

*Given the possible controversy that might be raised, I should make it clear that these are my own opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of the Interpreter Foundation.*

There have been a number of times over the years when I have been involved with studying the Book of Mormon where I will explain something I find fascinating to my wife, who gently responds, “Why would anyone care about that?” Although a little deflating, it really is a very good question. I’d like to look at Book of Mormon geography in just that light. Why might we care? What good does it do to know that Manti is north of Nephi and south of Zarahemla? Is it important to know that the Book of Mormon doesn’t typically give those descriptions for the relationships of those cities, but rather which are “up” or “down” from wherever one begins a journey?

Measured against the “will it affect my salvation” question, the answer is clearly that Book of Mormon geography is entirely non-essential. It is entirely possible that people can drink of the living waters of the Book of Mormon without any concept of geography. They have since it was first published. It is also quite true that one can drink of those living waters even if they hold an erroneous idea of Book of Mormon geography. Since there was only one geography for those who wrote the text—and we believers in the text have come up with hundreds of possibilities for that geography—most of us are wrong. Even if we might be right for the most part, I suspect that pretty much everyone is wrong about something in the geography, so we had better hope that understanding Book of Mormon geography won’t be on the final exam when we knock on the pearly gates.

As I think about it, Book of Mormon geography has seemed to matter for perhaps four different reasons. The first is simply the challenge of it. Like climbing a mountain because it is there, Book of Mormon geography is an interesting puzzle in and of itself. Solving it scratches an itch, but it serves no other master. The next three reasons do seem to have another master in mind.

Second, Book of Mormon geography has been used as a foundation for proving the Book of Mormon. I use ‘proving’ intentionally, understanding that it really cannot be done. That doesn’t mean that the attempts are not made, or that those who do so really don’t hope that it is what they are doing. The geography is used to provide a place against which either artifacts or history may be compared to the Book of Mormon and thereby demonstrate that the Book of Mormon must be a translation of a historical text if it corresponds to particular ruins, artifacts, or history (I’m not commenting here on the quality of the correlations, just how they appear to be used).

Third, there is a relatively recent use of the geography: It serves as a rallying point for patriotic nationalism. What started with geography has virtually left specifics behind. The argument assumes geography and hinges on nationalistic readings of prophecies. In this evolution of the use of geography, the purpose of geography becomes a referential proof—not of the Book of Mormon—but of a religiously inspired nationalism.

Fourth, geography can be used as the foundation for better understanding the people who wrote the Book of Mormon. While that might not affect our salvation, it does help provide a deeper understanding of the living people who wrote the histories that Mormon crafted into our Book of Mormon. Geography becomes a framework for understanding rather than the thing to be understood. Although not necessary for our salvation, the result of deepening our understanding of the Book of Mormon writers and their very human issues and struggles cannot help but affect our salvation as we more clearly see how the gospel can apply to our own real issues and struggles.

Of course, it is obvious that I have a personal preference for the fourth option. Others will prefer one of the other three for their own reasons. However, I suggest that there is a body of work developing that shows that geography provides more information than simply solving the puzzle of geography.

Establishing a location allows us to use both that location and the known history of that location to improve our understanding of the text.

In my opinion, the great value of John L. Sorenson's 1985 pivotal *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* was not the geography, although it represents the culmination of a careful examination of all possible textual references and inferences about geography. Had it stopped there, it would have been another geography and not become as influential as it has been. What moved it beyond an esoteric discussion of geography was that Sorenson used geography to ask more important questions about the people who lived on that geography and in that time. Placing the action of the Book of Mormon in the region known as Mesoamerica makes for a reasonable geography, but it also makes for a picture Book of Mormon peoples as living and participating in a particular culture. His recent book, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*, continues his thoughts on how the text fits into the geography he has identified.

One of the interesting ways that geography can lead to an understanding of the Book of Mormon is in providing an important background to an otherwise enigmatic story in the Book of Mormon. Limhi sent a party to find Zarahemla to request help against the Lamanites. It was perhaps the grandparents of those in that party who had come to the land where the people of Limhi were, and they would certainly have retained some remembrance of where Zarahemla was. Zarahemla was along the River Sidon. If the party followed the Sidon, they had to have found Zarahemla. They missed it. Instead they found the remains of the Jaredites. How could that have happened? The specific geography in Mesoamerica provides a simple and complete solution to the question. There are two rivers with headwaters within twenty miles of each other in the same mountain range. The search party followed the wrong river. In doing so, they would naturally end up in the region where the geographic model places the Jaredites. Lawrence Poulsen provided the first and most complete explanation of this interesting solution to a Book of Mormon question (see Lawrence Poulsen's web site).

Unlike the archaeology of the Bible, archaeology and the Book of Mormon cannot start with a location that has both records and traditions maintaining the locations of important sites throughout history. We have never *not* known the location of Jerusalem. We have no such anchor for the Book of Mormon, and the nature of the available records in the New World virtually assures that we will not (pre-contact texts are only available in Mesoamerica, and there are a limited number of them, compared with a rich literary tradition in the Old World). Without the firm anchor point, geography will continue to be argued as a geography. We will likely see others proposed and current correlations refined and re-argued. Personally, I don't have the patience for that kind of work, though I greatly admire it in those who do it in sincerity.

Understanding that geography in and of itself will not improve our understanding of the Book of Mormon, I lean to the ability of geography to provide a framework from which we can build that better understanding. Noting that there were people in a particular geography at a particular time is still in the realm of proof-texting our geography rather than trying to understand the text. The value of any geography should be its productivity for explaining the Book of Mormon, not for proving it—not for proving our faith in it. Geography is productive when the geography itself explains the events of the text. Geography is productive with an examination of the known history and culture of the peoples living in that area during Book of Mormon times elucidates why people acted in the ways that they did. Geography will come closest to affecting our salvation if it leads to a richer understanding of scripture, and a deeper way of connecting with those whose lives and whose writings gave us that scripture.

