

Lehi in the Promised Land: What did he Find?

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Introduction

The traditional assumption of most Latter-day Saints has been that Lehi and his family came to a *Promised Land* that was virtually devoid of inhabitants. The Jaredites, the previous dwellers in this land, had, except for their last survivor, Coriantumr, been totally annihilated. Thus, until the arrival of the Mulekites, Lehi's descendants had both the north and the south continents of America to themselves. Yet, even B. H. Roberts acknowledged that this view was neither supportable in light of the archaeological evidence of ancient America, nor was it a view dictated by the Book of Mormon text. It was assumed because the Book of Mormon has been viewed as making no reference to other peoples.

There are those in the general Christian community who teach that the Bible is the *complete* record of God's dealings with man. Thus, they will claim, "If it's not mentioned in the Bible, it didn't happen." My favorite example is their view of Melchizedek. They will teach that he was born with a knowledge of God. The Bible is clear that he had that knowledge, but in no place does it record any revelation to Melchizedek. Since it's not in the record, they maintain that it didn't happen.

Most Latter-day Saints see the fallacy of this thinking. We have been clearly told that the biblical record is not complete. Yet, these same Latter-day Saints seem frequently to make this assumption of completeness regarding the Book of Mormon. They may not make this assumption consciously. It's one of those things that just happens when we don't make a specific effort to avoid it. We need constantly to carefully examine what the text is really saying. We need to challenge our views and pay very close attention to the small, often very subtle clues left to us by the ancient authors of our text.

One who has demonstrated an unusual mastery for recognizing these near whispers of evidence and insight is John L. Sorenson of BYU and FARMS. Brother Sorenson is an archaeologist and an anthropologist. In the cover notes of the recent FARMS publication in Dr. Sorenson's honor, they give this assessment:

A common thread running through his work has been processing massive volumes of detail in order to formulate general statements and to make those cultures more transparent to us today. Yet he has believed consistently that no intellectual efforts can be deep or complete enough to deserve dogmatic adherence.⁽¹⁾

It is in this spirit exemplified by Dr. Sorenson that I want to pursue this subject.⁽²⁾ When I first came across Dr. Sorenson's landmark work, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, I dismissed it as a radical view based on a narrow minded examination of the text. However, over time, I came to realize that this work, and its author, were held in very high esteem by many men whose opinion I highly regarded. Of course, I had dismissed the work without reading it. Why should I spend the time when I know that I disagree with the basic premise? Well, I can't say that I'm yet convinced, but I am impressed. While I may not agree with all of the conclusions of Dr. Sorenson, I am very impressed with his method, his meticulous analysis, and his unwavering quest for understanding and for a more fully *fleshed-out* view of these ancient cultures. His method is well illustrated in his chapter in "Transoceanic Crossings" in *Nephite Culture and Society*. He begins that study by asking 36 questions, many of which I felt were interesting but unanswerable from the

limited detail available in the Book of Mormon. He then proceeds to find rather reasonable answers for each of these questions. Some of these answers are appropriate to the current study. As we look at Lehi's arrival in the Promised Land, an appropriate beginning is that *transoceanic* voyage which brought them to these shores.

Land Lovers at Sea

We have no evidence that any member of Lehi's company had any experience at sea. At the same time, we need not assume that they cast off without obtaining some experience and training. While the Book of Mormon says nothing of the presence of others in the neighborhood of their Bountiful dry dock, we now know the help and sailing experience was not far away. Salalah was a busy port city even in Lehi's day. We generally assume that Nephi possessed no prior nautical knowledge to prepare for his role as shipbuilder. However, Dr. Sorenson suggests that we have not read the text with sufficient care. Nephi states (1 Nephi 18:2) that he did not build the ship using the method or design of men. This statement implies that Nephi had some familiarity with those methods and designs. In our last lesson we learned that Nephi's bow probably broke in the neighborhood of Jiddah. This was also a port city. Brother England postulates that while there Nephi may have become somewhat acquainted with shipbuilding after "*the manner which was learned by men.*"

Was this a non-stop voyage? Our record doesn't say but reason and similar experiences quickly fill that gap. If for nothing else, stops would be necessary to replenish their water supply. Repairs, other provisions, and the scraping of barnacles are other conditions which have forced all ancient seamen to make frequent stops as they have pursued similar voyages. Lehi's journey would have taken them more than half way around the world. For comparison, Lehi's voyage would have traversed at least 200° compared to about 55° for Columbus's voyage to America. Of course, Lehi did not travel in a straight line. Sorenson estimates that Lehi's journey would have been about seventeen thousand miles as compared to about three thousand for Columbus. No, this was not a non-stop voyage.⁽³⁾

How long did it take? Dr. Sorenson suggests that we can get some feel for this time from the voyage of a Polynesian canoe named *Hokule'a*. This vessel, sailing about eight thousand miles in comparable waters, averaged about ninety-eight miles per day. While this represented eighty-two days at sea, stops for repairs, rest, and supplies, extended their voyage over more than a year. Unlike Lehi's experience, the *Hokule'a* encountered nothing but good winds for their entire journey. If all other factors were comparable, this would suggest a time of two to three years for Lehi's voyage.⁽⁴⁾

What about the winds and currents? Following the normal sailing patterns from the Persian Gulf eastward, it is assumed that Lehi's party would have sailed either past Singapore to the Philippines, or south of Sumatra to New Guinea. Either route would have left them sailing against the trade winds and the equatorial current in their passage across the Pacific. From the Philippines they could have sailed north towards Japan, at which point both wind and current would have been favorable to a Pacific crossing. However, these currents would most likely have landed them somewhere along the California coast. Recently, experts on Pacific Islands navigation have suggested an alternative which should now be familiar to most 1998 inhabitants of this American continent: *El Niño*. *El Niño* is a reversal of the normal Pacific wind and current patterns. It's now known to occur about every ten years. Under *El Niño* conditions a Pacific crossing from either the Philippines or New Guinea could take a ship to either South or Central America.⁽⁵⁾

Where Did They Land?

While there is not a great deal of detail in Nephi's record from which the point of landing can be determined with any certainty, there is one confusing comment that has led to some interesting speculation. Nephi said that they were on an "isle of the sea" (2 Nephi 10:20). While I've never read any speculation that the entire Book of Mormon history might have been lived out upon an island (no

way would the text support such an assumption), I have encountered those who have concluded that the point of landing must be the southern coast of Chile. This conclusion satisfies both this identification by Nephi, as there are many islands along that coast, and the reported statement by Joseph Smith that Lehi's landing was in Chile. There are problems with both of these threads of evidence.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word most often translated *isle* by the King James scholars is now known to mean "coast land" or "boundary." (It seems that the King James translators had in some places even more trouble with *island*; in Isaiah 13:22 and 34:12, the Hebrew word translated *island* means "a solitary wild creature that howls.") We've found previously that the Lord appears to have inspired his prophet to use the Old Testament translation of words, when that translation did not result in doctrinal error. Thus, it would seem that in this case Nephi might be referring to the *coastal land* rather than an *island*. A more probable explanation, however, is that Nephi and his people had not at this time made a sufficient exploration of the land to identify it as a continent rather than an island. In their cultural experience, every land they had ever encountered off of their native continent had been an island. In Nephi's day, the concept of multiple continents likely did not exist.

Now, what did Joseph Smith say about landing in Chile? We have no reliable evidence that he said anything. In the notes of the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon, Orson Pratt states that Lehi's landing was in Chile. In an 1882 publication, Franklin D. Richards attributed this identification of Lehi's landing place to Joseph Smith and to revelation. Chasing this back to its source, the only reference for the statement "by Joseph Smith" is a written comment by Frederick G. Williams. Other items on this particular paper appear to be notes taken at a meeting of the School of the Prophets. In an interesting analysis of the assumptions and speculations that can result from a few words on a scrap of paper, John Welch and John Sorenson demonstrate that the evidence, when all taken together, does not support this statement as anything more than a declaration written by Frederick G. Williams. He may have been recording the speculation of one of his brethren or even his own personal speculation. Subsequent events indicate that Joseph's mind was still open on the subject⁽⁶⁾

The most complete description of geography (really more of a collection of hints than description) is found in Alma chapter 22. In verse 28, Mormon speaks of the Lamanites as "spread through the wilderness . . . in the borders by the seashore, and on the west in the land of Nephi, in the place of their fathers first inheritance, and thus bordering along by the seashore." From this we learn that this "land of first inheritance" was on the western shore of the land inhabited by the Lamanites. The following verses make plain that this land was south of Zarahemla and Bountiful. Thus, this land of first inheritance, which was very close to where Lehi and his party landed, was in the southern part of these Book of Mormon lands, and on the west coast. Beyond this, there is no further specific information given in the record. However, there is much that can be deduced from a careful reading of all references to the geography of the land. And John Sorenson is a very careful reader.

Dr. Sorenson, in agreement with most who have given careful scholarly consideration to this question, proposes a Book of Mormon location in Mesoamerica. Most Book of Mormon readers, when they find reference to the *narrow neck of land*, immediately imagine this to be Panama. They then conclude that the *land northward* is North America and South America is the *land southward*. Dr. Sorenson says that this just doesn't fit the data. He has found, however, that if the *narrow neck* is assumed to be the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a very close correlation with the details of Book of Mormon geography is achieved. This theory would place Lehi's landing somewhere near the coast of present day El Salvador. The *Land of Nephi* would then be in Guatemala. There are those who have proposed an ancient city, near the present day Guatemala City, as the location of the City of Nephi.⁽⁷⁾

When They Arrived, What Did They Find?

Cows and Horses?

Nephi gives us a rather succinct list (1 Nephi 18:25). They found cows, oxen, burros, horses, goats, and wild goats. While there are several items in this list that bare discussion, let's first consider what Nephi is doing here. Reynolds and Sjodahl point out that when Nephi and his family arrived in this new world, wherever they landed, they were greeted by animals that they had never seen before. What was Nephi to call them. The only names he had were those for similar animals in the old country. He did what travelers throughout history have always done, he named these new animals according to their resemblance to that which was familiar.

Reynolds and Sjodahl give a well-known example. When the Spanish arrived in the Americas they were introduced to a new food crop for which they had no name. They called it **corn**. This was the old world name of the food which they found to bare the closest relationship — **wheat**. Today, when we come across a reference to **corn** in the Bible, we're sometimes confused. The description just doesn't sound like corn at all. And, of course, it isn't. Today, in popular language, **corn** almost universally has that new meaning given by those explorers who were stuck for a name to identify an unfamiliar food crop.

Another familiar example is the **buffalo**. When early explorers encountered a strange new animal on the North American plains, they didn't make up a new name. They called it a **buffalo** — the name of the animal back home which this creature most resembled. The bison is, of course, not a buffalo and to my knowledge no one has ever charged that the early explores claim of buffalo was a lie, nor that the records of their explorations contain an anachronism. Even today, for most Americas, a **buffalo** is that strange animal that roamed the plains and fed the Indians. The name, **bison** has just never caught on. "Bison Bill"? No! It just doesn't have the right ring to it.

Of course, translators must do this same thing. Yet, the translator is even more restricted. The explorer may learn from the natives their word for an unfamiliar plant or animal and use that word. This information is generally not available to the translator of an ancient record. The translator must either leave the name untranslated or use some familiar name that seems appropriate.

Looking at these specific animals named by Nephi, there has been found little evidence to suggest that the old world animals named were present on this continent prior to their introduction by the Europeans. At the same time, "little" does not mean *none*. In an interesting review of recent findings titled, "Once More, the Horse," FARMS discusses both the possible alternate meanings of horse and the current sprinkling of evidence which they say is "universally ignored" by the general scientific community.⁽⁸⁾

Dr. Nibley provides a very interesting insight:

Any naturalist would assume that the elephant has been extinct in western Asia for hundreds of thousands of years, for all the evidence the creature has left of itself: it is from written history alone that we receive the assurances that large herds of elephants roamed the temperate lands of Syria and the upper Euphrates as late as the XVIII Egyptian dynasty, when the Pharaohs hunted them there for sport, and that elephants were used by the war-lords of central Asia well into the Middle Ages. In late antiquity the wild variety disappear without trace, due perhaps to a change in world climate.⁽⁹⁾

Where there Others There?

When Lehi's party arrived in the land, did they find others there?⁽¹⁰⁾ John Sorenson cites population growth, cultural adaptation, and subtle hints given throughout the text as his evidence for a resounding answer of **yes!** Three summary paragraphs provide a suitable overview of his position:

It seems unavoidable that others were in the land, somewhere, when Nephi's boat landed on the shore of the "west sea," and quite certainly some of them were survivors

from the Jaredite peoples.⁽¹¹⁾

By the time of the passing of Nephi there were significant Nephite and Lamanite populations in the land. Even as early as forty years following their arrival in the land Nephi reported that there had been wars between his people and the Lamanites. How could there have been sufficient population just from the descendants of Lehi to justify this terminology? Further, the practice of plural marriage that so disturbed Jacob would mandate a surplus of women. That the descendants of five families (those who followed Nephi) should produce such a surplus in sixty to seventy years seems unlikely.

Have you noticed in your study of the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites and Nephites appear to be totally different cultures. While the Nephites continue many of the Hebrew traditions and practices, the descriptions of the Lamanites give no hint of Hebrew background. In a very short time they developed a totally new, or at least different, life style. To me, it seems probable that Laman and Lemuel, together with the sons of Ishmael, joined with a people who they found inhabiting the land upon their arrival. While Lehi's descendants adopted the life style of this established population, Laman and Lemuel, together with their descendants became leaders of this new society which Nephi and his descendants identify by the name of Nephi's eldest brother.

Dr. Sorenson points out that a careful reading of the text does not support the general view that "Nephite" and "Lamanite" refer to lineage. Rather, these are political designations. Jacob makes this very plain in Jacob 1:14. He there says that "Lamanites" is a name he is giving to all who seek to destroy the Nephite. He further states that all who are friendly to the Nephite king will be called "Nephites."

The Book of Jacob closes with a relevant story. We are told that after many years, "there came a man among the people of Nephi, whose name was Sherem." Where did Sherem come from? If there were only Nephites and Lamanites, Sherem could only *come among the Nephites* by coming from the Lamanites. However, our text gives no evidence of a Lamanite origin for Sherem. Sherem's argument with Jacob is not the Lamanite argument. Sherem is very well educated, with a "perfect knowledge of the language of the people;" yet, his education does not seem to be that of either Nephite or Lamanite. Further, he appears to be a stranger to Jacob. Sherem had heard of Jacob and had "sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you." Sherem is not family. The story gives no hint that Jacob recognizes Sherem as the descendent of one of his brothers.

Population, cultural differences, and the story of Sherem all suggest that there must have been others. Dr. Sorenson states an even stronger case for the evidence from linguistics. Both the internal and external evidence is relevant and consistent. For example, the Book of Mormon tells us about the Mulekites found by Mosiah in Zarahemla. The record says that due to the corruption of the Mulekite language, the Nephites and Mulekites were unable to understand each other. Dr. Sorenson indicates that linguistic studies have shown that such language changes will only occur if there has been an infusion of another language into the culture. Further, the similarity between Nephite and Jaredite names is strong evidence for a close association between these peoples. A look at the language diversity in Mesoamerica at the time of Columbus again leads linguists to conclude that the cultural history is complex. Recent studies have demonstrated that about 200 languages were spoken in Mesoamerica alone at the time of the arrival of the Spanish. Dr. Sorenson concludes that this evidence "cannot accommodate the picture that the book of Mormon gives us of its peoples without supposing that 'others' were on the scene when Lehi's group came ashore."⁽¹²⁾

With careful reading, we can see that the Book of Mormon give rather explicit hints of other peoples. For example, Alma, praying about the dissenting Zoramites, says, "O Lord, their souls are precious, and *many of them are our brethren*" (Alma 31:35). In other verses, Lamanite, Mulekites, and even Jaredites, are referred to as *brethren*. Who, then, are these people that Alma alludes to who are apparently not Lamanite, Mulekite, or even Jaredite? Following several such examples, Dr. Sorenson concludes:

Hereafter, readers will not be justified in saying that the record fails to mention "other" but only that we readers have hitherto failed to observe what is said and implied about such people in the Book of Mormon.⁽¹³⁾

After all this evidence, Dr. Sorenson claims that the real clincher regarding an establish population in the promised land at the time of Lehi's arrival is the Nephite cultivation of corn as mentioned in Mosiah 7:22 and Mosiah 9:9, 14. Dr. Sorenson points out that corn is a domesticated crop — it does not grow wild. Lehi could only find corn in this new world if there was already a people here who were cultivating it.⁽¹⁴⁾

Conclusion

Where does all this leave us. Under the title, "Latest Discoveries," FARMS has published a warning, primarily authored by John Sorenson, to any who would be tempted to believe all that they read and hear about Book of Mormon archaeological finds and other supposed evidence. First he points out that any discovery *must* be followed by a press conference in which the most extravagant claims are trumpeted. I say *must!* Dr. Sorenson points out that money to support further research will only come if the significance and importance of the find is maximized. Second, he explains that anything the archaeology finds takes years to verify and interpret. He closes his discussion with this wise council:

This is an interesting time, when information about ancient American civilizations is expanding notably. If the latest finds prove genuine, we should learn all we can about them. Meanwhile, patience and restrained comment are called for.⁽¹⁵⁾

I expect that Dr. Sorenson would agree that this *patience and restraint* are equally applicable to the acceptance of those hypotheses which he has proposed. At the same time he is busy both provided new support for his views and putting his theories to work as a *window* through which we might better understand the culture of the Book of Mormon peoples. His most recent publication, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*, is exactly such a work. It is *not* a further argument for the truth of his hypothesis. It is rather the application of that hypothesis as a tool to increase our understanding of Book of Mormon lands and people. This is exactly the way a good hypothesis should be used. When used to take us as far as it can, we learn from its boundaries to requirements to be place upon the next hypothesis.

References:

1. *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, Davis Bitton, ed., FARMS, 1998.
2. While the work of Dr. Sorenson is the primary source for this study, I also drawn on a number of relevant FARMS papers, all of which are available in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*.
3. See Sorenson, *Nephite Culture and Society*, p. 54-7.
4. See *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, p. 55; and *Culture*, p. 56-7.
5. See *Reexploring*, p. 53; and *Culture*, p. 55.
6. See *Reexploring*, "Did Lehi Land in Chile?" pp. 57-60.
7. A friend recently showed me an advertisement for a Book of Mormon Lands tour which included the "now identified *City of Nephi*" as one of its destinations.
8. *Ibid*, p. 98.
9. *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol.5, Part.2, Ch.4, p.219-220
10. "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" This is the title of Dr. Sorenson's very fine article on this subject in *Culture*, pp. 65-100.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
15. *Reexploring*, p. 113.

