

20. Randy Bass, “The Scholarship of Teaching.” I am in the process of gathering better “benchmark” data in summer 2008 classes.

21. One puzzle remains: What does it mean when he says he “felt the Spirit” each time he heard a fallible narrative? To me, one sentence in the conclusion dangled loosely: “And all throughout my membership in the Church I have been taught to listen to the Spirit, and it will teach me the things that I should know.” How does that comment relate to the rest of his conclusion? Did truth distill on his soul because he chose to “see things through to the end,” or was that principle itself the key disclosure?

22. One reason Sweetwater is sensitive is due to Church leaders’ use of the Kimball account in public discourse. The most notable example is President Gordon B. Hinckley’s quotation of the Solomon Kimball account in a talk given in 1981, shortly after he became a counselor in the First Presidency. Almost none of my students were alive then, but the Church Educational System subsequently incorporated President Hinckley’s remarks into a film that reenacted the river crossing (1997). I suspect that many of my students have seen the short and stirring film, but relatively few mention it in writing. It does nonetheless seem to shape some of the most negative reactions to Orton’s article.

23. Quentin L. Cook, in Conference Report, April 2008, 47–48.

24. Student paper, summer 2008 (male).

Cumorah and the Limited Mesoamerican Theory

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From the time the Book of Mormon was published, its readers have wondered about its geographical setting. Following is a lively debate between two thoughtful scholars. To motivate study of this topic, the Religious Educator offers their different viewpoints.

In recent years, many scholars interested in Book of Mormon geography have argued that the events of the Book of Mormon played themselves out in a Mesoamerican setting. Repudiating earlier and widespread assumptions that the “narrow neck of land” that figures so prominently in the book’s geography was the Isthmus of Panama and that the Nephites’ and Lamanites’ history ranged over the whole of North and South America, many now think that a restricted geography around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec provides the best setting for the book’s events in light of such considerations as recent archeological discoveries and the distances and geographical features mentioned and implied in the book itself.¹ Others have suggested limited sites centered in the eastern United States, specifically near the Susquehanna River and around the Great Lakes;² these proposals, however, have been convincingly discounted on the grounds that they fail to account for some of the more salient geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon like the narrow neck of land and a prominent northward-flowing river, and for the lack of an archaeological record temporally and materially consistent with evidence from the book.³

In this paper, I examine two important pillars of the “Limited Mesoamerican” thesis: first, that the geographical descriptions provided in the text itself require that the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place relatively close to both peoples’ centers of civilization near the narrow neck of land; and second, that the hill where Joseph Smith found the gold plates does not match the Book of Mormon’s descriptions of the hill where the final battles took place.⁴ I argue that both ideas, in spite of how widely they have been accepted, are based more on assumptions about the text than a close reading of it and that the text does not require either—indeed, there is much in the text that suggests that the distance between the narrow neck of land and the site of the final battles was quite large. Stated differently, the idea that the final battles took place far from the center of most of the other activities discussed in the book is consistent with all the logical requirements of the text, and the hill in upstate New York—or one like it—meets every real requirement the text places on the Book of Mormon’s hill.

Through all of this, I am not arguing that the New York hill is necessarily the same hill mentioned in the Book of Mormon or that the final battles were necessarily fought a great distance from the book’s other events. Also, I am looking only at the requirements of the text and not at other considerations that would need to be taken into account to develop a full model of Book of Mormon geography. The point is simply that there is nothing in the text requiring the final battles of the Nephites and Jaredites to have taken place within a few hundred miles of the land of Zarahemla or the narrow neck of land and near a hill of a vastly different nature than New York’s Hill Cumorah. The paper concludes with implications these observations hold for future research into the question of Book of Mormon geography and some suggestions for how that research might proceed.

A Limited Geography?

As John L. Sorenson and Sidney B. Sperry articulate it, the argument that the Hill Cumorah/Ramah must be located relatively close to Zarahemla is based on several pieces of textual evidence. One of the most important was provided by the small group of men Limhi sent from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla to enlist the Nephites’ aid against the Lamanites, who were holding the people of Limhi in bondage. Not sure of where they were going, Limhi’s men found what Sorenson identifies as the “final battleground of the earlier people, the Jaredites”⁵—in Limhi’s words, “a land which was covered with bones

of men, and of beasts, and was also covered with ruins of buildings of every kind” (Mosiah 8:8). Supposing this to be the remains of Zarahemla and her Nephite population, Limhi’s men returned to the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 21:26), demonstrating that the final battle of the Jaredites had taken place close enough to Zarahemla for travelers from Nephi to confuse the two sites.⁶

Another important part of this thesis is that the final battles of the Jaredites took place over a relatively limited area. This is demonstrated by the prophet Ether, who “fled for his life from the king’s headquarters in Moron, ‘hid himself in the cavity of a rock by day, and by night went forth viewing the things which should come upon the people.’ (Ether 13:13)”⁷ While in hiding, Ether “made the remainder” of the record he had apparently begun earlier and watched the progress of the Jaredite war.

“After eight years of intermittent combat,” Sorenson writes, “battles were still going on in the land of Moron, still within Ether’s viewing range. And he was still in his cave after a population of more than two million, which had covered ‘all the face of the land,’ had been killed (Ether 14:11, 22–23; 15:2). Finally, after the cataclysmic battle near the Hill Ramah, the Lord sent Ether from his cave to make the last entry in his record and deposit it where Limhi’s exploring party would find it.”⁸

For Ether to “observe most of the action while moving about only short distances from his cave base,” the final battles must have taken place within a relatively small area near Moron, which, according to Moroni, lay “near the land which is called Desolation by the Nephites” (Ether 7:6). Putting it all together, Sorenson suggests that “a hundred miles from Moron to the hill Ramah would probably accommodate all these facts.”⁹

As odd as it may sound initially, the legitimacy of this thesis depends largely on Ether staying near his cave as he watched the Jaredites annihilate themselves. That the cave was in the neighborhood of Moron and that Moron was near the land of Desolation are well-established facts (see Ether 13:13; 7:6). So, too, is Desolation’s proximity to Zarahemla, as demonstrated through the story of Limhi’s men confusing the two. If Ether watched everything unravel in the general area around the cave, including the final battle, then Ramah/Cumorah clearly lies relatively close to the Nephite lands mentioned so often throughout the narrative of the Book of Mormon. A careful reading of the text, however, shows that Ether’s cave actually drops out of the story long before the final battle is fought. Sorenson, in his sum-

mary of the events, includes the cave in his picture of the last battle and the death of Shiz, but the last we actually read of it in the narrative is in Ether 13:22, when Ether fled back to the cave after failing to convince Coriantumr to repent. This took place very early on, in Ether's second year of hiding. Ether later watched the armies of Shiz and Coriantumr gather together around the Hill Ramah and "went forth" to size things up after Coriantumr slew Shiz, but no mention is made of the cave in either case (see Ether 15:33, 13).

One might argue that Ether's location at the cave is implicit in the latter part of the story even though it is not made explicit in the text.¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that Moron itself, and other locations that figure prominently in the early years of the wars (valley of Gilgal, wilderness of Akish), also drop out of the latter part of the narrative.¹¹ The turning point comes during the reign of Lib, whose career clearly begins in the land of Moron (see Ether 14:10–11). Following Lib's pursuit of Coriantumr through the wilderness of Akish, however (see 14:14), Moron and other familiar sites entirely disappear from the story. In their place comes a succession of plains, lands, valleys, hills, and waters, only one of which, Ramah, appears earlier in the entire Jaredite narrative—and that appearance, significantly, was only when Omer "departed out of the land" in his flight from his son (9:3).¹² One is left with the strong impression that the "swift and speedy" war, in which the combatants "did march forth from the shedding of blood to the shedding of blood" (14:22), took them out of the traditional center of Jaredite lands and into a completely different area—an impression made even stronger by Moroni's statement that Coriantumr, when leaving the wilderness of Akish for the plains of Agosh and the beginning of this phase of the wars, "had taken all the people with him as he fled before Lib in that quarter of the land whither he fled" (14:15). Moron, it appears, was largely—if not completely—abandoned in the course of these wars, and at precisely the same point in the story when we lose sight of Ether's cave.¹³

All of this suggests the distinct possibility that what Limhi's men found in their search for Zarahemla was not the scene of the Jaredites' final battle, but the scene of a battle (or battles) that had been fought early on in the Jaredite wars, prior to the scene of action shifting from the land of Moron elsewhere.¹⁴ Moroni, abridging Ether's account, identifies no less than ten distinct battles between Coriantumr and his enemies that took place in or near the land of Moron (see Ether 13:16, 18, 23–24, 27–30; 14:3–4, 11–14). He also identifies two other periods of extensive warfare in the area—one a "war upon all the face

of the land" in which "every man with his band [was] fighting for that which he desired," and the other a two-year period in which "all the people upon the face of the land were shedding blood" (13:25, 31). All of these took place within a limited area in and around Moron, the sum total of which could easily account for the extensive destruction Limhi's men found.

The dead from these ten battles and two other wars were part of the slain "two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children" that Coriantumr would later count after the apparent shift in the scene of action from Moron to other regions (Ether 15:2). The remainder of the population died after this shift in theaters, in the "swift and speedy" war through cities, plains, and valleys that left "the bodies of both men, women, and children strewed upon the face of the land" (14:22), but before the final battle at Ramah. Given how many people had perished before Ramah appears in the narrative, one wonders how many people were actually left to fight in the final battle itself. In fact, some evidence in the text suggests the possibility that only a few thousand people ultimately closed ranks at Ramah. Moroni tells us that after five days of fighting, everyone had fallen except for fifty-two on Coriantumr's side and sixty-nine on Shiz's side (see Ether 15:15–23). After another day of fighting, Coriantumr's numbers were down to twenty-seven, while Shiz had thirty-two—about a 50 percent mortality rate on each side for that day's fighting (see 15:25).

While there is no way to determine the actual rate of mortality for the previous days' fighting, there is no reason to think the rate for the sixth's day's battle was exceptional in any way; one suspects, in fact, that those who had made it as far as Ramah were fairly evenly matched, and victories there were hard won. If the mortality rate per day was roughly the same during the first five days of fighting as it was for the sixth, then each side started off with somewhere between two and three thousand people. While significant, especially since their deaths represent the end of an entire civilization, five or six thousand people dying in a battle was hardly exceptional by Book of Mormon standards and does not represent the magnitude of destruction that greeted Limhi's men and gave the land of Desolation its name. The nature of the text doesn't allow us to draw any firm conclusions, but the numbers that we do have leave the door open for the idea that the Jaredites' final battle at Ramah was nothing compared to what had happened previously.

Unfortunately, Moroni provides no firm clues about how far Lib's and Shiz's pursuit of Coriantumr took the Jaredites. He mentions numerous topographical features and place-names,¹⁵ indicating that the

area was not terra incognita, and occasionally indicates the direction of Coriantumr's flight from one place to another (see Ether 14:26; 15:10), but in most cases direction and distance are open-ended.¹⁶ That Ramah was in a very different area from Moron is clear from his record, as was the existence of a seashore an undisclosed distance to the east of Moron, and Ogath's location some distance south of the waters of Ripliancum (see 14:26; 15:10).¹⁷ That the pursuit had a significant eastern trajectory, at least at one point, is clear (see 14:26); that it also had a northern trajectory is suggested by the fact that no mention is made of Limhi's men, coming from the south, finding any ruins south of the Desolation/Moron area.¹⁸ What other directions were involved over the course of the pursuit, and how many miles actually separated these and the others places mentioned in the account, are open questions, and it should be clear that Sorenson telescopes the events in his description and summary of them, flattening their complexity and the strong evidence suggesting that they actually took place somewhere other than near the land of Moron.¹⁹

Proponents for the limited Mesoamerican thesis find further evidence for "the close proximity of Ramah to Moron" in the account of the flight of Omer. Appearing early in Jaredite history when the Jaredite population must have been "tiny," Omer fled from an upstart son in Moron to the east sea, traveling "many days" with his family and passing Ramah/Cumorah en route to the sea. Omer later returned to Moron after the threat had passed. "If the area to which he fled, and thus of the last battle, was within a hundred miles or so of Moron, Omer's flight and return make sense," reasons Sorenson. "A much greater distance would seem strange, given the small population."²⁰ Taking a different tack, Sidney B. Sperry finds significance in Moroni's note that Omer "came over and passed by the hill of Shim" on his way to the "place where the Nephites were destroyed" and beyond (Ether 9:3).

The "hill Shim" . . . was the place in Middle America where the prophet Ammaron hid the Nephite records. . . . And when Moroni mentions in such a casual way that Omer passed from the Hill Shim "and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed," it is hard to believe that Cumorah was not in the same region as the Hill [Shim].

"This is especially so," argues Sperry, when we later see Omer's friend Nimrah and a small number of others join Omer in his exile (see Ether 9:9).²¹

On close examination, however, the whole affair begs enough questions to seriously compromise its utility as a "confirmation of the close proximity of Ramah to Moron."²² How far wouldn't a family and their friends run from an assassin? Why should a small population (if such really was the case) limit the distance people might flee to save their lives to one hundred miles? And why should it seem so unlikely that Omer would meet up with his friends from Moron many hundreds of miles away? Lehi and his family, for example, who were also fleeing assassins under the direction of the Lord (see Ether 9:3; 1 Nephi 2:1–2), ended up half a world away from their point of departure, where their descendants met up with the descendants of another group of people who had left from precisely the same place. In addition, and in spite of Sperry's confidence on the matter, Moroni's "casual" juxtaposition of the Hill Shim and the site of the Nephites' destruction does not necessarily imply that the two were close together. Moroni provides no information about how far apart the two were, and may have mentioned them by name simply because they were the only places on Omer's route with which readers of his father Mormon's record would be familiar.²³ It is not even clear, in fact, that the Hill Shim was located in "Middle America" as Sperry asserts. That it was north of the city Desolation is clear,²⁴ but how far north is an open question.²⁵ It was apparently unnamed when the prophet Ammaron hid the records there, and it was not a site with which Mormon, who evidently spent the first ten years of his life in the land northward, was familiar,²⁶ allowing for the distinct possibility that it lay somewhere beyond the centers of population in that direction. At best, Sorenson and Sperry are able to fit Omer's story into a limited geography, but the story itself hardly requires or confirms such a model.²⁷

Asserting that the "last cities and landmarks mentioned by Mormon" prior to Cumorah coming on the scene "are clearly in the land of Desolation in Middle America," Sperry argues that Mormon's account of the Nephites' destruction requires Cumorah to be in Mesoamerica as well. However, of the "last cities and landmarks" he mentions, only two—the cities Desolation and Teancum—were demonstrably in the land of Desolation near the narrow neck of land (see Mormon 3:5; 4:3). How far Boaz and the Hill Shim were from the city Desolation is impossible to say,²⁸ but it is clear from Mormon's summary of the flight from that area that by the time the Nephites reached the city Jordan and other cities, they were several "lands" (note the plural) from the area (see Mormon 5:5), let alone still within it or even immediately adjacent to it.²⁹ While the text does not allow us to be any more precise

regarding the locations of the sites mentioned just prior to Cumorah's debut on the scene, it does appear to allow room for the idea that the Nephites traveled a substantial distance on their way to Cumorah.

Other Evidence for a Limited Setting

Two other pieces of evidence might be invoked to support the idea that the Book of Mormon text requires a limited geography, although both break down upon close examination. The first is Limhi's description of the area where his men found the Jaredite record as "a land among many waters" (Mosiah 8:8), which sounds much like Mormon's description of the land of Cumorah as "a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains" (Mormon 6:4). There is no reason to conclude, however, that these lands of "many waters" are necessarily one and the same; indeed, the authors' use of the indefinite article before each phrase suggests that there are many such areas, as does a third reference in the text to such an area (see Helaman 3:4).

The second is the contention that since the "battle-worn" and "deeply wounded" Coriantumr could not have traveled far after Ramah, the site of the final battle must have been fairly close to where he was found by the people of Zarahemla.³⁰ This argument assumes, however, that Coriantumr was essentially crippled or incapacitated after the battle—an assumption not necessarily supported by the text. All we read is that he had lost a lot of blood and that he collapsed after decapitating Shiz (see Ether 15:27, 30, 32); nothing in the text indicates his wounds would have prevented him from traveling after he had time to heal and regain his strength. He had been severely wounded at least once before Ramah and had recovered enough to fight—and win—again (see Ether 13:31, 14:3), and, because he was arguably the best of the "large and mighty men as to the strength of men" (15:26) among the Jaredites, there is a real chance that he could have recovered sufficiently from his wounds at Ramah to travel long distances. Even his death nine months after being found by the people of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:21; Ether 13:21) says nothing about his health following Ramah, as the text provides no information about how long after the battle he was found. He may have died of old age or other causes rather than his wounds.

Some might argue against the plausibility of even a healthy Coriantumr and Ether traveling any substantial distance following the final battle—the former to be found by the people of Zarahemla, and the latter to deposit his record of Jaredite history "in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them" (Ether 15:33). Omer, too, would have

made a similar trip after the Jaredites almost destroyed themselves following his flight out of the land (see 9:3–13). As difficult as such a trek might be for individuals or small numbers to make, it is hardly out of the question—indeed, Sorenson makes a good case for the plausibility of Moroni making the same trip, albeit in the opposite direction, in his discussion of the limited Mesoamerican theory.³¹ While Moroni presumably would have traveled under the prompting of the Spirit, the journey of Coriantumr, Ether, and Omer can be explained in terms as simple and understandable as individuals who have been displaced by warfare wanting to return home—not only a natural impulse, but a very powerful one as well, and fully sufficient to account for people making such a trek.

At the very least, then, the evidence discussed above should make it clear that the text does not require that the site of the Jaredites' and Nephites' ultimate destruction be within a hundred miles or so of the narrow neck of land. In some places, in fact, the text appears to suggest a very different scenario—that is, that the battles took place far from the centers of their civilizations, in some sort of northern backcountry with which the Jaredites and Nephites were familiar, but that, with a few exceptions, generally lay outside the scope of their records. Other events and descriptions from elsewhere in the Book of Mormon similarly hint at a far-flung Nephite hinterland to the north of their center of civilization as well. Mormon, for example, writes that "an exceedingly great many" people departed out of Zarahemla in the last half of the first century BC and traveled north "to an exceedingly great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers" (Helaman 3:4). Sorenson, advocating a limited geography for the Book of Mormon, suggests that this was the Valley of Mexico, a lake region some 450 miles northwest of his proposed site for Zarahemla and "near the extremity of the Mesoamerican culture at the time of our record."³² At the same time, however, Mormon reports that it "was only the distance of a day and half's journey for a Nephite" to cross the narrow neck of land (Alma 22:32), some 75–125 miles, by Sorenson's estimate, which fits well with the 120-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec.³³ Such being the case,³⁴ why would Mormon identify 450 miles as "an exceedingly great distance" when a 120 miles was "only . . . a day and a half's journey"?

The difference in wording might partly be a result of who, precisely, was doing the traveling: Mormon might have considered 450 miles to be an "exceedingly great" distance for settlers to travel, while a fast individual—perhaps an athlete in a race—could cover 120 miles

in only a day and a half. Without more information, however, it is just as possible that the difference in wording reflects Mormon's perception of the actual distances involved, regardless of who was traversing them. If such is the case, one traveling to the Valley of Mexico would be on the road perhaps six days to the other's day and a half; would Mormon really consider an extra four or five days' travel sufficient grounds for replacing the adverb "only" with "exceedingly great"? The text is too vague to permit any firm conclusions (hence Sorenson's very rough estimate of the distance), but it at least opens the door to the distinct possibility that Nephites at this point in their history were traveling and settling much farther than 450 miles from the city of Zarahemla.³⁵

Similarly suggestive of an extensive Nephite backcountry is the prophet Nephi's six-year mission in the "land northward" some twenty years after people began traveling to "exceedingly great" distances in that direction (Helaman 6:6; 7:1). Mormon passes over the details of this mission; all we know is that Nephi "had been forth among the people who were in the land northward, and did preach the word of God unto them," and that "they did reject all his words, insomuch that he could not stay among them" (Helaman 7:2–3). Nephi may have spent the six years in a relatively limited geographical area, much like the sons of Mosiah seventy years earlier had spent fourteen years among the Lamanites in and around the land of Nephi (see Alma 17–26). But the sons of Mosiah were establishing and building up churches a good part of the time—a happy circumstance conducive to keeping missionaries in one place that Nephi didn't enjoy. The report is far too vague to support any firm conclusions, but we should be open to the possibility that a six-year mission among unreceptive, even hostile, people would have taken Nephi farther afield than a few days' journey from the land southward.

Yet another indication that a substantial distance may have lain between the narrow neck of land and the site of the final battles is the fact that it required four years for both the Jaredites and the Nephites to gather all their supporters (perhaps including foreign allies) in the area to Ramah/Cumorah (see Ether 15:14; Mormon 5:6–7; 6:5). The issue for both peoples was a pressing one, and one can only wonder why it would have taken so long if everything was happening in a limited area of only a few hundred miles in extent—especially if, in the case of the Nephites, that limited area had been a war zone for over thirty years leading up to the final battle.³⁶ Sorenson offers some reasons explaining why the Lamanites might allow the Nephites four years to gather their forces, but he doesn't address the equally important ques-

tion of why the Nephites needed that much time in the first place.³⁷ Yet again we lack the details, but the evidence we do have does not preclude the idea (and may even suggest the idea) that a much larger territory was involved at this point in the stories than allowed by the limited Mesoamerican theory.

The Hill Cumorah and Its Environs

It should be clear from the above discussion that there is nothing in the Book of Mormon that is at odds with the idea that the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place in some hinterland far to the north of these groups' centers of civilization. In fact, there is much in the book that may suggest and support such an idea. What about the textual requirements for the hill near which these battles were fought? Several scholars, following the lead of David Palmer, recently have argued that the Book of Mormon accounts of the final battles—especially the battle between the Nephites and Lamanites—require a much different hill than the hill near Palmyra, New York.³⁸ One of the biggest problems they have identified is the New York hill's size. Palmer argues that the hill described in the Book of Mormon "must have been a significant landmark, because the surrounding area was named after it" and that it had to be large for Mormon to be able "to survey the entire scene of carnage from the top of the hill."³⁹ Neither logic nor the text, however, bears out either of these assertions. Nothing requires that the land of Cumorah be named after the Hill Cumorah, for example; quite possibly, the lines of influence went the other way. Even if the land had been named after the hill, the hill's significance need not be a function of its size; rather, it may lay in the significance of something that had happened there earlier. Nor should Mormon have had any difficulty surveying the scene from the top of a relatively small hill like the one in New York, from which the city of Rochester, some twenty miles away, is visible on a clear day.⁴⁰

Palmer also argues that the hill must have been quite large because "it is quite clear that the battle took place on that hill and the plain leading up to it."⁴¹ This is clearly an assumption on his part, however, as nothing in the text suggests that any part of the battle took place on the actual hill. The Nephites pitched their tents around it, and Mormon climbed it after the battle, but there is no evidence that any fighting took place on it (see Mormon 6:4, 11). A hill need not even be particularly large for a large number of people to fight around or near it.⁴² Hundreds of thousands could fight around or in the vicinity of a fence post if they were so inclined; the limiting factor is not the

central object's circumference, but its proximity to geographical features (oceans, lakes, cliffs, etc.) that prevent the requisite number of combatants from fitting within the designated area. No such limiting feature exists anywhere in the vicinity of the New York hill.

Similarly, Sorenson argues that the hill must have been "high enough that the wounded survivors would be safe on top from being spotted by the Lamanites below."⁴³ Again, however, the text hardly requires such an interpretation. Mormon writes that he and his fellows viewed the destruction after "the Lamanites had returned unto their camps" but gives no information about where those camps were located (Mormon 6:11). They may have been out of sight several miles away, with Mormon and his companions not dependent on the hill's height for their safety. Rather than suggesting that the hill was quite large, in fact, the story might just as validly imply that the hill was fairly small—so small that Mormon had to wait for the Lamanites to withdraw from view before he dared climb it. The text simply does not give us enough information to know one way or the other on this score, and it should be clear from the foregoing that, here as elsewhere, the Book of Mormon makes no absolute requirements of its Hill Cumorah that the hill in New York is unable to meet.

Some have suggested that the climate, topography, and physical features of a hill like the one in upstate New York do not match Book of Mormon descriptions for the site of the last battles. Both Sorenson and Palmer, for example, have argued on the basis of Omer's flight past "the place where the Nephites were destroyed, and from thence eastward, . . . to a place which was called Ablom, by the seashore" (Ether 9:3), that Ramah/Cumorah was near an eastern sea.⁴⁴ Where no distance between Ramah/Cumorah and the seas is specified, however, such a conclusion is unjustified—a thousand miles could lie between the hill and the eastern sea as easily as ten. Similarly, Palmer argues that the text requires a volcano in the area, although it is clear that he is conflating Cumorah and the Nephite heartland in this case.⁴⁵ Palmer also argues that the absence of any mention of cold or snow "is strong evidence that no part of the Nephite history took place as far north as New York."⁴⁶ Again, however, such a conclusion is unjustified; by this logic, the final battles were evidently accompanied by no weather at all, as no climatological phenomena are mentioned in the text at this point in the story. Nor was Mormon necessarily referring to "water springing from under the earth" when he noted the presence of "fountains" in the land of Cumorah, the lack of which, according to Palmer, is further evidence that Palmyra's hill is not the hill of the Book of Mormon.⁴⁷

"Fountain" is used earlier in the Book of Mormon to designate at least two phenomena other than water springing from the earth—the Red Sea in one case, and a river in the other (see 1 Nephi 2:9, 12:16). Home to several large bodies of water and rivers, upstate New York fits the bill very well.

A more substantial criticism of a setting for the final battles far to the north of the narrow neck of land is the contention that the hill had to be located in an agriculturally productive area to sustain the numbers of people massing there prior to the final battle between the Nephites and Lamanites.⁴⁸ Although upstate New York is fertile and productive today, for example, maize was not cultivated there until after Book of Mormon times—a simple fact that, for some, calls into serious question the region's ability to produce the food necessary to sustain the armies.⁴⁹ Again, however, such a concern is based more on assumption than the actual text, which gives little concrete information about how the Nephites actually gathered to Cumorah. We have no idea how long large numbers of people were living in the area. We know from Mormon's chronology that the Nephites took flight from the city of Jordan and other cities in about the three hundred and eightieth year (Mormon 5:3–7), that sometime later Mormon requested that the Lamanite king allow them to gather to Cumorah (6:2), and that by the end of three hundred and eighty four years all the Nephites had made it there (6:5). The text implies that the gathering was a process and that some were there longer than others, but there is no reason to think that hundreds of thousands of people were living there for four years—just the opposite, in fact. Nor does the text require that the armies were growing their food on the spot. Quite possibly they were not; earlier periods of warfare saw armies on both sides receiving provisions from somewhere other than the fields of battle (see Alma 56:27–30; 57:6, 8, 10–11, 15; 58:4–5, 8), and at one point early in the first century AD the Nephites had gathered enough provisions to maintain "thousands and . . . tens of thousands" of people a full seven years (3 Nephi 3:22, 4:4)—several years longer than Mormon's armies were gathering to Cumorah. Like Helaman's ten-thousand-man army earlier, each of Mormon's twenty-three armies of ten thousand might have come to Cumorah prepared with enough supplies "for them, and also for their wives and their children" (Alma 56:28) to last as long as necessary, rendering the agricultural productivity of the site of the final battles in the fourth century AD a moot point. In the absence of any textual evidence suggesting that the armies grew their own food at the site of the final battle, and in the presence of textual evidence

indicating that the Nephites were capable of storing and transporting tremendous amounts of supplies, one must take seriously the proposition that the battle at Cumorah may have been fueled largely from somewhere outside.

Another criticism with textual roots leveled against the possibility of New York's Hill Cumorah being the site of the final battles is that the hill, and the area immediately around it, "lacks the expected archaeological record"—that is, the "fortifications, habitations, weapons, or skeletons" we should expect to find at such a site.⁵⁰ The text, however, gives no evidence that either the Jaredites or Nephites constructed any buildings or fortifications in the area; the most we read about during the four years in which the Nephites were gathering to Cumorah are the "tents" Mormon's people pitched at some undisclosed distance "round about" the hill (Mormon 6:4).⁵¹ Nor does the text provide any information on the final disposition of the dead, their (supposed) armor, and their weapons on the battleground. Bodies might ultimately have been buried, burned, removed, or left to rot, and armor and weapons, based on the information we have in the text, could have been hauled off by the Lamanites or others as easily as they might have been left on the ground.

With the Lamanites continuing to war among themselves after destroying the Nephites (see Mormon 8:8), this last point is an important one; armor and weapons would have continued to be in high demand among the Lamanites, calling into serious question the proposition that such valuable items would have been left on the field following the final battle. Without more textual information about how and where the opposing armies made their weapons, and what materials were used, even the reported absence of arrowheads and flint chips in the area cannot be considered "evidence" that battles were not fought in the area.⁵² If we use the text as our guide, in short, scholars need to be open to the possibility of finding all sorts of different scenarios at the scene of the final battles, including the very real possibility that there might not be much there at all.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

I have argued that there is nothing in the Book of Mormon text that requires the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites to have taken place in the general proximity of these peoples' center of civilization near a narrow neck of land. Many things in the text, in fact, suggest just the opposite. I have also argued that there is nothing in the text that would render a hill like New York's Hill Cumorah unfit as

a candidate for the Book of Mormon's Hill Cumorah. Again, though, I have not argued that the New York hill is necessarily the same hill mentioned in the Book of Mormon or that the final battles were necessarily fought a great distance from the book's other events.

It should be clear from the above, however, that we may need to look for Cumorah farther to the north, in some sort of Jaredite and Nephite backcountry, than many have thought necessary in recent years. In doing so, it is of paramount importance that scholars continue to keep the requirements and ambiguities of the text firmly in mind as they formulate their hypotheses for what they should expect to find. What sort of archaeological evidence, for example, should we expect to find for Book of Mormon peoples living outside the centers of their civilizations? The answer quite possibly could be "not much." One gets the strong impression from the text that much of the region lying between the centers of civilization and Ramah/Cumorah, although known to the Jaredites and Nephites, was sparsely settled, at least when compared to the areas the narrative primarily deals with. Cities quickly give way to plains and valleys in Lib's and Shiz's pursuit of Coriantumr to Ramah (see Ether 14:17–15:11), while "towns and villages" come into the picture during the Nephites' race for Cumorah (Mormon 4:22; 5:5). No settlement of any size is identified near Cumorah itself, suggesting that even the villages thinned out along the way. Archaeological remains and Nephites and Jaredites in this area, therefore, could be few and far between, and on a far humbler scale than one should expect to find at the cultural centers. Along with being open to the possibility of finding all sorts of scenarios at the scene of the final battles, as discussed above, scholars should also be open to the idea that Book of Mormon peoples in far-flung areas may have adapted their clothing, implements, and building practices to the climate and resources in the new area, and that much of what they find may therefore be of a very different character than remains found closer to the centers.

How far from the Jaredite and Nephite centers should we look for Ramah/Cumorah? It should be clear from this paper that as far as distances and directions go, many places in northern Central America and North America might be considered potential candidates. While I have not argued for it exclusively, it should also be clear that a site in upstate New York should at least be considered a possibility and may not be as far-fetched as some might imagine. By means of coastal plains and the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys, a natural, well-defined path of sorts exists between Central America and upstate New York. Although the 2,300 miles of coastal plains and river valleys that lie between Central

America and Manchester, New York, might seem impossibly far, the use of such an extensive territory by a single people is not without parallel in the pre-Columbian New World—the Inca Empire of South America, for example, extended almost twice that distance, and over much more difficult terrain. Old World examples of peoples covering such extensive territories for settlement, trade, and warfare abound,⁵³ as do examples from American history like John Fremont’s escapades in California or the Mormon Battalion. Lehi’s group itself appears to have traveled at least 2,100 miles from Jerusalem to Bountiful, with Nephi and his brothers traveling an additional 1,000 miles in the course of their two trips back to Jerusalem from Lehi’s encampment in the valley of Lemuel.⁵⁴

If the apparent Jaredite and Nephite backcountry somehow utilized these river valleys and their tributaries—perhaps as sites for scattered settlements, or communication or trade routes with other peoples—upstate New York would come into the picture very naturally during the extremities of genocidal warfare, as opposing sides coursed the length of their “interaction sphere” looking for recruits. The use of such a natural path leading away from the centers of civilization also explains how two different peoples at two different times in history ended up at precisely the same place for their final battles—a difficult thing even for a limited model to account for, frankly. As a possible source of men and supplies relatively close to the site of the final battle, this hinterland might also explain how 230,000 Nephite warriors, plus their wives and children, really could end up over 2,000 miles away from the narrow neck of land and the scene of most Book of Mormon events.⁵⁵

However plausible one may or may not consider the idea of a New York Cumorah to be, it should be noted here that two distinct cultures did flourish in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys during Jaredite and Nephite times. Remains of the earlier of the two, the Adena, date from around 500 BC to AD 100; remains of the latter, the Hopewell, date from around 100 BC to AD 400.⁵⁶ While neither culture appears to have attained to the level of urbanization we read about in much of the Book of Mormon,⁵⁷ a Hopewellian effigy pipe carved in the shape of a toucan taking food from a hand and a caiman-shaped copper cutout from Pike County, Illinois, indicate contact of some sort between these people and Central American peoples during Book of Mormon times.⁵⁸

Could these cultures represent a distant, relatively sparsely settled Jaredite and Nephite backcountry or hinterland that developed over the course of these peoples’ histories (for examples, see Alma 63:4, 9; Helaman 3:3–8), or could they reflect the presence or influence of

Book of Mormon peoples or traders in the area? Less dramatically, might these areas simply have been within the purview of Jaredites and Nephites? The dates of the remains, their location in a natural corridor extending north from Central America, and the physical evidence for contact with that area are certainly suggestive of such possibilities. So, too, is the nature of their artifacts and remains, which include both barley and maize (compare Mosiah 9:9), strings of pearls (compare 4 Nephi 1:24), and numerous copper headplates and breastplates (compare Mosiah 8:10; Alma 43:38; Helaman 1:14; 3 Nephi 4:7; Ether 15:15).⁵⁹ The orientation and dimensions of many Hopewell mounds and earthworks also indicate an advanced understanding of astronomy and mathematics.⁶⁰ Suggestive, too, at least for those willing to take seriously the possibility that the final battles were fought in upstate New York, is the fact that the northeasternmost sites for both cultures are located near Lake Ontario.⁶¹ With a text that allows for “towns and villages” lying some distance north of the great urban centers near the narrow neck of land, the remains of these two cultures beg the attention of those Book of Mormon scholars who have traditionally confined their research to Central America.⁶²

Just as early Spanish descriptions of Central American peoples and ruins have shed light on a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon,⁶³ so might the records of early explorers, missionaries, and settlers in North America shed some light on a possible Jaredite and Nephite backcountry in the north. Such sources and resources have received very little attention in the past from trained scholars, some of whom have quickly dismissed them as “very old gossip and folklore,” “old hearsay,” or a “credulous mishmash of opinions.”⁶⁴ This charge, to a degree, is true; one reading these sources quickly finds himself buried in suppositions about Persians, Tartars, antediluvians, and other explanations growing out of the sources on ancient peoples available to nineteenth-century Americans. At the same time, many of the sites and artifacts are still around today and have subsequently been classified as representative of the Adena and Hopewell cultures mentioned above.⁶⁵ While we might be inclined to disagree with early Americans’ interpretations of what they saw, their descriptions of the ruins, artifacts, native vocabularies, native practices, and native traditions that they found so suggestive of biblical and classical civilizations constitute an important source for understanding pre-Columbian America.⁶⁶ At the very least, such sources deserve the careful scrutiny of Book of Mormon scholars trained in archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, history, linguistics,

and comparative religion before they are rejected as irrelevant to Book of Mormon studies.⁶⁷

Some of these sources even have the potential to help us solve long-standing difficulties the Book of Mormon presents. As just one example, Josiah Priest, in his popular *American Antiquities*, describes a cave on the Ohio river in which pictures of three animals “like the elephant in all respects except the tusk and tail” are found, along with representations of human figures whose clothing “resembles the Roman.”⁶⁸ Given the problem the elephants of the Jaredites have presented to defenders of the Book of Mormon over the years, we should ask, where did Priest get his information? Are there other contemporary descriptions of this cave and its pictures? If there really was such a cave with pictures, where is it located? Are the pictures still visible? Are there, or were there, datable remains in the cave or in the immediate area? Priest’s book and many other early publications and records like it contain all sorts of tantalizing hints like this,⁶⁹ and while the possibility is very real that many of these reports are more legend, imagination, and even fraud than anything, it would be inexcusable for students of the Book of Mormon to brush them aside as such without further scrutiny.

These are just a few of the research ideas that suggest themselves when one is willing to consider the possibility that Cumorah lay north of Mesoamerica. Some are probably more viable than others, and all are open to debate. The point, though, is that rather than leading to a dead end, a reconsideration of the geographical requirements of the Book of Mormon appears to open up several avenues for potential research into a variety of Book of Mormon topics, and not just geography. Where these avenues might lead remains to be seen; at this point, the fact that such opportunities exist in this direction should be considered significant. Insofar as they appear to be viable in terms of the requirements of the text, it seems clear that they are worth pursuing as part of our larger effort to identify and better understand the peoples, setting, and meaning of this remarkable book. **RE**

Notes

1. The theory has found its best expression in John Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996); and David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidence for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981). Other treatments include Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of*

Mormon (Orem, UT: S. A. Publishers, 1989); and F. Richard Hauck, *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).

2. Most notably, see Delbert W. Curtis, *Christ in North America* (Tigard, OR: Resource Communications, 1993); Duane R. Aston, *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived* (Sacramento: American River Publications, 1998); Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Tepran, 1999); and Phyllis Carol Olive, *The Lost Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Bonneville Books, 2000).

3. John E. Clark, “Evaluating the Case for a Limited Great Lakes Setting,” *FARMS Review* 14, no. 1 (2002): 9–77.

4. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 13–16, 44; Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 447–51; Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 38–45. According to Sorenson, these ideas had become clear to anyone “who had paid close attention” to scholarly developments in Book of Mormon geography by the 1960s (John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* [Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992], 28). For overviews of the development of ideas regarding Book of Mormon geography, including the development of the limited Mesoamerican theory, see Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, and Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 225–75.

5. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 14.

6. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 13–15.

7. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 15.

8. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 15.

9. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 15–16.

10. One might also argue that Ether’s location at the cave is suggested in Ether 13:14, which states that “as [Ether] dwelt in the cavity of a rock he made the remainder of this record, viewing the destructions which came upon the people, by night.” In 15:33, however, we read that he “finished his record” after he “went forth” following the death of Shiz. Taken together, these two verses imply that he worked extensively on the record while living in the cave, and perhaps brought it near to its completion, but that the idea expressed in 13:14 that he actually “finished” the record there is not to be taken completely literally. Nor does Moroni’s statement that Ether “finished his record” and then “hid them in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33) necessarily mean that he finished the record close to where Limhi’s men found them in the land of Desolation. Moroni tells us in the same verse that we are only getting the briefest glimpse of all that happened, leaving the door open to the very real possibility that Ether finished his record far from where he actually hid it.

11. At least two battles between Coriantumr and his early enemies were fought in the valley of Gilgal (see Ether 13:27, 30). The wilderness of Akish also appears twice before the rise of Shiz—once as a battlefield, and once as an area where Coriantumr took refuge from Lib (see Ether 14:4–5, 14). Neither appear in the narrative after Shiz came on the scene.

12. Lib’s and then Shiz’s pursuit of Coriantumr led through the plains of Agosh (see Ether 14:15), into the land and valley of Corihor (see 14:27–28), the valley of Shurr and upon the hill Comnor (see 14:28), to the waters of Ripliancum (see 15:8), to a place called Ogath (see 15:10), and to the hill Ramah (see

15:11). None of these occur earlier in the narrative. Incidentally, traditional lands eventually completely drop out of Mormon's account of the wars leading to the Nephites' final battle as well (see Mormon 4:19–5:8; 6:1–4).

13. Ether fled to his cave near Moron after unsuccessfully trying to convince Coriantumr to repent (see Ether 13:22). The next time Ether appears in the text, which is after Lib's and Shiz's pursuit of Coriantumr has commenced, the cave is not mentioned (15:13).

14. Sorenson identifies the area Limhi's men found "as the final battleground of the earlier people, the Jaredites," but nowhere does the Book of Mormon make that identification (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 14). The area becomes known as the land of Desolation, "the land which had been peopled and been destroyed" (Alma 22:30), but the Book of Mormon never identifies Desolation as the site of the last actual battle between Shiz and Coriantumr.

15. See note 12 above.

16. We have no solid clue indicating how far and in what direction the plains of Agosh might lie from the wilderness of Akish, for example, or how far and in what direction the waters of Ripliancum might lie from the land of Corihor (see Ether 14:14–15; 14:27–15:8).

17. Moron appears to have lain near a seashore (see Ether 14:11–12), but the text fails to provide any directions in this case. We cannot conclude, therefore, that this seashore is the same one mentioned in Ether 14:26, which clearly lay "eastward" of the plains of Agosh and perhaps Moron.

18. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon are Jaredite ruins mentioned south of Desolation.

19. Like Sorenson, Palmer disregards the ambiguity of the evidence when he argues that the Jaredites' final battle took place "in the presence of an established populace" and "right in the midst of the Jaredite settlements and cities" (Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 60–61). Hugh Nibley, on the other hand, notes the "wilderness" setting of the Jaredites' final battle, far from "the great monuments of Jaredite civilization" that "abound in the land of the south that they first settled" (Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrel L. Matthews, Stephen R. Callister [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 227–28). In an additional argument for a Mesoamerican setting for the final battles, Palmer interprets the fact that some Nephites, after Cumorah, sought refuge in "the south countries" (Mormon 6:15) to mean that Cumorah was near the narrow neck of land leading into the land southward (Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 44). Mormon's use of the phrase "south countries," however, rather than "land southward"—the phrase he usually employed in the course of his record to specify the traditional Nephite center—raises the strong possibility that he had something in mind other than an area south of the narrow neck. Later Moroni refers to the same area as the "country southward"—again, a different phrase than that traditionally used to designate the actual land southward (Mormon 8:2).

20. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 16.

21. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 449–50.

22. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 16.

23. Mormon mentions the hill Shim in Mormon 1:3 and 4:23, and the Nephites' final battle at Cumorah in chapter 6 of his book. The exact direction the site of the final battles lay from Moron is also unclear. By telling us that Omer,

after reaching "the place where the Nephites were destroyed," went "from thence eastward," Moroni appears to be telling us that in coming "over" from Moron to the hill Shim, and from the hill Shim to Ramah/Cumorah, Omer was traveling directions other than straight east (Ether 9:3).

24. Mormon took the records from the hill Shim following a Lamanite offensive out of the land southward, which was under Lamanite control at the time (see Mormon 4:19–23; 2:29).

25. The Nephites had fled an undisclosed distance from the narrow neck of land to the city Boaz, and from Boaz to another undisclosed distance through "towns and villages" before Mormon took the records from the hill (see Mormon 4:19–23). See below for a more detailed discussion of Mormon's and the Nephites' flight to Cumorah.

26. Ammaron tells Mormon that he will find the records in the "land Antum," at a hill "which *shall be* called Shim" (Mormon 1:3; emphasis added). Mormon went into the land southward when he was eleven years old, although it is unknown whether this was the first time he had been there (see Mormon 1:6).

27. Probably the most valid conclusion to be drawn from Omer's flight "out of the land" of Moron, in fact, is that Ramah was in a different land than Moron (Ether 9:3).

28. The Nephites fled an undisclosed distance from the city Desolation to the city Boaz, then another undisclosed distance from Boaz to the city Jordan and other cities. It was sometime during this latter move that Mormon took the records from the hill Shim (see Mormon 4:19–5:4).

29. Sperry appears to be identifying the land northward with the land of Desolation. While the Nephites may have done the same in the first century BC (see Alma 22:31), Mormon's reference to the "north countries" (Mormon 2:3) suggests a more complex situation by the middle of the fourth century AD. So, too, does his numerous references to various "lands" in his recital of events leading up to, and immediately after, the treaty with the Lamanites in which the Nephites were given the land northward for their inheritance (see 2:4–6, 16–17, 20, 27, 29; 3:5–6). Given that the treaty line was drawn at the narrow neck of land, at least some of these lands (especially those referenced in 2:27) must have been in the land northward.

30. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 448.

31. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 44–45.

32. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 37, 266–67.

33. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 16–17, 36.

34. Elsewhere I argue that there are good reasons for rejecting Sorenson's identification of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the Nephites' narrow neck of land; see Andrew H. Hedges, "The Narrow Neck of Land," *Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 151–60.

35. According to Sorenson's proposed map, similarly, the distance between Bountiful at the narrow neck of land and the "Distant Land of Waters" to the north is about the same as the distance between Bountiful and the land of Nephi to the south—that is, about three hundred miles (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 37). Yet nowhere does the Book of Mormon suggest that it was an "exceedingly great distance" from the land of Nephi to the narrow neck of land—in fact, the expedition undertaken by Limhi's men, discussed above, suggests just the opposite. If Sorenson's reconstruction of the distance between the land of Nephi and

the narrow neck of land is correct, three hundred miles, at least, does not appear to have been an exceptional distance by Nephite standards.

36. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 344.

37. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 348.

38. Clark considers Palmer's study of Cumorah "the most thorough analysis of the physical expectations for the hill Ramah/Cumorah" available (Clark, "Limited Great Lakes Setting," 29). Sorenson defers to Palmer's judgment on this topic as well (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 350).

39. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 45.

40. It may be a small point, but the text doesn't actually have Mormon surveying "the entire scene of carnage" from the top of the hill. Mormon "did behold" the 10,000 men he led, and he "beheld" the 10,000 Moroni led, but simply recorded that the other 210,000 "had fallen" or "did fall," without indicating whether he actually saw them at that time or not (Mormon 6:11–15).

41. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 45.

42. Sorenson argues this point (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 350).

43. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 350; compare 26–27.

44. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 45–46; Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 343–344.

45. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 38–41. Several authors have suggested that the earthquakes, severe storms, sinking cities, and three days of darkness attending the death of the Savior resulted from a nearby volcanic eruption. Never once, however, does Mormon mention Cumorah by name in his lengthy and detailed discussion of the areas affected by this destruction. Any conclusion that Cumorah suffered from these calamities is based on a reconstruction of the geography, not on a direct statement in the text.

46. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 41. Palmer again conflates Cumorah with the Nephite center here by citing the fevers mentioned in Alma 46:40 as further evidence for a "temperate, tropical or subtropical climate"—apparently without realizing that upstate New York is considered a temperate climate. As a further problem, Alma 46 deals with events and situations some 450 years prior to the final battle of the Nephites.

47. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 44.

48. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 44–45.

49. Clark, "Limited Great Lakes Setting," 29–30.

50. Clark, "Limited Great Lakes Setting," 29–30. See also John E. Clark, "Archaeology and Cumorah Questions," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, nos. 1–2 (2004), 144–51.

51. Mormon's description of how the Lamanites had "gone through and hewn down" his people and how they "passed by" him (Mormon 6:10–11) suggests an open field of battle at least as much, and perhaps more, than it suggests a battle taking place in the midst of various kinds of fortifications.

52. Langdon Smith, "Looking for Artifacts at New York's Hill Cumorah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005), 50–51. The absence of evidence for an event, of course, cannot be considered evidence for the absence of the event. This is especially true for questions involving the archaeology of New York's Hill Cumorah, where no professional archaeological studies, apparently, have been conducted (see Clark, "Archaeology and Cumorah Questions," 146). Langdon Smith's note on the absence of arrowheads and chipping sites is based on

conversations he had with various locals and two walks he took through plowed fields in the vicinity of the hill.

53. In his defense of the proposition that both Jaredites and Nephites could have traveled from Central America to upstate New York, Nibley provides several examples, from both the Old World and the New, of large numbers of people traveling thousands of miles in relatively little time, often against a backdrop of war. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 223–28, 451–54; and Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 426–30.

In addition to the peoples described by Nibley, one might add the Persian Empire and the territory conquered by Alexander the Great, both of which extended some 3,000 miles from Macedonia in southern Europe to the Indus River in India. (The 22,000 miles Alexander and his armies covered in the course of their campaigns, incidentally, demonstrates how much ground ancient armies were capable of covering.) Similarly, the later Roman Empire, much of which was conquered and maintained by armies operating over land, stretched some 2,500 miles from northern England to Upper Egypt, and from the Atlantic coast of Spain to upper Mesopotamia. For maps and descriptions of the above examples, see Chester G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 278, 396, 402, 658.

54. S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, John W. Welch, ed., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 79–80. Brown also references the historian Strabo, who relates an account of a 10,000-man Roman army that took six months to travel between 1,000 and 1,100 miles down the west side of Arabia in 25–24 BC. The army retraced its steps after disease broke out, taking a mere two months for the return trip (Brown, "New Light from Arabia," 80).

55. The suggestion that Mormon and his army may have followed a natural route from Mesoamerica to upstate New York does not require that every individual from both sides followed this same route as they gathered in to Cumorah over the course of the next four years. Individuals and groups living in along the coasts or river systems could have made their way to Cumorah along any number of routes, thereby avoiding their opponents. Depending on how strictly the Lamanites honored their king's promise not to attack the Nephites until they had gathered to Cumorah (see Mormon 6:2–3), such avoidance may not even have been necessary during the gathering process.

56. James H. O'Donnell III, *Ohio's First Peoples* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 14.

57. Clark, "Limited Great Lakes Setting," 62–63.

58. See E. G. Squire and E. H. Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1847), 265–66; and Robert L. Hall, "The Enigmatic Copper Cutout from Bedford Mound 8," in Douglas K. Charles and Jane E. Buikstra, ed., *Recreating Hopewell* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 464–74.

59. For overviews of these and other findings, see Henry Clyde Shetrone, *The Mound Builders* (D. Appleton, 1930); O'Donnell, *Ohio's First Peoples*, 18–22; Richard W. Jeffries, "Death Rituals at the Tunacunnhee Site," *Recreating Hopewell*, 161. For photographs and descriptions of Hopewell pearls, copper head plates, and copper breast plates, see Shetrone, *Mound Builders*, 108, 113, 119, 198–99, 201.

60. William F. Romain, *Mysteries of the Hopewell: Astronomers, Geometers, and Magicians of the Eastern Woodlands* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2000).

61. *Mound Builders & Cliff Dwellers* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1992), 11.

62. The suggestion that there may be some connection between the Adena and Hopewell cultures and the Book of Mormon is not new, but it has generally been made by those advocating some sort of a limited Great Lakes geography for Book of Mormon events. For recent examples, see Edwin G. Goble and Wayne N. May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2002); Wayne N. May, *This Land: Only One Cumorah!* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2004); Wayne N. May, *This Land: They Came from the East* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2005).

63. See, for example, Sorenson and Roper, “Before DNA,” 16.

64. Clark, “Limited Great Lakes Setting,” 15, 56; John L. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 489.

65. Archaeological sites at Marietta, Paint Creek, and Circleville, Ohio, for example, which figure prominently in these early accounts (for example, see Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West* [Albany, NY: Hoffman and White, 1835], 42–46, 169–75, 222), have been dated to Hopewell times and continue to be studied today.

66. Many have argued that the Book of Mormon, which recounts the course of civilizations in America derived from biblical peoples, merely reflects common early American theories regarding the ancient ruins so visible in the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Intent on refuting such ideas, Joseph Smith’s modern defenders have failed to see that the evidence behind these early theories might actually be invoked in support of the Book of Mormon’s claims to ancient origins and connections with ancient Near Eastern cultures.

67. The uncritical use of these sources in connection with dubious other “sources” (such as the fraudulent “Michigan Relics”) by various researchers advocating a limited Great Lakes geography for Book of Mormon events (see sources listed in note 60 above for recent examples) has no doubt contributed to scholars’ negative assessment of their worth.

68. Priest, *American Antiquities*, 146, 149.

69. These include evidence for mass burials, iron tools or weapons, armor, and horses, much of which was apparently found near sites that have subsequently been dated as either Adena or Hopewell (Priest, *American Antiquities*, 157, 183, 185, 191).

Plausibility, Probability, and the Cumorah Question

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Response to Andrew Hedges’s “Cumorah and the Limited Mesoamerican Theory.”

In his article on the Hill Cumorah, Andrew Hedges challenges two long-held assumptions of advocates of a limited Mesoamerican geography.¹ First, “that the geographical descriptions provided in the text itself require that the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place relatively close to both peoples’ centers of civilization near the narrow neck of land,” and second, “that the hill where Joseph Smith found the gold plates does not match the Book of Mormon’s descriptions of the hill where the final battles took place.” While granting that recent alternative models which limit Book of Mormon events to the Great Lakes or Susquehanna River regions “have been convincingly discounted,” the author suggests that the limited Mesoamerican view is also problematic and that the above two tenets rest “more on assumptions about the text than a close reading of it and that the text does not require either.”² Hedges’s admonition that we pay close attention to the text and that we more carefully distinguish between our own deductions and inferences and what the text actually says is a welcome one. While I disagree with much of what the author says in his paper, I am grateful for the opportunity to reexamine the Book of Mormon text and some of my own long-held ideas. It is my hope that the readers of the *Religious Educator* will likewise benefit from the exchange.