

Where Did Book of Mormon Events Take Place?

The Lord has never revealed the specific location of Book of Mormon events. Instead, we are left to our own speculations concerning Book of Mormon geography. Since the days of Joseph Smith most Saints believed that the Book of Mormon took place across the entire expanse of North and South America. This theory—referred to as the *Hemispheric Geography Theory* (HGT) posits that North America is the “land northward,” that South America is the “land southward,” and that present-day Panama is the “narrow neck” of land. This is a natural interpretation of Book of Mormon geography based on a cursory reading and superficial understanding to the Book of Mormon text. It is likely that Joseph Smith, his contemporaries, and most Saints—perhaps even most Saints today—have unquestioningly accepted this as an accurate model for Book of Mormon geography. Related to this view is the common belief among LDS that Book of Mormon people were the founding inhabitants of all native peoples of both North and South America.

Currently, most LDS scholars (and some LDS leaders) reject the HGT in favor of a *Limited Geography Theory* (LGT) for the Book of Mormon. This theory posits that the Lehites arrived to a New World already inhabited. (I discuss this in a brochure entitled “Were the Lehites Alone in the Americas?”) According to this view, the Lehites would have not only engaged these natives, but they would have also become part of their society and culture. The LGT claims that Book of Mormon events would have taken place in a relatively small area of land and that this section of land is that of Mesoamerica (Central



America) with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the “narrow neck” of land. There are at least four questions or concerns which arise among LDS when they first encounter this theory:

(1) What is the evidence for a limited geography?; (2) why Mesoamerica?; (3) how can Cumorah be in New York if Book of Mormon events took place in Mesoamerica?; and (4) Why did Joseph Smith and subsequent prophets accept the HGT?

What is the Evidence for a Limited Geography?

The decisive factor in opting for a limited geography is travel distances between extreme ends of Book of Mormon cities. Travel distances, where mentioned, are always mentioned in terms of how long the travel took. All travel distances that we can decipher from Book of Mormon events indicate a very limited scale, probably no more than a few hundred miles. While such a small area may seem unusual to modern readers, it should be noted that 95% of the Old Testament took place in an area only 150 miles long and less than 75 miles wide.

Why Mesoamerica?

Following are some of the geographic criteria from the Book of Mormon text and how those criteria are met by Mesoamerica:

- Mapping the internal geography of the Book of Mormon requires that the land be *hourglass* shaped.
- Writings. Mesoamerica is the only place that appears to have had a sophisticated writing system during Book of Mormon times.
- Advanced cities and fortifications. Archaeology confirms such cities in Mesoamerica in Book of Mormon times.
- Rivers must be the right size and in the right portions of the land (we find such correlation in Mesoamerica).
- The Book of Mormon suggests a temperate climate (for growing such things as “wheat” and “barley”) and never mentions snow or cold in a New World setting.
- Both Book of Mormon cultures and Mesoamerican cultures had developed agriculture and commerce.
- Volcanic activity and earthquake zones.

At first glance there appears to be a problem with Book of Mormon directions and the layout of Mesoamerica. Whereas the Nephites generally used terms such as “northward” and “southward,” the hourglass shape of Mesoamerica runs *northwest* and *southeast*. How could an intelligent people like the Nephites get cardinal directions wrong?

In both Mayan and Hebrew, *north* means on “the left hand” and *south* means “on the right.” Studies indicate that some people in Mesoamerica called the Pacific Ocean the “west sea” and the Gulf Coast the “east sea,” just as done in the Book of Mormon. Even some European conquerors used directions similar to those used in the Book of Mormon when they wrote about their travels in Mesoamerica.

Systems for labeling directions in ancient times varied by thousands of different schemes and were generally arbitrary systems designed by individual groups to deal with their unique geographical and linguistic situations.

To put it simply, the directional systems of some ancient cultures were not based on the same cultural principals as ours. Thus, a Mesoamerican geography for the Book of Mormon is not problematic when considering cardinal directions.

How can Cumorah be in New York if Book of Mormon Events Took Place in Mesoamerica?

It is important to recognize that Mormon claimed to bury all the plates *except* those that became the Book of Mormon in the hill Cumorah (Mormon 6:6). The plates from whence we have the Book of Mormon were given to Moroni who, after

more than thirty years, was still adding to the record. Moroni doesn't tell us where he plans to bury his plates, and it is not unreasonable that he carried them to New York during the many years following his father's demise. That such a trip is not as far-fetched as some might suppose, we know of an account of a shipwrecked sailor who walked for eleven months from Tampico, Mexico to Maine – nearly the same route and distance as Moroni would have had to travel.

“Cumorah” was the name given to Moroni's hill by early LDS. While it's probable that early LDS may have supposed that the Cumorah of New York was the hill in which all of Mormon's records were deposited, a close reading of the text does not support this conclusion.

Why Did Joseph Smith and Subsequent Prophets Accept a Hemispheric Geography?

Joseph and other LDS leaders were not (and are not) immune to their own opinions, thoughts, and even misconceptions based on tradition. The Church does *not* support an official Book of Mormon geography, so it is up others to develop the most plausible geography.

The fact that Joseph Smith may have believed in a hemispheric model for Book of Mormon geography is strong support that he did not *write* the Nephite text, but rather translated it. When a man becomes a prophet, God does not instantly answer all questions and concerns about all aspects of the gospel (especially peripheral aspects such as geography). Influenced, no doubt by the thinking of the day, early Latter-day Saints assumed (without carefully reading the actual text of the Book of Mormon) that Book of Mormon geography must have encompassed the entire hemisphere. The hemispheric model offered a superficial fit to a casual reading of the text.

Additional Information

For more information and greater detail on this topic see:

John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1–47.

John L. Sorenson, “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6:1 (1994), 297–361.

John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992).



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