

DECODING ANCIENT AMERICA



A GUIDE TO THE
ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE
BOOK OF MORMON

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CHAPTER ONE



The location of the lands of the Book of Mormon



THE SCRIPTURES INDICATE that the lands of the Book of Mormon comprised three major areas: the land northward, the land southward, and the narrow neck of land. This could be North and South America, with Panama as the narrow neck of land, or it could be the smaller area of Mexico and Central America, with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the narrow neck of land. Many of the early Church leaders thought that the Book of Mormon took place in North and South America. However, there are many clues that the lands where the Book of Mormon people lived comprised a much smaller area, encompassing only parts of Mexico and Central America.

The more limited location described above is the opinion of most Latter-day Saint archaeologists, those dedicated people who piece together the puzzles of the past by going through the remains that ancient people left in their lands, their buildings, and their works of art. Mesoamerica is the land that archaeologists define as ancient Mexico and Central America.

The small box in Figure 1 shows the area known as Mesoamerica within the Americas. It is between Central Mexico and just before Costa Rica and Panama in South America. The countries of Central America that will be mentioned in this book are Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. The states in Mexico that are mentioned are Puebla, Morelos, Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas, and Yucatan.



Figure 1. Map of the Americas.

For clarification, we will use the word *Mexican* to refer to those ancient tribes that lived in the country we call Mexico. The name *Mexico* was derived from the Mexica tribe, one of seven Aztec tribal groups that lived in this area anciently. However, it is also important to realize that there were many other ancient tribes that lived within the Mexican proper, such as the Zapotec, Mixtec, Toltec, Huastec, Teotihuacano, and Mezcala, to name a few.

The Lord has never revealed where the Book of Mormon history took

place. However, Joseph Smith, the first LDS Church prophet and the editor of the Church's newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, stated that the city of Zarahemla, which burned at the time of the crucifixion of the Savior, was in Guatemala.¹

In Joseph Smith's day, Guatemala was larger than it is today, and we know from the scriptures that Zarahemla was in the land southward (see Mormon 1:6). That would mean that the land northward was roughly what is now Mexico, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec would have been the narrow neck of land (see Alma 63:5). This is just one of the clues that point to Mesoamerica as the lands of the Book of Mormon.

If we use Joseph Smith's basic model of Mesoamerica, we can visualize the general location of the lands mentioned in the Book of Mormon (see Fig. 2). Figure 3 shows the major cultures that lived in Mesoamerica. It is crucial to remember that the Book of Mormon contains only limited history and geography; its primary purpose is to be another testament of Jesus Christ, containing the gospel message of the prophets to their people and the teachings of our Savior.

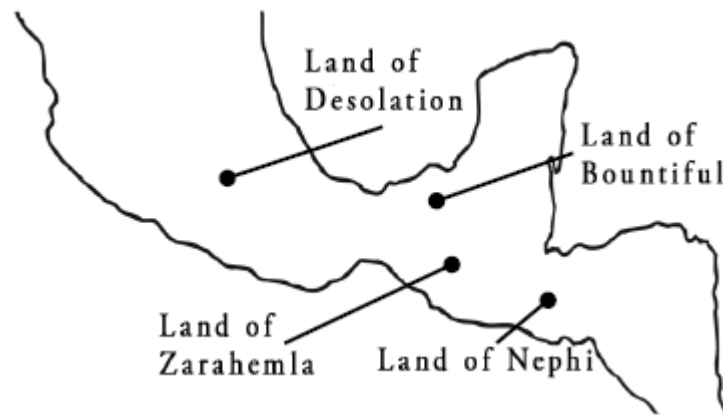


Figure 2. Proposed Book of Mormon lands in Mesoamerica.

Many scholars have attempted to pinpoint the exact location of Nephite cities within Mesoamerica. However, this may not be possible unless evidence is found at a site that can be identified as a city in the Book of Mormon. Actually, many Book of Mormon cities may have been discovered, but they are now called different names than they are labeled in the scriptures. Therefore, LDS archaeologists cannot be specific, because

the names of these cities have been changed since the time of the Book of Mormon.

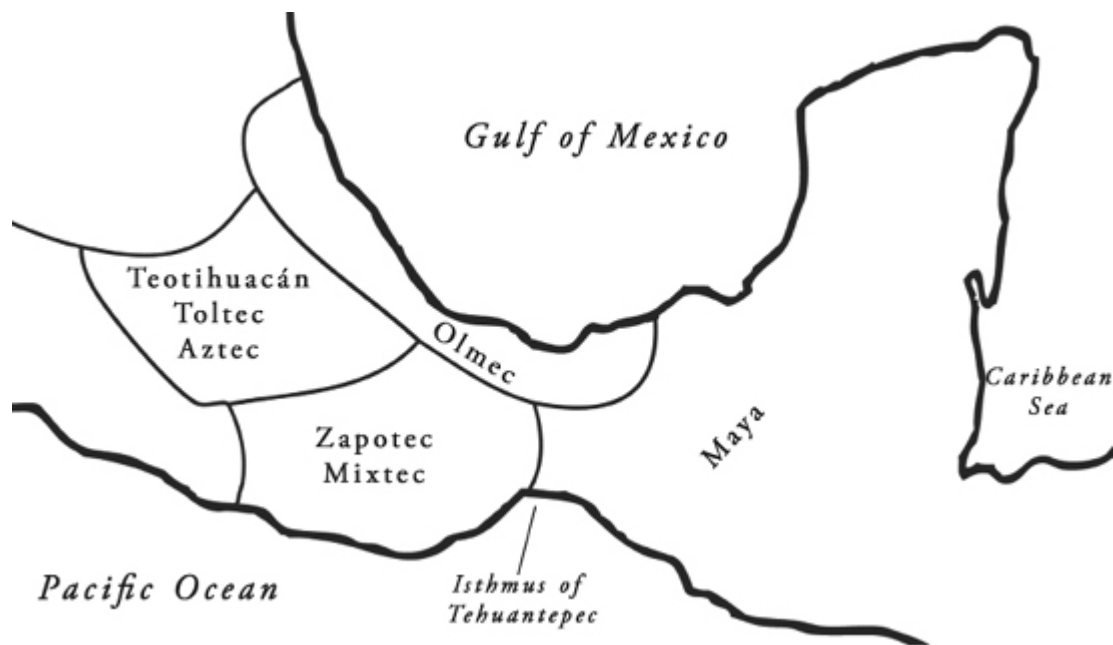


Figure 3. Cultures in Mesoamerica.

So how can we connect this area to the lands of the Book of Mormon? There are actually several similarities between the lands of the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica that point to Mesoamerica as the location of the Book of Mormon peoples. To name a few: buildings made with cement, roads that connect cities, walled cities with fortifications for protection, the prevalence of fevers during certain seasons of the year, and a number of advanced writing systems. All of the above are mentioned in the Book of Mormon and are obvious in Mesoamerica but are not predominant in North and South America.

Ancient North and South American people did not build with cement. Both North and South America had roads anciently but not to the extent that they existed in Mesoamerica; the same is true of fortifications. Fevers were not prevalent in North and South America due to the nature of the climates. South America had no ancient writing system during Book of Mormon times, and most writings found by nonprofessional archaeologists in North America have yet to be proven as authentic. Let us go through

these items and explain their significance in uniting the Book of Mormon lands with Mesoamerica.

CEMENT

And there being but little timber upon the face of the land, nevertheless the people who went forth became exceedingly expert in the working of cement; therefore they did build houses of cement, in the which they did dwell. (Helaman 3:7).

When the Nephites traveled to the lands northward, they built with cement as they had done in the land southward. Many of the buildings in Mesoamerica were covered with a type of stucco, which may be termed *cement*. In this way, they were able to mold designs as they wished. Murals were painted on stucco, and in fact, most building exteriors were brightly painted with red, blue, green, and yellow on a surface of stucco. The making of cement or stucco is a difficult process that takes skilled craftsmanship. Actually, it takes a great deal of limestone and an even greater amount of wood to create a few cups of stucco/cement. Today visitors will notice a scarcity of wood. Scholars agree that in parts of Mesoamerica the forests were largely destroyed by AD 100 due to the making of stucco. Since wood was scarce, the Nephites had timber shipped in from other locales (see Helaman 3:10).

ROADS

And there were many highways cast up, and many roads made, which led from city to city, and from land to land, and from place to place (3 Nephi 6:8).

Imagine great highways linking the cities of the Nephites and perhaps those of the Lamanites. Roads connected cities throughout Mesoamerica and were raised up from the ground with stone, oftentimes overlaid with cement. The Book of Mormon refers to roads being “cast up,” and that is exactly how they built their raised highways. Archaeologists call these roads causeways. These causeways connected one city to another, spreading out like the spokes of a wheel from a central city. This was done during Book of Mormon times.

WALLED CITIES AND FORTIFICATIONS

Thus Moroni did prepare strongholds against the coming of their enemies, round about every city in all the land. (Alma 50:6)

Becan, in the Mexican state of Campeche, is probably the most well known city for walls and fortification (see Fig. 4). Almost every pre-Classic site dating between 400 BC and AD 250, which is right in the heart of Book of Mormon times, is known to have a fortification surrounding it.² These fortifications were necessary due to warfare throughout the land, as recorded in the Book of Mormon.

A ditch, or moat, in front of a wall was often one way to make a fortification against enemies in Mesoamerica. Today many of the walls can no longer be seen because the stones were used by later cultures for their buildings. There is evidence of this.

It is amazing that thirty years ago, the Maya in the eastern parts of Mexico and Central America were considered to have been a peaceful culture, unlike the warring cultures described in the Book of Mormon. Today we know that, in reality, the Mesoamericans were almost constantly at war. The Aztecs sacrificed many hundreds of their captives, and the Maya thought killing the kings of their enemies made them more powerful.³ Building fortifications was necessary for survival.



Figure 4. Fortification at Becán, Campeche, Mexico. Becán began about 600 BC and declined by ad 1000.

TROPICAL CLIMATE

And there were some who died with fevers, which at some seasons of the year were very frequent in the land. (Alma 46:40)

The Book of Mormon lands in the eastern portion of Mesoamerica had a tropical, hot climate, and sickness from fevers was common. During one of their battles, Amalickiah and his men were overpowered with fatigue because of the heat of the day. Because of their fatigue, Teancum and his servant were able to put a javelin to the heart of Amalickiah, thus causing the death of this king (see Alma 51:33–34).

The Lamanites, in particular, often wore little clothing for battle (see Alma 43:20). Even though it may have been uncomfortable, the Nephites wore thick clothing for protection against their enemies (see Alma 43:19). After the end of the Nephite culture, many people of Mesoamerica adopted this padded-type clothing, which can now be seen in sculptures of warriors (see Fig. 5).

WRITING SYSTEMS

And now there are many records kept of the proceedings of this people, by many of this people, which are particular and very large, concerning them. (Helaman 3:13)

We know from Mormon 9:32 that the Book of Mormon was written in Reformed Egyptian, which consisted “of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2).

Various Mexican cultures and the Maya to the east made picture books known as *codices* (singular codex). Codices have accordion-like pages that run many feet in length. To us today they appear to have a cartoon quality, primarily because most people do not understand what they mean. To the natives these codices told stories that those who were familiar with the legends of their forefathers could understand. Archaeologists can comprehend a portion of them.



Figure 5. Maya Warrior with protective clothing, from Jaina, Yucatan, Mexico.⁴

The most well known writing system in Mesoamerica is Maya (see Fig. 6).⁵ Maya hieroglyphs differ from Egyptian hieroglyphs, but the individual

glyphs were pronounced in a similar way; in other words, they both used a phonetic system to pronounce syllables. There is also an earlier system of writing in Mesoamerica called Epi-Olmec, which scholars are working on now. In either case, the hieroglyphs in Mesoamerica are not like the Book of Mormon script. We have a sample, known as the Anthon Transcript, that was copied from one of the golden plates. The Anthon Transcript shows us that Reformed Egyptian, the system used by Nephite writers, is very different from Maya hieroglyphs.

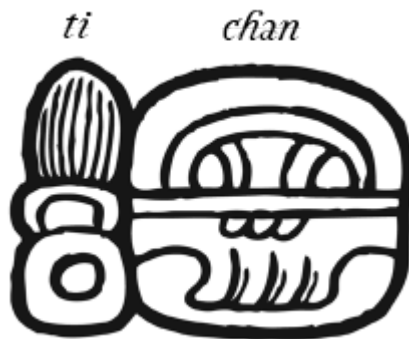


Figure 6. Maya Glyph *ti chan*, translated as “in heaven.”

However, a few roller stamps (an object shaped like a small battery) have been found in Mesoamerica. Roller stamps were used by rolling the stamp on fabric or paper to get an impression of a design or written script. These stamps, often called cylinder seals, were also popular in the Near East, where the Lehitese lived before they left their homeland for the promised land. One stamp in particular that was made in early Book of Mormon times, and found in Mexico, may be similar to the Nephite sampling from the Anthon Transcript (see Fig. 7).⁶



Figure 7. Roller stamp with inscription, from Tlatilco, Mexico.⁶

It must be remembered that the Nephites' system of writing was considered a unique and priestly script, not to be read by the common population. Those who wrote on the plates of the Book of Mormon had to be specifically schooled to do so. Even the Maya hieroglyphs could not be read by the common people. That is why Mesoamerican royalty used monumental art in order to communicate to their people an understanding of their religion, power, and politics.

LIMITED AREA

And I [Moroni] even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. . . .
Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth. (Mormon 8:3-4)

Moroni wrote the above scripture about AD 401, after the collapse of the Nephite nation through war, which happened approximately AD 385. Consequently, he had many years to travel and deposit the gold plates in a place of the Lord's choosing. Moroni did not mention a name for the hill in New York where he placed the plates in a stone box. However, many early Church members assumed this hill in New York was the same Hill Cumorah/Ramah where both the Nephites and the Jaredites fought their last battles.

We must also consider the travels and distances the people made as recorded in the Book of Mormon. Let us consider the Limhi expedition in Mosiah for an example (see Mosiah 8:7-11 and 21:25-27). This story may be the best argument against the Hill Cumorah in New York as being the

same Hill Cumorah in the Book of Mormon.

In these verses in Mosiah, we read of a group of men who were headed from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla. Both locations were in the land southward, that is, south of the narrow neck of land (see Helaman 5:14, 16). Their grandparents had traveled from Zarahemla to Nephi and back two generations earlier (see Mosiah 7:9, 9:1–2).

For those who think that the Book of Mormon took place in both North America and South America, it is hard to believe that the Nephites traveled three thousand miles before they realized they missed Zarahemla. That would have been quite an oversight. They came to a place of bones from fallen Jaredite warriors. The men of the Lehi expedition also found the gold plates of Ether. Where was this? It was at Ramah, which is the same place that the Nephites called Cumorah (see Ether 15:11).

Limhi's men probably went through the narrow neck of land to the land northward in Mexico before they realized that they had missed Zarahemla. This was a trip of “many days” and a few hundred miles—not three thousand miles to what is now the state of New York.⁷ (More discussion on the Hill Cumorah is contained in chapter 10 of this book.)

All these clues point to the theory that Mesoamerica is the land of the Book of Mormon. It is a limited area. The Book of Mormon describes these factors as being part of their history. However, in the nineteenth century when the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith, scholars scoffed at the idea of Native Americans having a high culture—people in those days thought the Native Americans were and always had been uncivilized. It was a general understanding that Indians did not have kings, could not write, did not make cement, and did not construct walls around their cities. With our awareness of archaeological discoveries since the Prophet's time, we now know otherwise.

As we continue with our quest for the best location of the Book of Mormon, we will look at other evidence that indicates Mesoamerica is the most likely place. Lehi and his party practiced many customs and beliefs in the Near East before they sailed to the “land of promise.” We will examine some of these traditions to see if they can also be found in Mesoamerica.

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