the question of their faithfulness matter? When looking for evidence of Nephite colonies, we need to ask ourselves if they had been practicing normative Nephite religion or if they had been fully acculturated into native beliefs and practices.[23] Alma 63 makes no mention of them taking records or being led by righteous individuals. I think it plausible, if not likely, that their Mesoamerican identity would have been more dominant than their Nephite affiliation. As an aside, my personal view is that the Nephites lived among the larger population but were not one and the same with it, just as Latter-day Saints across the world are completely entrenched within their cultures yet maintain their subcultural identity as members of the Church. By analogy, suppose we were to take a bunch of inactive Mormons — those who were raised in the Church but have no interest in actually practicing it — and drop them in the middle of China. Would they be perceived as an American colony or a Mormon colony? If they brought no scriptures or Church literature with them and were completely cut off from the main body of the Saints, any remnant of Mormon identity would likely be completely lost within a generation or two. So it may have been with these northward-settling Nephites. On the other hand, they may have ended up like those in the Mormon colonies of Mexico, who remained faithful despite living in the hinterlands 1,000 miles from the core of the Church.

As something of an aside, but pertinent to our discussion: When I was an undergraduate student at UCLA, I spent a summer in the Mormon Colonies doing a linguistic anthropological study of bilingualism in the Mormon Colonies for my honors research project. I am always surprised at

23 See Mark Alan Wright and Brant A. Gardner, "The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 1 (2012): 25–55; online at http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-cultural-context-of-nephite-apostasy/ (accessed 5 September 2014).

how many members of the Church have never heard of the Colonies. They got a little bit of press during the 2012 election cycle, since Mitt Romney's heritage traces back to them, but they still remain relatively unknown. Perhaps we can draw an analogy, then. If the Mormon Colonies of Mexico are so little known among members of the modern Church living in the information age, it seems entirely plausible — and, I think, extremely likely — that the majority of Nephites living after the time of Christ knew little to nothing about the fate of those who went northward a century or more earlier.

Evidence for Mesoamerican/North American Interaction[24]

With the Hinterland Hypothesis, the question naturally arises as to whether or not there is any evidence for movement from Mesoamerica to North America. There is.

The evidence suggests that Mesoamerican cultural influence spread, primarily northward, beginning long before the Nephites ever set foot in the New World and continuing through the late Postclassic period, meaning that the trails were blazed long before the Book of Mormon era began and continued to be used long after Moroni sealed the record up.

The evidence for movement northward is incremental, slowly radiating outward over the generations. What types of evidence is there? Genetic, linguistic, botanical, ideological, and archaeological evidence are all there.

Let us begin with the genetic evidence. In 2003, a study was done that compared the DNA of the Ohio Hopewell with that of 50 indigenous populations from both North and Central America, and it found Central American and even South American markers.[25] This, of course, demonstrates that

24 This section relies heavily on Livingston's "The Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican Travels 'Northward,'" cited in n. 1. See the article for a fuller treatment of all of the lines of evidence and supporting sources that are only briefly touched on here.

25 Lisa A. Mills, "Mitochondrial DNA Analysis of the Ohio Hopewell of the Hopewell Mound Group" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2003), 90–91.

the interaction between the two regions involved more than just the trading of goods and ideas. For the genetic markers to be so prevalent, it is likely that there was a significant amount of procreation, more than is likely from the occasional Mesoamerican merchant passing through town.

Linguistic data compiled by Brian Stubbs demonstrates that Uto-Aztecan languages spread from Mexico into North America, primary the American Southwest.[26] As was mentioned previously, the northward influence was often incremental, meaning that we see clear influence from central Mexico up to northern Mexico, and then influence from northern Mexico into the American Southwest, then from the America Southwest moving further northward, and so on. There is a filtering or diluting of cultural traits, but they are nevertheless traceable. For example, non-LDS scholar Robert L. Hall recently published in *The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology* — a very reputable source — that the Cherokee word for corn, *selu*, is likely cognate with the Nahuatl root word for corn, *xilo-*.[27]

As for botanical evidence, one brief but potent example will suffice. The main staple food of Mesoamericans was maize, or corn. As non-LDS scholars Bruce Smith and Richard Yarnell note in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2009, domesticated corn from Mesoamerica had already reached eastern North America by approximately 200 BC.[28]

Ideologically and culturally, there are a number of fascinating commonalities pointed out by Robert L. Hall in his *Oxford Handbook* chapter entitled "Some Commonalities

26 Brian Stubbs. 2004. "A Few Hundred Hints of Egyptian and Two Dialects of Hebrew (or Northwest Semitic) in Uto-Aztecan." Unpublished 142-page manuscript in possession of the author.

27 Robert L. Hall, "Some Commonalities Linking North America and Mesoamerica," in *The Oxford Handbook of North American Archaeology*, ed. Timothy R. Pauketat (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 61.

28 Bruce D. Smith and Richard A. Yarnell, "Initial Formation of an Indigenous Crop Complex in Eastern North America at 3800 BP," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106/16 (2009): 6561.

Linking North America and Mesoamerica."[29] He notes the importance of the sweat bath, which is variously associated with birth, renewal, and spiritual cleansing and is found from as far south as Guatemala and across North America from Alaska to Newfoundland. Another cultural commonality is the importance of competitive sports, specifically the ball game. Although the specific game varied from culture to culture, they shared the overarching concept of team sports played with a ball. There are also many commonalities regarding their mourning rites and their rituals of sacrifice. For example, a particular rite among both Aztecs and Great Plains tribes required that warriors be tethered to a stone or pole and fight enemies using only a wooden paddle. The tethered warrior was not likely to win; it was a sacrificial rite. Another common sacrificial ritual was that of scaffold sacrifice, wherein a victim would be tied standing upright, with arms and legs spread out, and subsequently be shot with arrows.

These few examples will need to suffice. Something that nonarchaeologists may not understand is that there is frustratingly little communication between Mesoamericanists and North American archaeologists. In a 2008 article in *American Antiquity*, one of the top-tier journals in our field, the authors lamented, "Archaeologists in the southeastern United States and Mexico seldom communicate with each other. Basic comparisons of site data, settlement, subsistence, or other cultural systems from one region to the other are rarely attempted, even around the Gulf, where it should be easy."[30] The point is that there is a lot we still do not know.

In conclusion, I would like to restate that my hope with this paper was that I might be able to reconcile the statements made by the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning Nephites and Lamanites with what the best archaeological evidence tells us about where the Book of Mormon likely took place. I

29 Hall, "Some Commonalities," 52–63.

30 Nancy Marie White and Richard A. Weinstein, "The Mexican Connection and the Far West of the U.S. Southeast," *American Antiquity* 73/2 (2008): 230.

have attempted to show that the Hinterland Hypothesis can account for Joseph's inspired statements while keeping the core narrative of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica. Evidence from within the Book of Mormon and from real-world archaeology demonstrates the movement of peoples and ideas from Mesoamerica to North America. But to reiterate, the Church has no official position on such matters. As members of the Church, we ought to engage in civil discourse as we discuss these matters. Let us not let questions of where the Book of Mormon took place overpower the actual message of the book: that Jesus is the Christ, and that the prophecies and promises are extended to all who come unto him.

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2013 FairMormon Conference (http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2013-fair-conference/2013-heartland-as-hinterland-the-mesoamerican-core-and-north-american-periphery-of-book-of-mormon-geography). A video version of the conference presentation can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlAy1cDPLMo. Many thanks to our friends at FairMormon for all the excellent material they have made available at their website.

Mark Alan Wright earned his BA in Anthropology at UCLA and his MA and PhD in Anthropology (with a subfield of specialization in Mesoamerican Archaeology) from UC Riverside. He regularly conducts research in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Belize. Dr. Wright is Assistant Professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University and Associate Editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies *at the Maxwell Institute.*