

Why Book of Mormon Geography is Important

by Shirley Heater

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This mission requires a setting for The

bread! (It is astonishing to me to consider that 175 years after its coming forth, believers are still divided over the location of the lands of The Book of Mormon!) A brief capsule of the two main geography theories may shed some light on where we stand today. Both views have their roots in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They both center around identification of the narrow neck of land which divided the Land Northward from the Land Southward and is the key to proper identification of Book of Mormon lands.

The first view hearkens back to a series of maps

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Christians cannot imagine the Bible without places—Israel, Egypt, Jerusalem. All are foundational to the events recorded. We take the location of Bible lands for granted because of the long-known history in that area of the world. Yet over the years, Bible scholars and biblical archaeologists have differed as to the accuracy or even the historicity of some of the events. Did the walls of Jericho really fall down? Were the Israelites slaves 400+ years in Egypt? What about the Exodus and parting of the Red Sea? Or Noah's Ark? There are even those who relegate the Bible itself to myth status and question the resurrection! In recent years some critics have tempered their criticisms as archaeology contributed confirmation of scriptural accounts, many converted to its message.

Today, even more turmoil surrounds The Book of Mormon—in addition to the anti-Book of Mormon segment. Even within the ranks of professed believers, some question whether or not it is important to know where the recorded events took place. Others have taken the path of some Bible scholars, questioning the historicity and just considering it a good story, albeit with some good principles. I have heard the fol-

lowing comment more than once: "It's an interesting subject, but it really doesn't matter that much—my salvation isn't dependent on knowing where The Book of Mormon took place." This statement reveals a lack of knowledge of the message and purpose of The Book of Mormon and shirks the ultimate responsibility of those who believe in it—that those who possess The Book of Mormon are actually caretakers entrusted with a special mission.

This mission requires a setting for The Book of Mormon. It is as essential to The Book of Mormon believer as it is to those Bible believers who do not take for granted specific locations in the Bible. The Bible and Book of Mormon share the same purpose concerning prophecies of the restoration of the House of Israel in the Last Days—The Book of Mormon relating to a specific branch. But before I explore this important topic, let's first review the subject of geography.

Where something took place is always important when reading historical material. For The Book of Mormon, as with the Bible, this necessitates a map. There are actually two kinds of maps—internal and external. An internal map places lands and cities in relation to each other based on the text, without locating them in a specific geographical area. An external map places those internal references in a specific geographic location. While internal maps are helpful in establishing relationships between places, it is the external map that brings reality to the events.

produced by an archaeology committee commissioned by the 1894 RLDS General Conference (published in 1898). Those maps identified the narrow neck as the Isthmus of Panama. That would stretch Book of Mormon lands over 8,000 miles, way beyond the more rational smaller area required by Book of Mormon events. In addition, the Darien Gap—Panama's isthmus—is a swampy, impassible corridor which was rejected for the plan to build a Pan-American highway.¹ It is also possible that this swampy area was underwater during the time of The Book of Mormon. Travel by individuals, and especially by large groups as recorded in The Book of Mormon, would have been impossible or extremely difficult at best through such an area that is nearly impenetrable even today. These conditions tend to rule out the Panama location as the narrow neck. Other requirements which also do not match are discussed below.

Nineteen years after the committee maps were published, a second view was presented by Louis Hills in 1917. Hills had been studying and teaching his proposed geography for several years before his map was published in *Geography of Mexico and Central America*. Glenn Scott observes that because the knowledge of Central America

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tem, kings, a knowledge of proper cardinal directions, and more.

Locating the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mesoamerica as the narrow neck is the linchpin in the conclusion that there is only one possible location that fits all the criteria—Mesoamerica—making it the most widely held view by Book of Mormon scholars today. We can confidently move forward knowing that just as the Bible has an identified location, so does The Book of Mormon.

Let us now return to the subject of the title, why geography is important. In these Last Days, we are poised on the threshold of the culmination of both Biblical and Book of Mormon prophecies. This understanding leads us to the main reason we need to know the geographical setting—to identify Lehi's descendants who are part of the House of Israel. This broken-off branch, whether those in the heartland of The Book of Mormon lands or those who may have migrated northward into the United States two thousand years ago,³ must be brought back into the mother tree as part of the restoration of the House of Israel.

All who read The Book of Mormon can be blessed by its testimony of the Lord and by its teachings on faith, and many other significant subjects. Read The Book of

Mormon for your own personal edification and rich blessings. But in addition to that (perhaps even more so as a result of our relationship with the Lord and with this book), realize the responsibility inherent in embracing it. We are caretakers of this record, and in God's great scheme of things, it must go to the descendants to whom and for whom it was written and preserved.⁴

What is your response? I challenge each of you to look for those promises and blessings to the remnant and to make this a matter of prayer. When our voices are united, our faith is magnified 10,000 times (a type for this is found in Leviticus 26:8 and Deuteronomy 32:30). We will see the posterity of Lehi, Nephi, Alma, Mormon and Moroni restored to their inheritance—expect it!

Recommended Reading

For more in-depth discussions on the subjects of Book of Mormon geography and archaeology, consult the following:

Voices from the Dust, by Glenn Scott
Peoples, Places and Prophecies, by Verneil W. Simmons

Exploring the Lands of The Book of Mormon, by Joseph L. Allen

¹ The Pan American Highway is to extend over 16,000 miles to unite North and South America, from Alaska to Argentina. The Darien Gap is one of three segments still not completed, although the technology now exists to overcome the previous difficulties and may someday become a reality.

² See *Voices from the Dust*, by Glenn A. Scott, page 7, for discussion of Joseph Smith's comments that Zarahemla was north of the Isthmus of Darien in "Guatimala" [sic], in addition to more detail on Hills' map and the narrow neck of land requirements.

³ The Maya people in Guatemala and surrounding areas are the largest indigenous group in the New World—over seven million people. They are also becoming more populous in the US as they continue to migrate today, joining their brothers and sisters who left over two thousand years ago.

⁴ As an aid to begin your study on this purpose, as well as other purposes, refer back to an earlier article in *glyph notes*, "Purposes of The Book of Mormon," by Lyle Smith, May/June 2005, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 1-3.