

## SECTION 2: GEOGRAPHY

### (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

**Editor's Note:** *This is a summary of the full paper, Section 2: Geography, available online at [http://www.fairlds.org/DNA\\_Evidence\\_for\\_Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_Geography/](http://www.fairlds.org/DNA_Evidence_for_Book_of_Mormon_Geography/). This paper was last updated 3 September 2008.*

This document is an analysis of the scholarly merits of the evidence and research used by Rodney Meldrum<sup>1</sup> in his firesides and DVD presentation, *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography*.<sup>2</sup> Neither FAIR nor this document take any position on the geographic location of Book of Mormon events.<sup>3</sup> It is important, however, that Meldrum's theories be analyzed according to the same standards by which other Book of Mormon geography theories are evaluated. To avoid confusion, this paper refers to Meldrum's geographic model as the Limited North American Model, or LNAM.<sup>4</sup> This document is just one in a series of such analytical documents.

In this document we examine the geographical evidences offered by Meldrum for the LNAM. The examination is relevant to three sections of his presentation: "Geography: Foundations for Book of Mormon Geography" (Section 2), "Book of Mormon Lands: Mapping the Book of Mormon" (Section 15), and "Travel Indications: Book of Mormon Excursions" (Section 16).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper follows the scholarly custom of referring to an individual, at first reference, by full name and then subsequently referring to the individual by last name only. We fully recognize Rodney as a brother in the gospel, but in discussing secular issues (such as scholarly research and geographic models) it was felt that continually prefacing his name or the name of any other referenced scholar or individual with "Brother" or "Sister," while accurate, would distract from the readability of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Meldrum, *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography: New scientific support for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon; Correlation and Verification through DNA, Prophetic, Scriptural, Historical, Climatological, Archaeological, Social, and Cultural Evidence* (Rodney Meldrum, 2008). The DVD is in sections; citations in this paper reference the DVD's section number and title, followed by an approximate time stamp from the DVD.

<sup>3</sup> FAIR recognizes that faithful individuals and scholars can honestly disagree on where Book of Mormon events took place; there is no revealed or officially accepted geography. FAIR provides an online reference to over 60 different geographic models at [http://en.fairmormon.org/Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_geography](http://en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon_geography) (click on Book of Mormon Geographical Models). That being said, this paper may occasionally make reference to a Mesoamerican model for Book of Mormon geography. Such reference is not made to argue for that particular geographical model, but because (1) the presentation often criticizes Mesoamerican models through misrepresentation and (2) the presentation often makes a claim that is equally true of the Mesoamerican model. If both models make the same claims and meet the criteria necessary for those claims, it stands to reason that both models would be equally viable relative to such claims.

<sup>4</sup> Meldrum's model places Book of Mormon peoples in an area roughly covering the Atlantic seaboard to the Rocky Mountains. This name was chosen as descriptive of the general model. We recognize that Meldrum may pick a different name at some point and would invite him to do so.

It is obvious that Meldrum believes a knowledge of Book of Mormon geography is critical. He explains the reasons behind this belief at the DVD's website:

For the first time in history, knowing the geography of The Book of Mormon is critical to defending the validity of The Book of Mormon itself, for if we are looking in the wrong geographical location, what chance is there of finding this evidence and dispelling the false claims of those who would tear the church and its members down?<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the belief that we need to understand and know Book of Mormon geography is mistaken. Even if we found an incontrovertible sign that said “welcome to Zarahemla,” those who did not want to believe would still not believe. People have known where Jerusalem has been for millennia, yet that knowledge does not compel belief in the Bible or in the divinity of Christ. Neither does Book of Mormon geography provide a basis for belief—only evidence for those who are already believers. A true basis for belief only comes through a spiritual witness.

Since geographical information does not provide a basis for belief and does not compel one to believe, it is proper to point out that studying Book of Mormon geography is a secular endeavor, not a religious endeavor. Just like biblical archaeology is non-theological, studying any supposed geography of the Book of Mormon, while interesting, should not be confused with religious endeavors related to the book.

With that reality firmly in mind, let's start to examine the interesting world of Book of Mormon geography.

## INTERNAL MAPS

In discussing anything related to Book of Mormon geography, it must be remembered that the majority of the text is the work of a single ancient prophet: Mormon. As one becomes familiar with his great work in editing, redacting, and explaining hundreds of years of records of his people, it is soon evident that he was aware of where significant events occurred and of their relationship in distance and direction to each other. Mormon's geographical knowledge, displayed through geographical statements and hints in his writing, has come to be referred to by scholars as “Mormon's map” or as an “internal map” of the Book of Mormon.

Piecing together the geographical information that Mormon included in the Book of Mormon allows us to reconstruct, as much as possible, that map. To propose a Book of Mormon geography that does not take Mormon's writings fully into account does not reflect sound scholarly practice.

Unfortunately that is one of the major mistakes that the DVD presentation makes—in effect the presentation has the process backward, starting from the real world and

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<sup>5</sup> Answer to the question “Why is knowing the geography of the Book of Mormon important?” on Meldrum's website, <http://www.bookofmormonevidence.org/FAQ.php>, accessed August 27, 2008.

shoehorning the Book of Mormon into the area in which the DNA evidence somehow proves the Nephites lived.

## TESTING THE MAP

It is impossible to “prove” that a certain internal (or external) map is correct. All we can do is show that a certain map is plausible and consistent with everything in the Book of Mormon. It may, however, be possible to *disprove* a map. If, for example, a map claimed that Zarahemla was on the east of the river Sidon, we would know from our internal map based on the Book of Mormon text that this cannot be true.<sup>6</sup> Any proposed Book of Mormon map:

- A. Must match the relationships between features described in the Book of Mormon text.
- B. Must have sites in the right location relative to each other that are also the right distance from each other.
- C. Must not violate known physical laws: for example, rivers do not run uphill. A map that requires a river to flow uphill is not plausible.
- D. Must not violate the real-world “facts on the ground.” For example, a hill to the north of a city in the Book of Mormon cannot be located to the south of the city when the map is placed in its proposed real-world location.
- E. Should not misrepresent alternative models.

The last point requires a bit of explanation. Disproving one map does not provide support for any other map. If we can demonstrate that the LNAM is in error, this provides no evidence that (say) a Mesoamerican map is correct—both could be wrong. If however, one geographical model *misrepresents* another model, this is cause for concern.

The LNAM, as presented in the DVD presentation, makes many geographical claims that can be tested against these five criteria:<sup>7</sup>

- Claims about Hagoth violate points C and D because the Great Lakes were not navigable to the ocean at the time of the Book of Mormon.
- The identification of the Mississippi River as the river Sidon violates point A because the text clearly indicates that the Sidon flows south to north and the Mississippi actually flows north to south.
- The claim that the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers is the “head” of the river Sidon violates point D as this confluence is not in an area identified by the Book of Mormon as a “narrow strip of wilderness.”

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<sup>6</sup> See Alma 2:34.

<sup>7</sup> These are the results of just a few of the claims examined. A full discussion is in the full *Section 2: Geography*, available online at [http://www.fairlds.org/DNA\\_Evidence\\_for\\_Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_Geography/](http://www.fairlds.org/DNA_Evidence_for_Book_of_Mormon_Geography/).

- The LNAM use of the Ohio River as the geographic feature separating the land of Nephi from the land of Zarahemla, which violates point A. The text indicates that the separating feature was a narrow strip of wilderness.
- The claim that the river Sidon is the Mississippi River violates point D because the Book of Mormon indicates that the river Sidon flows northward, likely emptying into one of the four seas mentioned. The Mississippi flows nowhere near the Great Lakes (identified in the LNAM as the four seas), instead heading south to the Gulf of Mexico.
- The claim that the land Bountiful is southeast of Zarahemla violates point A. The text indicates Bountiful is north of Zarahemla.
- The claim that Bountiful is directly north of the land of Nephi violates point A. The text indicates that Zarahemla is directly north of the land of Nephi.
- The claim that the land of Bountiful separates the land of Nephi from the land of Zarahemla violates point A. The text indicates that a narrow strip of wilderness separates the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla.
- The LNAM placement of the land of Nephi violates point A. The text indicates the land of Nephi stretches from the sea east to the sea west, which it does not do in the LNAM.
- The LNAM placement of the sea west violates point A. The text indicates it should be west of the Zarahemla and the land of Bountiful, but the LNAM has it east of Zarahemla and north of Bountiful.
- The LNAM placement of the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla violates point A. The text indicates both lands were nearly surrounded by water, but the LNAM have no seas nearly surrounding them.
- The LNAM placement of the land of first inheritance violates point A. The text indicates the land is on the west sea, to the west of the land of Nephi, but the LNAM places it on the Gulf of Mexico, south of the land of Nephi.
- The LNAM account of the travels of king Limhi's explorers violates point D. The text has the party traveling a limited distance, but the LNAM requires them to travel in error over 1700 miles.

In short, there are many points at which the claims made in the presentation fail when judged against the five evaluative criteria.

## **MISREPRESENTING OTHERS' WORK**

Earlier, when introducing analysis points that should be applied to any proposed Book of Mormon geography, it was mentioned that disproving one model does not provide support for any other geographic model—each model needs to stand on its own, particularly in relation to the Book of Mormon text.

If, however, proponents of one geographic model misrepresent another model, this is cause for concern. (See point E in the analysis points.) In this case, the DVD presentation often misrepresents Mesoamerican models of the Book of Mormon, and particularly Sorenson's

Mesoamerican model. It appears that the presentation does this either out of ignorance (the Mesoamerican model is not fully understood) or out of a desire to have the audience dismiss the Mesoamerican model and, in the resulting vacuum, adopt the LNAM as the only remaining alternative.

As mentioned at the first of this paper, FAIR does not endorse any particular Book of Mormon geography and even provides online resources addressing all the known geographies.<sup>8</sup> The misrepresentations of competing geographic models is deeply woven into the DVD presentation, however, and must be addressed—it simply is not good scholarship and does a disservice to viewers of the presentation.

It is perfectly acceptable for any Book of Mormon student to subscribe to whatever geographic theory they desire; it is not acceptable for individuals to misrepresent others' theories and pass that misrepresentation off as "scholarship." In evaluating the DVD presentation, FAIR found many such problems:

- The presentation discusses the difficulties of crossing the Isthmus of Panama, only to later acknowledge that this isthmus has nothing to do with Sorenson's model.
- The presentation uses LDS pioneers as models for how far one can travel in a day when single-person travel is more appropriate to the evaluation.
- The presentation assumes that travel times "for a Nephite" means "an average Nephite," and does not address that it may be technical term with a specific meaning.
- The presentation talks about how difficult it would be for a modern audience to cross the distances described when there's ample precedent for such journeys in bygone days.
- The presentation talks about how 150 miles is too far to walk through Mesoamerica when Sorenson doesn't use that inaccurate figure for his model.
- The presentation fails to mention how the isthmus distance need not be from sea to sea, though this concept is used for different purposes later in the presentation.

All of this has the effect of making the Mesoamerican model seem impossible and, by implication, the LNAM more acceptable. Yet, these claims are either of no relevance whatever, or they are false. FAIR does not endorse any geography, but believes that all models should be evaluated according to their actual arguments and merits, not misrepresentations or irrelevancies.

## CONCLUSION

Much else could be said about the LNAM as presented in *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography*, but it has already failed the five evaluative points, A through E, many

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<sup>8</sup> See [http://en.fairmormon.org/Book\\_of\\_Mormon\\_geography](http://en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon_geography) and click on Book of Mormon Geographical Models.

times over. On matters of river flow, land orientation, geographic relationships, travel distances, and topography it has been demonstrated as lacking. In short, the LNAM is simply not viable.

Further, the description of a theory with which the presentation disagrees is inadequate and misleading. Readers will have to return to the Book of Mormon text itself if they wish to develop a more reliable geographic model, or use the tools presented in this paper to judge among the many existing models.

Again, this paper is a summary of information presented in the full paper, *Section 2: Geography*. If you are interested in a longer exposition on the matters covered here, please see the full paper. The full paper also provides additional points at which the theories in *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography* should be rejected.