

Administrator's Note: The following post is intended to generate discussion and should only be seen as representing the beliefs of the author. While many individuals have settled on their own ideas about the geography of the Book of Mormon, there is certain a wide range of those ideas. Discussion and clarifications are always beneficial, and this post and subsequent discussions may lead to both.

By J. Theodore Brandley

I believe there are five common misunderstandings of the text of the Book of Mormon that have kept the truth of its geography hidden for the past 185 years. These misconceptions are:

1. The River Sidon flows to the north.
2. The city of Lehi-Nephi is the original city of Nephi
3. Alma's party travelled only about 250 miles from the city of Lehi-Nephi to Zarahemla.
4. Directional geographical names in the Book of Mormon are absolute and always refer to the same location.
5. The land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were divided by a narrow neck of land.

Flow of the River Sidon

The "head of the river Sidon" has been assumed to be the source of the river. Under this assumption, it being south of Zarahemla (Alma 22:27), Sidon would flow to the north. However, a study of the context reveals that the "head of the river Sidon" is not its source. Dr. Hugh Nibley is the only one I am aware of to make note of this. Speaking extemporaneously about the head of the river Sidon mentioned in Alma 22:27 he said, "If that's the head of the river, I suppose it's the source of the river. Well, it may be the head of the river where it empties. Sidon goes the other way, I think." ((Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of The Book of Mormon—Semester 1: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University*, 1988—1990, Provo: FARMS, p.143))

Consider the text Dr. Nibley was referring to in Alma 22:27:

a narrow strip of wilderness, which ran from the sea east even to the sea west, and round about on the borders of the seashore, and the borders of the wilderness which was on the north by the land of Zarahemla, through the borders of Manti, by the head of the river Sidon, running from the east towards the west (emphasis added)

From the above we find:

1. The narrow strip of wilderness ran east and west round about on the edge of the seashore
2. Zarahemla was north of the seashore and north of Manti (see also Alma 6:7, 17:1)
3. Manti was near the narrow strip of wilderness, *that was by the sea*
4. The head of the river Sidon was by the narrow strip of wilderness, *that was by the sea*

Conclusion: As rivers run to the sea, the river Sidon ran from Zarahemla south to Manti and through the east-west narrow strip of wilderness to the "head of the river Sidon" near the sea. There is a second witness from the text in Alma 50:11 confirming that the head of the river Sidon was by the sea:

And thus he cut off all the strongholds of the Lamanites in the east wilderness, yea, and also on the west, fortifying the line between the Nephites and the Lamanites, between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi, *from the west sea, running by the head of the river Sidon* (emphasis added)

As rivers run to the sea, the river Sidon therefore flowed from Zarahemla south to the “head of the river Sidon” and into the sea. That the Sidon actually ran to the sea is confirmed when we read that after a major battle the dead bodies that were thrown into the river Sidon near Zarahemla were carried into the sea (Alma 2:15, 3:3).

In 1792 the New York State Legislature passed a bill creating the town of *Riverhead* at the east end of Long Island. ((A History of Long Island: From Its Earliest Settlement to the ..., Volume 2, By Peter Ross, William Smith Pelletreau, Lewis Publishing Company, 1905 – Long Island (N.Y.)) The name signifies that the town is located at the mouth of the Peconic River where it flows into the Atlantic at Flanders Bay. Joseph Smith grew to manhood in New York where the elected lawmakers from across the state collectively considered the mouth of the river to be the *head* of the river. It was obviously a commonly understood use of the word *head* in that location, in that era. It is reasonable to assume that Joseph Smith also understood the mouth of the river Sidon to be the “head of the river Sidon” and translated it as such. Regardless of the possible explanation, the context of the Book of Mormon clearly describes the Sidon as flowing from north to south and any geography based upon a more common understanding of the one translated English word *head*, out of context, is probably in error. Incidentally, the *Sidon, River* entry in the LDS *Index To The Triple Combination* used to read, “most prominent river in Nephite territory, runs north to sea.” The new 2013 *Index* now reads, “most prominent river in Nephite territory.” In the LDS *Index*, the Sidon no longer runs north.

The prime candidate for a major river flowing south on the North American Continent would be the Mississippi River. The prime candidate for the city of Zarahemla would therefore be the World Heritage Site of Poverty Point, on the west side of the lower Mississippi. The Mississippi River may be the link that ties together truths in the Mesoamerica and Heartland theories.

The City of Lehi-Nephi

It has generally been assumed that the city of Lehi-Nephi, from which the Nephites fled under the leadership of King Mosiah 1st, was the original city of Nephi established by Nephi. However, between those two reigns there were about 400 years of wars with the Lamanites. Two hundred years after Lehi left Jerusalem, Jarom records that the wars had continued and that the Nephites and the Lamanites were scattered upon much of the face of the land (Jarom 1:5-9). By 280 BC the more wicked part of the Nephites had been destroyed. The record does not indicate where the more righteous Nephite survivors were living at that time but with the pattern of them fleeing their persecutors they certainly would have been driven from their original city of Nephi (Omni 1:4-7). With the passage of another hundred years the more righteous Nephites were living in a city called Lehi-Nephi (Mosiah 7:1). After 400 years of war and persecution the city of Nephi and the city of Lehi-Nephi could have been a great distance apart. The city that Mosiah 1st had fled is called Lehi-Nephi from chapter 7 of Mosiah through chapter 9 verse 8. In verse 15 of the same chapter the name of the city suddenly changes to the city of Nephi with no apparent reason. This is what has generated the confusion but there is no indication in the text that this is or could be the original city of Nephi. The reason that this city is critical to the geography of the Book of Mormon is that the travel time between Lehi-Nephi and the city of Zarahemla is known and is the only distance in America that can be calculated with any accuracy from the text.

The Distance Between Lehi-Nephi and Zarahemla, and a Limited Geography

John L. Sorenson set the standard for the travel speed of Alma's party from Lehi-Nephi to Zarahemla at 11 miles per day, the speed of driving a herd of fat hogs to market through mountains. ((John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting For the Book of Mormon*, pp. 8-9, Deseret Book Co. and FARMS, 1996.)) Alma and his people fled the Waters of Mormon with King Noah's army in hot pursuit, for eight days. Later they fled from the Lamanites for thirteen days, making it twenty-one days travel to Zarahemla (Mosiah 23:3, 24:20, 24:25). Alma had previously fled from King Noah to the waters of Mormon, near the borders of the land (Mosiah 18:4), so it could have been another day from King Noah's city of Lehi-Nephi. This would make a total of twenty-two days travel, or about 250 miles from Lehi-Nephi to Zarahemla at Sorenson's rate of 11 miles per day.

Alma was traveling with children and flocks but they were fleeing for their lives and, "The Lord did strengthen them that the people of King Noah did not overtake them to destroy them" (Mosiah 23:2). The war parties of King Noah and the Lamanites, in hot pursuit, would have done about 40 miles per day. ((The first indication of how far the Nephites would generally travel in one day can be estimated from Lehi's three days of travel from the tip of the Red Sea to the river Laman (1 Nephi 2:5-6). George Potter, in his article *A New Candidate in Arabia for the "Valley of Lemuel"* (Journal of Book of Mormon Studies: Volume – 8, Issue – 1, Pages: 54-63 Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 1999) presents sound evidence for support of Maqna, Saudi Arabia, as the probable site where the River Laman empties into the Red Sea. This is a minimum of seventy-five miles of travel for Lehi in three days, or twenty-five miles per day.

Joseph Smith, leading Zion's Camp, made twenty-five to forty miles a day (Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:65, 68). George A. Smith reported that Zion's Camp traveled 25 to 40 miles a day (LDS Church, *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, p. 287). Don Rickey wrote a book about US enlisted soldiers during the Indian Wars. It is entitled, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay*, indicating their standard day's travel distance.)) Alma and his band had a head start but would still have to have travelled at least 30 miles per day to save their lives. Twenty-two days of travel, in two separate segments, at a rate of 30 miles per day, would put the city of Lehi-Nephi over 600 miles from Zarahemla rather than the traditional 250 miles. This is a significant difference in territory from what has been generally thought and brings into question the whole concept of a limited geography.

A 600 mile radius compass-arc drawn from the suggested Poverty Point/Zarahemla to the southwest, sweeps the Rio Grande River. In this scenario, separating the land of Nephi from the land of Zarahemla would be the huge southern plain of Texas. During the Nephite period this area of Texas was a grassy savannah rather than the mesquite and brush we see today. ((Around 500 BC West and Southwest Texas underwent a notable cooling that encouraged the southward expansion of the lush grasslands of the Southern High Plains. This expansion reached the Rio Grande and was widespread enough to encourage large herds of bison to range freely as far south and east as Langtry and Del Rio. (Paleoenvironments, *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/sop02>, Dec 16, 2014))) It is easy to understand how the Nephites would keep getting lost on a vast ocean of grass with few landmarks.

The concept of a limited Book of Mormon geography comes mainly from the account of the scouts of King Limhi who were sent out from Lehi-Nephi to find the city of Zarahemla. Instead they found the dead civilization of the Jaredites and returned with their records. It is thought to be unreasonable if they had traveled from Mesoamerica to New York. With their departure point 600 miles from the Mississippi River it becomes reasonable and understandable. The scouts may have come to the banks of the river Sidon above Zarahemla, built dugout canoes or a sailing raft and continued upstream. After they had gone only another 250 miles upstream they were into the central plains at the fork of the Ohio River. By then they would have been finding the death and destruction of the Jaredites which they assumed were the people of Zarahemla (Mosiah 21:25-26). The scouts would have continued to follow the trail of death upstream looking for survivors. The Ohio branch of the Mississippi River would take them within 100 miles of Cumorah. King Limhi referred to the scouts as being "diligent" even though they did not find Zarahemla (Mosiah 8:8). The expedition of the scouts of Limhi would have been similar to our Lewis and Clark expedition. Additionally, the scouts were being led by the Lord to pick up the twenty-four gold plates of Ether. Ether set the plates in the place where the Lord would bring the scouts of Limhi (Ether 15:33). The Book of Ether gave the Nephites a record of the people who came before them and was another testament to them of Jesus

Christ. The Book of Ether was to the Nephites what The Book of Mormon is to us (Mosiah 28:17-19; Alma 37:21, 29-30). The long trip of the scouts of Limhi was a small price for them to pay for the Book of Ether.

In the scenario where the Mississippi is the river Sidon, and the city of Lehi-Nephi is not the original city of Nephi, the expedition of the scouts of King Limhi is not geographically limiting. If the people of King Mosiah 1st travelled 600 miles in one migration fleeing from the Lamanites, their ancestors before them would probably have been driven over 1,000 miles from the original city of Nephi in several migrations over the 400 years. There is nothing in the text of the Book of Mormon that would limit the Nephite's geography from stretching from Costa Rica to Cumorah.

Directional Geographical Locations In The Book of Mormon

One thing that can be particularly confusing in The Book Of Mormon is that all directional names are relative to the context in which they are given. The same directional names do not always refer to the same geographical locations. For example, in the following verse the land north refers to the land of Zarahemla:

Now the land south was called Lehi, and the land north was called Mulek, which was after the son of Zedekiah; for the Lord did bring Mulek into the land north, and Lehi into the land south. (Helaman 6:10)

However, in this next verse Zarahemla is in the land southward:

And it came to pass that I, being eleven years old, was carried by my father into the land southward, even to the land of Zarahemla. (Mormon 1:6)

Sometimes Bountiful is in the north as in Helaman 1:23, and sometimes it is in the south as in Alma 22:31. The same is true with references to seas. Today we sometimes use similar references. People in Florida refer to the Atlantic as the east sea, and the Gulf of Mexico as the west sea. Those living in Mesoamerica would refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the east sea and the Pacific as the west sea. Directional names in the Book of Mormon are given relative to their position or to the context.

Names of the various lands in the Book of Mormon can also be confusing because sometimes the same name will refer to different sized areas. The "land of Zarahemla" for example, sometimes refers to the area close around the city like a county size as in Alma 5:1, sometimes to a larger area such as a state size as in Alma 59:4, and sometimes it refers to all the lands of the Nephites as in Alma 22:32.

The Narrow Neck of Land

The concept that the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla are separated by a narrow neck of land is a major misunderstanding of the text. There are only two references to the narrow neck of land:

And it came to pass that Hagoth, he being an exceedingly curious man, therefore he went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship, on the borders of the land Bountiful, by the land Desolation, and launched it forth into the west sea, by the narrow neck which led into the land northward. (Alma 63:5)

And they built a great city by the narrow neck of land, *by the place where the sea divides the land.* (Ether 10:20, emphasis added)

Notice that the narrow neck of land is by the border of the land Bountiful and the land Desolation, which is much further north than the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi. Notice also that the Jaredites built a great city *by* the narrow neck of land, not on it, or above it, or below it. Also the narrow neck of land was a place where “the sea divides the land,” like a major inlet or bay creating a peninsula, rather than an isthmus creating an hour-glass where the land divides the sea. This narrow neck of land, or peninsula, could be anywhere along a coast-line. As the eastern boundary of the land of Bountiful was on the east sea (Alma 22:33), in our scenario of the river Sidon being the Mississippi River this east sea would be the Atlantic Ocean. The obvious candidate for the narrow neck of land would be the Delmarva Peninsula, which is only 20 miles wide at the neck and the sea of Chesapeake Bay divides the land for 200 miles. Hagoth then launched his ships into the sea on the west side of the narrow neck of land, or into Chesapeake Bay of the Atlantic Ocean.

The confusion about the narrow neck of land is generated from Alma 22:32 where it speaks of a “small neck of land.”

and thus the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were nearly surrounded by water, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward.

This is the only verse in the Book of Mormon where the phrase “small neck of land” is mentioned. It is not to be confused with the “narrow neck of land” referred to above. This verse explains that the land of Nephi (all of the Lamanite territory) and the land of Zarahemla (all of the Nephite territory), together, were *nearly* surrounded by water, *except* for a small neck of land on the south of them that led to another land southward. This verse does not call for a small neck of land between the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla. There is no hourglass shaped territory between the lands of the saga of the Book of Mormon. This small neck of land can only refer to the Isthmus of Panama, and the land northward in this verse is North America, and the land southward is South America. Although there were very likely migrations of Lamanites into South America the text does not mention it.

Summation

With the above explanations of misconceptions of some of the text of the Book of Mormon, the geography of it becomes clear and simple and fits perfectly into the North American Continent. With the suggested configuration as a basis there are further signposts in the text that help answer many more questions, such as:

Where was Lehi's landing?

Where was the original city of Nephi?

Where was the city of Bountiful?

Where and on what terrain did the major battles take place?

Where did the ships of Hagoth go, and why did Mormon even mention them?

What was the route of the Jaredite's journey?

Mormon gave us all the clues we would need to identify the locations he wrote about and to physically verify his work as being accurate. I also hope this explanation can help tie together the truths in the Mesoamerica Theory with the truths in the Heartland Theory.