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Abstract Review of *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and the United States of America* (2009), by Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum.

JOSEPH SMITH, REVELATION, AND BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY

Matthew Roper

Review of Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum. *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and the United States of America*. New York: Digital Legend, 2009. xviii + 239 pp., with appendix. \$24.95 (paperback).

As far as can be learned, the Prophet Joseph Smith, translator of the book, did not say where, on the America continent, Book of Mormon activities occurred. Perhaps he did not know.

John A. Widtsoe¹

[Smith] either knew or he didn't know. If he didn't know, what was he doing?

Bruce H. Porter²

Joseph knew what he knew—and what he knew was far more important than geography.

John L. Sorenson³

In *Prophecies and Promises*, Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum set forth their case for situating Book of Mormon events in the central

Original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been preserved in all quotations from *Prophecies and Promises* and from historical sources.

1. John A. Widtsoe, "Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?" *Improvement Era*, July 1950, 547.

2. Quoted in Kristen Moulton, "Book of Mormon Geography Stirring Controversy," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 27 March 2010.

3. Quoted in Michael De Groote, "The Fight over Book of Mormon Geography," *Deseret News*, 27 May 2010.

and eastern United States.⁴ This so-called heartland theory is not the traditional hemispheric model in which those events were thought to have occurred throughout North and South America. Rather, this theory confines the events and the prophecies concerning the land of promise and the remnant of Lehi (the Lamanites) to the United States. Porter and Meldrum claim their view is supported by prophetic statements of Joseph Smith. These “historically documented” teachings and revelations, they aver, show that “the Prophet Joseph Smith did, in fact, know about the geographical setting for the Book of Mormon and that he did, in fact, claim inspiration for the statements he made about its geography” (p. 91). Other interpretations that suggest a Mesoamerican location for the Book of Mormon or some other location in Central or South America are, they declare, “beyond comprehension” (p. 101); and those who advance such interpretations are trying to discredit or cast doubt upon the inspired words of Joseph Smith and his prophetic calling (p. 105).

Elsewhere I have addressed the portion of Porter and Meldrum’s work that attempts to identify the land of promise and the nature of the remnant described in the Book of Mormon.⁵ In this essay I will first review what leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have said about Book of Mormon geography. Second, I will address a related question: Does accepting Joseph Smith as a prophet and the translator of the Book of Mormon, a record brought forth through the “gift and power of God,” require that we believe Joseph was an authority on the ancient geography of that book? Third, I will examine terms such as “this land,” “this continent,” and “this country” used by Joseph Smith in his descriptions of the Book of Mormon. Does such language support a limited North American setting for the Book of Mormon and rule out a Mesoamerican setting? Fourth, I will examine the basis for the authors’ claim that the heartland setting was

4. Two versions of *Prophecies and Promises* were published by Digital Legend in 2009. One (V5) was printed in October and the other (V6) in December. Although not described by the publisher as new editions or revisions, these printings contain minor variations in the text. Unless otherwise indicated, this essay references the October 2009 version.

5. Matthew Roper, “Losing the Remnant: The New Exclusivist ‘Movement’ and the Book of Mormon,” in this issue of the *Review*.

revealed to Joseph Smith. Is that claim supported by the historical evidence? Finally, I will explore early Latter-day Saint interest in Central American discoveries as evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon. What does such interest suggest about the question of a divinely revealed geography?

The Church and Book of Mormon Geography

While it is true that the church does not endorse any single geographical model for Book of Mormon events, church leaders have offered valuable counsel on the subject. They have, for example, stressed that the issue is not one that can be settled at present by an appeal to the authority of church leaders. Writing in 1890, President George Q. Cannon explained that “the First Presidency have often been asked to prepare some suggestive map illustrative of Nephite geography, but have never consented to do so. Nor are we acquainted with any of the Twelve Apostles who would undertake such a task. The reason is, that without further information they are not prepared even to suggest. The word of the Lord or the translation of other ancient records is required to clear up many points now so obscure.”⁶ That the First Presidency declined to undertake any suggestive map is significant since that group included not only the Prophet Joseph Smith’s nephew Joseph F. Smith but also Wilford Woodruff, who had participated in Zion’s Camp and had known the Prophet Joseph Smith since the early days of the church. President Joseph F. Smith was once asked to approve a map purporting to show exactly where Lehi and his family had landed in the Americas. He declined, saying that the Lord had not yet revealed it.⁷ Speaking to the Saints in the April 1929 General Conference, President Anthony W. Ivins stated:

There is a great deal of talk about the geography of the Book of Mormon. Where was the land of Zarahemla? Where was the City of Zarahemla? and other geographic matters. It does not make any difference to us. *There has never been anything*

6. George Q. Cannon, editorial, *Juvenile Instructor*, 1 January 1890, 18.

7. “Route Traveled by Lehi and his Company,” *Instructor*, April 1938, 160.

yet set forth that definitely settles that question. So the Church says we are just waiting until we discover the truth. . . . We do not offer any definite solution. As you study the Book of Mormon keep these things in mind and do not make definite statements concerning things that have not been proven in advance to be true.⁸

President Ivins's observation is significant.

In 1903 President Joseph F. Smith taught that regarding Book of Mormon geography, the question, for instance, of the location of the city Zarahemla "was one of interest certainly, but if it could not be located the matter was not of vital importance, and if there were differences of opinion on the question it would not affect the salvation of the people: and he advised against students considering it of such vital importance as the principles of the Gospel" and cautioned them against making questions of Book of Mormon geography "of equal importance with the doctrines contained in the Book."⁹

In 1938 Elder Joseph Fielding Smith wrote an article published in the *Deseret News* arguing against what he then termed the "modernist" theory that the final battlefield of the Nephites and Jaredites may have been in Central America rather than in New York.¹⁰ In 1956 this article was included in a selection of Elder Smith's writings compiled by his son-in-law Bruce R. McConkie.¹¹ Although Elder Smith would later become president of the church in 1970, his article arguing for a New York location as the scene of the final battlefield was written many years before he assumed that position, and he apparently never

8. Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, 15–16 April 1929, emphasis added.

9. Quoted in "Book of Mormon Students Meet," *Deseret Evening News*, 25 May 1903; and "Where was Zarahemla?" *Provo Daily Inquirer*, 25 May 1903.

10. Joseph Fielding Smith, "Where Is the Hill Cumorah?," *Deseret News*, Church Section, September 1938, 1, 6. This article was reprinted under a different title in 1954: "Book of Mormon Establishes Location of Historic Region," *Deseret News*, Church News, 27 February 1954, 2–3.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:232–41. The 1999 reprint of this work states that "consistent with the principle of continuing revelation, here and there is a statement that is dated" (*Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999], publisher's preface).

revisited the question as president of the church. There is evidence that Elder Smith may have softened his opposition on the Cumorah question. In a letter written to Fletcher B. Hammond, who argued emphatically for a Central American location and had sent Elder Smith a copy of his findings, the apostle explained, “I am sure this will be very interesting although I have never paid any attention whatever to Book of Mormon geography because it appears to me that it is inevitable that there must be a great deal of guesswork.”¹² Apparently, he did not consider his 1938 argument as settled and definitive or as a measure of doctrinal orthodoxy.

Sidney B. Sperry, after whom an annual Brigham Young University symposium is named, was also one who initially supported the New York Cumorah view (that is, an area of New York as the final battlefield of the Nephites and Jaredites).¹³ During the 1960s, as he began to explore the issue, he came to a different conclusion. For several years Sperry circulated a handout for his Religion 622 class on the Book of Mormon that outlined key information in that scripture suggesting that the final battlefield was within or near the land of Desolation, which bordered the narrow neck of land.¹⁴ Sperry encouraged his students to address the question and try to reconcile a New York location for those events with the data in the Book of Mormon text. In 1968 he published these conclusions in his *Book of Mormon Compendium*.¹⁵ Reversing his earlier position, he wrote: “It is now my very carefully studied and considered opinion that the Hill Cumorah to which Mormon and his people gathered was somewhere in Middle America. The Book of Mormon evidence to this effect is irresistible and conclusive to one who will approach it with an open mind. This evidence has been reviewed by a few generations of bright students in

12. Joseph Fielding Smith to Fletcher B. Hammond, 18 September 1959, in Fletcher B. Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon: “Where Is the Hill Cumorah?”* (n.p., 1964), 34.

13. Sidney B. Sperry, *The Book of Mormon Testifies* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 335–36.

14. “Were There Two Cumorahs?,” handout for Religion 622, 31 March 1964. This study was offered as a FARMS Reprint in 1984 and was reprinted in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (Spring 1995): 260–68.

15. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 447–51.

graduate classes who have been given the challenge to break it down if they can. To date none has ever been able to do so.”¹⁶ Sperry, who was very familiar with what Joseph Fielding Smith had previously written, told him that he did not feel comfortable publishing something that contradicted what the apostle had written, but that he and other sincere students of the Book of Mormon had come to that conclusion only after serious and careful study of the text. Sperry said that Elder Smith then lovingly put his arm around his shoulder and said, “Sidney, you are as entitled to your opinion as I am to mine. You go ahead and publish it.”¹⁷

Other church leaders such as John A. Widtsoe considered the Cumorah question an open matter worthy of further investigation. “As far as can be learned,” wrote Elder Widtsoe, “the Prophet Joseph Smith, translator of the book, did not say where, on the American continent, Book of Mormon activities occurred. Perhaps he did not know.”¹⁸ Elder Widtsoe further observed that

the hill from which the Book of Mormon plates were obtained by Joseph Smith is definitely known. In the days of the Prophet this hill was known among the people as Cumorah. This is a fixed point in Book of Mormon later history. There is a controversy, however, about the Hill Cumorah—not about the location where the Book of Mormon plates were found, but whether it is the hill under that name near which Nephite events took place. A name says one, may be applied to more than one hill; and plates containing the records of a people, sacred things, could be moved from place to place by divine help.¹⁹

After reviewing the evidence from church history, including the Zelph story and the claim that Lehi landed in Chile, Elder Widtsoe

16. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 447.

17. Recollection of John Fugal of Orem, Utah, to Matthew Roper, 15 May 2010. Fugal was a student in a BYU Book of Mormon class where Sperry recounted the experience.

18. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” 547.

19. John A. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” 547; reprinted in John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1951), 3:94.

found little support for the view that Book of Mormon geography had been revealed to the Prophet. He summarized:

They who work on the geography of the Book of Mormon have little else than the preceding approaches with which to work, viz: that Nephites found their way into what is now the state of Illinois; that the plates of the Book of Mormon were found in a hill in northwestern New York State; that a statement exists of doubtful authenticity that Lehi and his party landed on the shore of the land now known as Chile; and that under the Prophet's editorship Central America was denominated the region of Book of Mormon activities. Out of diligent, prayerful study, we may be led to a better understanding of times and places in the history of the people who move across the pages of the divinely given Book of Mormon.²⁰

Church leaders, acknowledging the lack of authoritative answers regarding Book of Mormon geography, have encouraged earnest, diligent, and careful study of the matter while counseling the Saints not to allow such interests to cloud their focus on gospel principles. Elder James E. Talmage counseled, "The more thinkers, investigators, workers we have in the field the better; but our brethren who devote themselves to that kind of research should remember that they must speak with caution and not declare as demonstrated truths points that are not really proved."²¹ Elder John A. Widtsoe made a similar point: "Usually, an ideal map is drawn based upon geographical facts mentioned in the book. Then a search is made for existing areas complying with the map. All such studies are legitimate, but the conclusions drawn from them, though they may be correct, must at the best be held as intelligent conjectures."²² In short, until additional revelation on the matter is forthcoming, the question of where Book of Mormon events occurred is one that cannot be resolved by an appeal

20. Widtsoe, "Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?," 597.

21. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, April 1929, 44.

22. Widtsoe, "Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?," 547.

to authority. It is a matter of study and scholarship, not a measure of faithfulness.

How *Not* to Have a “Conversation” about Book of Mormon Geography

Porter and Meldrum sometimes claim that they merely want to introduce new ideas and encourage conversation about the Book of Mormon. “The goal of this study is to cause ‘scholars’ and other students of the Book of Mormon to think beyond traditional thought and realize there might be more to consider” (p. 200). The authors say they do not mean to “diminish the research of those who have done tremendous work in this area of study” (p. 206). Yet at other times they undermine this professed goal with accusatory statements implying that Latter-day Saint scholars who disagree with them are less honest, intelligent, or faithful than they are. One observer of the authors’ activities notes that “Meldrum’s ideas do not create much controversy. But some fear his rhetoric questions the faith of those who have differing opinions and that he is, in effect, not just offering an interesting theory but a call to repentance.”²³ Meldrum denies this: “All I’m saying is that here is another theory, if you will, but if you will take a look at how it matches what Joseph Smith said and what the scriptures say, it’s a better match.”²⁴

It is difficult, however, to reconcile such denials with other statements found in *Prophecies and Promises*, as well as in the authors’ public presentations and advertisements. They give initial lip service to the Brethren’s neutrality on the question, then insist that the Saints should not be neutral. “This book,” according to Porter and Meldrum, “is dedicated to the historically documented fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith did, in fact, know about the geographical setting for the Book of Mormon and that he did, in fact, claim inspiration for the statements he made about its geography” (p. 91). They claim that these statements have been suppressed or ignored by pre-

23. Michael De Groot, “Raiders of the Lost Book of Mormon Geography,” *Deseret News*, 6 June 2008.

24. Quoted in De Groot, “Lost Book of Mormon Geography.”

vious scholars who, it is implied, consider “education, knowledge, or beliefs more authoritative and correct than scripture or revealed prophetic statements,” thereby “placing their trust in the arm of flesh” (p. 92). Porter and Meldrum make clear that they are not speaking of anti-Mormon writers or referring to writers of *Sunstone* or *Dialogue*.²⁵ They refer, rather, to believing Latter-day Saints who accept the divine authenticity and historicity of the Book of Mormon but who conceptualize a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon. Porter and Meldrum class these “Mesoamericanists” among other unbelievers whose views are inconsistent with the inspired teachings of Joseph Smith. Although the Prophet Joseph Smith was “clear and concise in his statements about Book of Mormon geography, . . . the allure and enticement of Mesoamerica ruins and a desire for physical proof seems to determine the interpretation and interpolation of the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It is regrettable that so many cannot simply take Joseph Smith at his word” (p. 102).²⁶ The authors believe that those who speak in terms of a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon are harming the church. “What message,” they ask, “is sent to those unfriendly to the Church and Mormonism when recognized scholars within the Church openly disagree with (or reject) the words and claimed inspiration of the founding prophet of this dispensation?” (p. 116).²⁷ “Those who choose to reject the prophet’s revelatory words

25. I am not suggesting that all contributors to these venues reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon, although many do.

26. “For scholars to cling to a Mesoamerican model, Porter says, they must disregard what the church’s founding prophet said. ‘Most of the people fighting it are people who have something to lose financially or by reputation,’ Porter says. ‘I feel for them. . . . How would it be when you’ve spent your life trying to prove The Book of Mormon location . . . if someone came along and said you’d ignored the statements of Joseph Smith?’” (Moulton, “Book of Mormon Geography Stirring Controversy”).

27. The authors currently distribute a set of five DVDs entitled *Book of Mormon Evidence Series*, which covers much of the same material found in their book. On disk 5, *Heartland Geography*, Bruce H. Porter is shown speaking while standing on the grounds of a temple. He states: “Right now, as we are dealing with the prophecies and promises within the Book of Mormon, in regard to the statements of Joseph Smith and the statements in the Book of Mormon, the anti-Mormons have recognized, they know what the statements are of Joseph Smith in regard to Book of Mormon geography, and they know what scholars have said, and they are now beginning to discuss that *the best scholars that the Mormon Church has, or that the Latter-day Saints have, are discounting the words*

cannot then also claim to be ‘defending Mormonism’ in the pursuit of their own agendas, which occasionally run contrary to his words. Such actions demonstrate a casual disregard for Joseph’s prophetic calling and an espousal of the ‘theories of men’ over his inspired and historically documented statements” (pp. 116–17).²⁸ Given the counsel of the Brethren discussed above, one wonders if the authors also include them among this group. Do *they* discount the revelations and teachings of Joseph Smith?

The authors believe that their heartland theory has not received a fair hearing. “Much of the information presented here has hitherto been the subject of relatively unsympathetic review by an array of scholars” (preface). “Ironically,” they claim,

of Joseph Smith in regards to Book of Mormon geography. That’s aimed at BYU and will probably soon be aimed even at Salt Lake, but it right now is something that needs to be addressed” (emphasis added).

28. “Many in the LDS community have either consciously chosen, or ignorantly dismissed the statements of Joseph Smith,” writes Bruce H. Porter in a recent lengthy ad published in the *Deseret News*. “Some have manifested a blatant disregard for the ‘documented’ words, statements and declared revelations pertaining to a geographical setting for the Book of Mormon that have come from the mouth of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The question that keeps coming to mind is ‘WHY?’ Why did ‘we’ (many [not all] so called scholars) decide that ‘we’ knew better than the Prophet? Why have ‘we’ concluded that the Prophet was wrong? For the last half century, books and articles have been written trying to explain ‘why’ the prophet was wrong, while accepting questionable and undocumented sources as the words of Joseph. Scholars have declared that Joseph Smith ‘just didn’t know’ or ‘was unaware’ of where the Lands of the Book of Mormon were. Some LDS authors also state in their writings that the Prophet Joseph ‘never claimed inspiration on the matter’ or ‘changed his mind’ about this geography. These published statements discounting, dismissing, and ignoring the statements of Joseph, are just plain wrong (not wanting to beat around the bush). Many scholars dismiss Joseph Smith, while rationalizing their conclusions in the inapt abilities of an uneducated Prophet of God, while touting personal training, education and degrees, trusting in their own arm of flesh. . . . Implying that someone might be neglecting the statements of Joseph Smith no doubt seems harsh and judgmental. Many who do not want Mesoamerica to exit the center stage take the position that the Prophet’s ‘opinions’ changed later in his life. Most often the standing rationalization is that the Prophet Joseph was not speaking as a ‘prophet’ at the time he made the statements, but just offering an opinion. However, Joseph Smith’s statements cannot and should not be understood as ‘opinion’ or uneducated guess work. . . . It is time to support the Prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, not just in the geography of the Book of Mormon but in his statements on doctrine, scripture and history” (Bruce H. Porter, “A Second Look,” *Deseret News*, 18 February 2010).

the greatest threat to the information contained in this book is not the anti-Mormon faction. The greatest objection to this information comes from those whose theories, articles, papers, books, reputations, and income are challenged by a move away from Mesoamerica. Sadly, many in the LDS scholarly community refuse to look objectively at the statements of Joseph Smith, the context of the Book of Mormon, and the scientific evidence, both genetic and archaeological. (p. 167)²⁹

“Finally, scientific evidence,” Porter and Meldrum assert, “may now support the statements of Joseph Smith pertaining to the geography of the Book of Mormon but the LDS intellectual community is one of the groups who ignore both for the sake of a theory” (p. 167). This conspiracy of scholars is the greatest obstacle to the authors’ endeavor.

The greatest threat to a culture is the culture itself. As the Lord declares to Alma: “This is my church, and I will establish it; and nothing shall overthrow it; save it is the transgression of my people” (Mosiah 27:13). The greatest disappointment is that the rejection of the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the sciences that now support his statements, is coming from the LDS culture. (p. 168)

In other words, Latter-day Saint scholars who disagree with the authors are transgressors like the wicked Alma who secretly went about seeking to destroy the church. It is because of these scholars, including some associated with the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, “that the anti-Mormons have launched the largest onslaught against the Church in years” over the DNA issue. Porter and Meldrum allege that

objective consideration of the statements of Joseph Smith, archaeological research, and the potential DNA evidence for a North American setting for the Book of Mormon is not allowed in most Latter-day Saint scholastic circles. In future years this will no doubt be a point of humorous recollection,

29. Porter and Meldrum provide no evidence for this claim.

but the academic bias referred to here was never more evident than when the authors of this work were denied access to BYU's Education Week (where Mesoamerican theories are routinely presented) as it was determined that the information herein was too 'controversial' to be allowed. (p. 182)

Methodological Confusion

The first step in approaching the question of Book of Mormon geography is to get clear on what the Book of Mormon itself has to say about it. This must be done *before* one tries to measure the text against any proposed American setting.³⁰ "The Book of Mormon," noted Latter-day Saint archaeologist John Clark, "must be the final and most important arbiter in deciding the correctness of a given geography; otherwise we will be forever hostage to the shifting sands of expert opinion."³¹ Porter and Meldrum wrongly attribute the abundance of Book of Mormon geographical models to the practice of constructing an internal geography based upon the Book of Mormon text (p. 11). Yet the truth is that much of the diversity of opinion on the question is due to the *failure* of most proponents to *do so*. Only after this first exercise is done in a thorough and comprehensive manner can one then proceed to the secondary issue of how this internal picture may or may not correlate with a particular real-world setting.³² This does

30. "The basic methodology followed by historical traditionalists in reconstructing Book of Mormon geography is as follows: 1. Carefully study the text of the Book of Mormon, identifying all passages of any geographic significance. 2. Categorize these toponyms according to type (cities, lands, hills, rivers, seas, etc.). 3. Analyze the relationships between various passages for consistency or inconsistency. 4. Identify any type of geographical links described between toponyms (travel times, directions, spatial relationships, etc.). 5. If these geographic statements are internally consistent, develop an internal ideal model of Book of Mormon geography. 6. Apply this internally consistent hypothetical model to various potential real world settings in an attempt to formulate possible correlations. 7. Compare the various models of real world correspondences in order to determine which, if any, forms the best correlation." William J. Hamblin, "An Apologist for the Critics," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 472-73.

31. John Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 21.

32. "When this full methodology is followed we discover, first, that Book of Mormon internal geography is remarkably consistent, and second, that it is consistently limited—

not mean that all who do so will necessarily agree on all points, but it does keep such efforts tied to the text itself.³³ Instead of first trying to get clear on what the Book of Mormon itself says about its geographical location, Porter and Meldrum rest their speculation on a shaky interpretation of certain prophecies and promises found in the text.

To focus on geographic passages of the Book of Mormon in the creation of a hypothetical map is to espouse a belief that these passages are of more import and of greater consequence than that of inspired prophetic utterances. For example, is it not more important to know that the New Jerusalem will be built upon “this land” by prophecy than debating what constitutes a wilderness, or how far a Nephite can walk in a day? (pp. 73–74)

This matter of comparative importance, of course, depends upon the question one wants to answer. To know where the New Jerusalem will be built is one thing. But if one wants to know how far the land of Nephi was from Zarahemla, one cannot ignore what the Book of Mormon says about travel distances or directions. Porter and Meldrum claim that Book of Mormon prophecies about the land are a *more* reliable source of information on geography than geographical passages themselves. These “prophecies and promises” are thought to be the key to establishing the location of Book of Mormon lands. “The

that all known geographical distances (travel times) point to a macrogeographical zone of only a few hundred miles. To my knowledge, no critic of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon has ever successfully disputed these two conclusions based on evidence from the text itself. The remarkable result of this process is that there is a significant disjuncture between early Latter-day Saint interpretations of Book of Mormon geography, and the geography of the text itself. This would lead one to conclude that, if Joseph Smith believed in a hemispheric Book of Mormon geography, he was not the author of the text.” Hamblin, “Apologist for the Critics,” 473.

33. On this see Clark, “Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 20–70. Sorenson provides a verse-by-verse analysis of each geographical passage in the Book of Mormon in *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 215–326. He also includes a “Summary of the Criteria for an Acceptable Model from the Text, by Feature” (pp. 329–53), followed by a useful “‘Report Card’ for Evaluating Models” (pp. 357–64) and a “Trial Map” (p. 367) based upon that data. This provides a useful starting point for those interested in the subject. See also John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000).

prophetic record is specific and inspired about the Promised Land and must take precedence over all physical and geographic descriptions. That said, when physical and geographical passages are clear, they will match the more important descriptions set forth by the prophecies and promises in the text” (p. 74). This approach is dubious since it allows the interpreter to arbitrarily pick and choose which geographical passages are more important and which are not, when what is really needed is a comprehensive examination of all the relevant passages in the Book of Mormon.

Porter and Meldrum assert that the prophecies and promises in the Book of Mormon “are spiritual in nature because of the fact that they are revealed and understood by the workings of the spirit,” while “the geographic passages are temporal in nature and in purpose, having no ‘fulfilment’ in a historical or future setting” (p. 75). So Book of Mormon passages on prophecies and promises are spiritual while Book of Mormon geographical passages are not! This again seems very arbitrary and self-serving. Why attempt an internal geography when they can pick and choose and dismiss geographical information in the text on a whim? Not willing, apparently, to expend the needed effort and study required to determine what *the Book of Mormon* says about its geography, the authors attempt an end run around the process with rhetorical tricks. Passages that support their view are the “spiritual” ones, while the others are not.

Doesn't a Prophet Know Everything?

Joseph Smith was the translator of the Book of Mormon. He always claimed that this work was done through “the gift and power of God.” He claimed to be, and Latter-day Saints believe him to have been, an eyewitness and a participant in this event. Does his being a prophet who received revelation mean that he knows and understands everything? Does his being a witness to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon necessarily entail also being an expert on its contents? Lehi had a dream or vision of the tree of life. Later Nephi saw what his father had seen. When Nephi was asked by his brethren about the meaning of the river that his father had seen, he explained

that it represented filthiness and that “so much was his [father’s] mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water” (1 Nephi 15:27). Nephi’s comment clarifies that even those who receive revelations may not fully understand every aspect of them. “Now, I unfold unto you a mystery,” said Alma; “nevertheless, there are many mysteries which are kept, that no one knoweth them save God himself. But I show unto you one thing which I have inquired diligently of God that I might know” (Alma 40:3). Alma knew certain things only because he has made them a matter of diligent and persistent inquiry. Joseph Smith received revelations about the establishment of Zion. When the Saints were mobbed and forcibly expelled from their lands in Jackson County, Missouri, the Prophet was deeply troubled. In a letter to the Saints, he wrote:

I know that Zion, in the own due time of the Lord will be redeemed, but how many will be the days of her purification, tribulation and affliction, the Lord has kept hid from my eyes; and when I enquire concerning this subject the voice of the Lord is, Be still, and know that I am God! . . . Now there are two things of which I am ignorant and the Lord will not show me—perhaps for a wise purpose in himself. I mean in some respects, and they are these, Why God hath suffered so great calamity to come upon Zion; or what the great moving cause of this great affliction is. ~~These two things~~ and again by what means he will return her back to her inheritance with songs of everlasting Joy upon her head. These two things brethren, are in part kept back that they are not plainly <shewn unto me.³⁴

Speaking of another revelation, the Prophet taught:

I was once praying very earnestly to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man, when I heard a voice repeat the following: Joseph, my son, if thou livest until thou art eighty-five years old, thou shalt see the face of the Son of Man; therefore

34. Joseph Smith to Edward Partridge and others, 10 December 1833, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 329.

let this suffice, and trouble me no more on this matter. I was left thus, without being able to decide whether this coming referred to the beginning of the millennium or to some previous appearing, or whether I should die and thus see his face. I believe the coming of the Son of Man will not be any sooner than that time. (D&C 130:14–17)

It is clear from Joseph Smith's own teachings that he received revelations, but it is equally clear that he did not always fully understand them. George Q. Cannon taught this principle: "We believe in revelation. It may come dim; it may come indistinct, it may come sometimes with a degree of vagueness which we do not like. Why? Because of our imperfection; because we are not prepared to receive it as it comes in its purity; in its fulness from God. He is not to blame for this. It is our duty though to contend for more faith, for greater power, for clearer revelations, for better understanding concerning his great truths as he communicates them to us. That is our duty; that is the object of our lives as Latter-day Saints."³⁵ Wilford Woodruff taught that "the Lord does communicate some things of importance to the children of men by means of visions and dreams as well as by the records of divine truth. And what is it all for? It is to teach us a principle. We may never see anything take place exactly as we see it in a dream or a vision, yet it is intended to teach a principle."³⁶ One might conceivably have a vision of the ancient Nephites without understanding the details of their geography.

Early critics of the Book of Mormon initially claimed that Joseph Smith must have fabricated the book himself, but for those who actually knew Joseph Smith, his limited education and abilities precluded such an explanation. "It is agreed on all hands," wrote one early critic whose caustic comments are typical, "that Smith is too ignorant and stupid to have originated such a book." The critic then added with some amazement, "This his followers readily admit and *glory in it* as an evidence that he must have been divinely inspired."³⁷ "It is asserted

35. George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:76–77.

36. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:333.

37. "Author of the Book of Mormon," *Zion's Advocate* (Portland, ME), 20 December 1837, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,1407>.

by one of his principle followers, (who also pretends to divine illuminations,) that Jo, even at this day is profoundly ignorant of the meaning of many of the words contained in the Book of Mormon.”³⁸ How could such things be if Joseph Smith was a prophet?

In an address given at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, on the two hundredth anniversary of the Prophet’s birth, Latter-day Saint archaeologist John Clark made an important observation that accords with my own:

For Mormons, Joseph Smith is a prophet, seer, and revelator, and the Book of Mormon is the word of God. Detractors ridicule both as blasphemous frauds. There is no secure middle ground between positions, but there is one spectacular point of agreement. Champions on both sides see the Book of Mormon as the key to Joseph Smith’s claim to be a prophet. Divergent views on the origin of the book lead to different supposed authors; in each case the deduced person thought to be responsible for the book remains incomplete. Surprisingly, both friends and foes have diminished Joseph and the Book of Mormon in the same way—by exaggerating his abilities. . . .

Critics see Joseph Smith as author of a romantic fiction, the Book of Mormon, and in so doing they distort both the man and the book beyond belief. They see the book as a logical product of its 1820s intellectual environment, combined with Joseph Smith’s native intelligence and deceitful propensities.

Most Mormons fall into a more subtle error that also inflates Joseph’s talents; they confuse translation with authorship. They presume that Joseph Smith knew the contents of the book as if he were its real author, and they accord him perfect knowledge of the text. This presumption removes from discussion the most compelling evidence of the book’s authenticity—Joseph’s unfamiliarity with its contents. To put the matter clearly: Joseph Smith did not fully understand the

38. “Gold Bible, No. 3,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, NY), 1 February 1831, 92, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,576>.

Book of Mormon. I propose that he transmitted to readers an ancient book that he neither imagined nor wrote.

One thing all readers share with Joseph is a partial understanding of the book's complexities. Indeed, many things about the book were simply unknowable in 1830. Over the last sixty years, Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, and other scholars have shown the Book of Mormon to be truer than Joseph Smith or any of his contemporaries could know. Consequently, *what Joseph Smith knew and understood about the book ought to be research questions rather than presumptions*. Thanks in large part to his critics, it is becoming clear that Joseph Smith did not fully understand the geography, scope, historical scale, literary form, or cultural content of the book.³⁹

It is, of course, possible that the Lord revealed the details of Book of Mormon geography to Joseph Smith, but this is, as Clark reminds, a research question, not a given. In what follows, I will assess the historical evidence bearing on what Joseph knew about the geography of Book of Mormon events.

Land, Continent, Country, and Context

“*This Land*”

Porter and Meldrum argue that the words “this land” (e.g., 2 Nephi 1:5) in reference to the promised land cannot refer to all of the Americas, but rather exclusively to a smaller region that they identify with the Central and Eastern United States. They claim that the demonstrative *this* in Hebrew shows that the land in question is limited to the region immediately within the vicinity of the speaker; hence the words cannot refer to the entire American hemisphere.

39. John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins,” *BYU Studies* 44/4 (2005): 84–85, emphasis added. This was a presentation delivered for “The Worlds of Joseph Smith” conference held on 5–6 May 2005 at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

The phrase “this land” in the passages above [2 Nephi 1:5–9; 10:10–12], and all others must be intimate to the speaker and the listener, or the prophet writing the text. “This land” must then be definite, specific, and under the feet of the listener to answer the question of “which land.” The demonstrative solidifies the understanding of which land is “this land”—the land where they are. Because of these demonstratives the land where they are must be the same land where the specific prophecies and promises are to be fulfilled. (p. 31)

The authors insist that when Moroni speaks of the New Jerusalem being built upon “this land” it can only mean that Moroni was standing in or very near Jackson County, Missouri. When Book of Mormon prophets say that “this land” is to be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles, we must, according to Porter and Meldrum, understand this to refer to the United States exclusively. When the Book of Mormon speaks of the remnant of Lehi in “this land,” the words can only mean the United States or some location within the United States. The words cannot, in their view, have wider application to all of the Americas. They continue:

The only way that the words “this land” (the singular among the plural) found in the Book of Mormon could be forced to mean the entire western hemisphere is for the Nephite writers to be intimate and familiar with the entire extent of the land from north to south and from east to west before the statements were made. The use of the phrase “this land” would indicate that there were other lands that were not part of “this land”, indicating within the text a non-hemispherical setting. The phrase “this land” can only be defined as singular within “lands” around the speaker to even warrant the need of the demonstrative. If the discussion was meant to include all the lands within the hemisphere that are connected at the point or place of discussion, the text would not require the demonstrative “this” but only the definite article. One would not say “this chair” in a room full of chairs to mean all chairs.

Nor would one say “this land” in a hemisphere of many lands.
(pp. 32–33)

For Porter and Meldrum, any other explanation is inconceivable. “To try to stretch of the meaning of ‘this land’ in this revelation to include Central or South America is beyond comprehension” (p. 101). The phrase, however, does not mean what they think it does. The demonstrative *this* in “this land” does not tell us the extent or limits of the land referred to. In other words, the proximity suggested by *this* does not define scope, for “this land” may begin under the feet of the speaker and go on indefinitely. In Hebrew, *this* and *that*, as well as *these* and *those*, can refer to things both proximate and distant. Sometimes, for example, “this land,” even in English, can mean “the land of which I am speaking” rather than “the land where I am writing this.” Before the Israelites entered the land of promise, Moses spoke of it as “this land” although he had never set foot upon it (Deuteronomy 3:18; 29:24). Nephi was in the Arabian land of Bountiful when he spoke of the land of Canaan: “Do ye suppose that the children of *this land*, who were in the land of promise, who were driven out by our fathers, do ye suppose that they were righteous?” (1 Nephi 17:33). “This land” clearly referred to the land of *which* he was speaking rather than the land *where* he was speaking. King Mosiah was in the land of Zarahemla in the land southward when he spoke of the destruction of the Jaredites in “this land,” even though they were destroyed in the land northward (Mosiah 29:27). Mormon was in the land northward when he wrote about “this land” in which Jesus had chosen his twelve disciples—which happened in Bountiful in the land southward (Mormon 3:19; 8:23). Jesus speaks of the great destruction in “this land,” meaning both the land northward and southward (3 Nephi 9:12).

When Jesus speaks to the Nephites concerning his other sheep, he explains that their brethren in the land of Jerusalem did not know about them. He speaks of the lost tribes: “And verily, verily, I say unto you that I have other sheep, which are not of *this land*, neither of the *land of Jerusalem*, neither in any parts of *that land* round about whither I have been to minister” (3 Nephi 16:1). The lost tribes were not in “this land” where the Lehites were or the “land of Jerusalem”

or any parts of “that land” where Jesus had previously ministered to the Jews. Speaking from the Nephite temple at Bountiful, Jesus distinguishes “this land” from the land where he had walked among the Jews in the Old World, but aside from this, the nature of “this land” is left open and undefined.

It also appears that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries interpreted “this land” more broadly than Porter and Meldrum do. In June 1842, while the Prophet was serving as its editor, the *Times and Seasons* included an article comparing Aztec traditions of the confounding of languages with the account of the brother of Jared in the Book of Mormon. The editor then observed:

The tradition and hieroglyphics of the Zaltees, the Colhuacans, and the Azteca nations, in regard to the confusion of languages and their travels to *this land*, is so like that contained in the Book of Mormon, that the striking analogy must be seen by every superficial observer. . . . These accounts, then, precisely agree, *one of which was found in Ontario county, N.Y., and the other in Mexico.*⁴⁰

Clearly, the editor considered both New York and Mexico to be part of “this land.”

“*This Continent*”

Porter and Meldrum claim that the phrase “this continent” when used by Joseph Smith also indicates that he was not speaking of all the Americas, but only the United States or part of it. In his account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, now included in the Pearl of Great Price, the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote that the angel Moroni explained that the Book of Mormon gave an account of the “former inhabitants of this continent” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). According to Porter and Meldrum,

40. “Traits of Mosaic History, Found among the Azteca Nations,” *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL), 15 June 1842, 820, accessed 6 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?/BOMP,3432>.

the interpretation of the phrase “former inhabitants of this continent” must, for clarity of understanding, have one of two meanings or conclusions. Either this refers to “this continent” or it does not. If it does not refer to the United States, a person would have to ignore the demonstrative “this” and then redefine “this continent” into a generality of hemisphere or continent(s). To assume the latter would mean that either Joseph or Moroni made a mistake in the description and the use of the demonstrative in pointing to the “which” continent. (pp. 92–93)⁴¹

The authors’ interpretation fails to take into account the historical context in which the Prophet’s statement was made and also ignores how the words were used by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries. The historical evidence suggests that the earliest Latter-day Saints thought of events in the Book of Mormon as having occurred throughout North and South America. The early Saints did not have their own press until mid-1832, but other early newspapers reported the activities and ideas of the earliest missionaries. Eight months after the publication of the Book of Mormon, an Ohio reporter described the teachings of Oliver Cowdery and his companions as they stopped in Ohio on their way to Missouri: “This new Revelation, they say is especially designed for the benefit, or rather for the christianizing of the Aborigines of America; who, as they affirm, are a part of the tribe of Manasseh, and whose ancestors landed on the coast of Chili 600 years before the coming of Christ, and from them descended all the Indians of America.”⁴² Other early reports state that Orson Pratt and

41. In contemporary usage we think of the North American continent as including Canada, the United States, and Mexico, but it was defined more broadly in Joseph Smith’s day to include what we now call Mesoamerica (southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador) and all of Central America as far south as Panama. As Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* explains, “From Darien to the North, the continent is called *North America*, and to the South, it is called *South America*.” So the phrase “this *continent*,” even if understood to refer exclusively to the North American continent, would still not exclude Mesoamerica and Central America.

42. A. S., “The Golden Bible, or, Campbellism Improved,” *Observer and Telegraph* (Hudson, OH), 18 November 1830, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,243>.

Lyman Johnson preached that Lehi landed in South America and that the final battles of the Nephites commenced at the Isthmus of Darien and ended in New York.⁴³ By June 1832, the church had commenced its own newspaper in Independence, Missouri, under the editorship of W. W. Phelps. In an early issue, Phelps spoke of Missouri as “the *centre of America*; it being about an equal distance from Maine, to Nootka sound; and from the gulf of St. Lawrence to the Gulf of California; yes, and *about the middle of the continent from cape Horn, south, to the head land at Barra’s Bay, north.*”⁴⁴ It is in this context of a hemispheric view inclusive of all the Americas that early Latter-day Saint usage of the word *continent* is best understood. When we survey how Latter-day Saint writers in Joseph Smith’s day used the term, it becomes clear that they had reference to Central and South America as well as North America, as the following examples show:

- We are glad to see the proof [from Central American ruins] begin to come, of the original *or ancient inhabitants of this continent*. It is good testimony in favor of the book of Mormon, and the book of Mormon is good testimony that such things as cities and civilization, “prior to the fourteenth century,” existed in *America*. Helaman, in the book of Mormon, gives the following very interesting account of the people who lived upon *this continent*, before the birth of the Savior.⁴⁵
- Now, the beauty of this simile or figure can only be discovered by those who take the pains to contrast it with the literal fact as it occurred; the relation of which may be found in the

43. “Mormonism,” *Fredonia Censor* (Fredonia, NY), 7 March 1832, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,1355>; and “The Orators of Mormon,” *Catholic Telegraph* (Cincinnati, OH), 14 April 1832, 204–5, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,599>.

44. “The Far West,” *Evening and the Morning Star* (Independence, MO), October 1832, 37, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,758>. Later writers such as Parley P. Pratt thought of the Book of Mormon as a “record of half a world.” Parley P. Pratt, “Book of Mormon,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, February 1841, 263–64, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,2688>.

45. “Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Central America,” *Evening and the Morning Star* (Independence, MO), February, 1833, [71], emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,658>.

book of Mormon, first book of Nephi, where a remnant of the branches or seed of Joseph are represented as crossing the sea, and settling *this continent of North and South America*.⁴⁶

- The Book of Mormon describes the christian religion as being on the *Western Continent* . . . a religion in operation at the *Isthmus of Darien* 600 years before Christ.⁴⁷
- Mr. M. I have always thought that there had been a more enlightened people on *this continent*, than the present Indians. The remains of ancient buildings, monuments &c., are evident proofs on this point. Mr. R. There can be no doubt on this subject. In the recent researches in *Central America*, the ruins of very large and splendid buildings have been found, but it does not necessarily follow that the Book of Mormon is true.⁴⁸
- The Book of Mormon gives an account of a number of descendants of Israel coming *to this continent*; and it is well known that the art of embalming was known among the Hebrews, as well as among the Egyptians. . . . This art was no doubt transmitted from Jerusalem to *this continent*, by the before mentioned emigrants, which accounts for their finding of the mummies [in Kentucky], and at the same time is another strong evidence of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.⁴⁹
- The city [Moronihah] was in some region on the South of what is called at this time, North America, and at the time our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, near Jerusalem, in Asia. At that time there was a terrible destruction on *this continent*, because of the wickedness of the people, at which time those

46. William Smith, "Evidences of the Book of Mormon," *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH), January 1837, 434, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,1653>.

47. Walter Scott, "Mormon Bible. No. IV," *Evangelist* (Carthage, OH), 1 May 1841, 111, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,4481>.

48. "Dialogue on Mormonism No II," *Times and Seasons*, 15 July 1841, 473, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,3011>.

49. "A Catacomb of Mummies Found in Kentucky," *Times and Seasons*, 2 May 1842, 781–82, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,3455>.

cities were destroyed. . . . And how was you destroyed? was the inquiry of those efficient antiquarians Messrs. Catherwood and Stephens, the charge d'affairs of these United States, as they sit on the wondrous walls of "Copan". . . . Read book of Mormon, 3d edition, page 549. Let the reader observe, that the book of Mormon was published A. D. 1830. The discovery of this city by Messrs. Catherwood and Stephens was in 1840. Read Stephens' travels in *Central America*, vol. i. page 130, 131, &c. Mr. Stephens states, "There is no account of these ruins until the visit of Col. Galindo in 1836, before referred to, who examined them under a commission from the Central American government." Question.—If the book of Mormon is a fiction, no difference who wrote it, how did it happen to locate this city so nicely before it was known to exist till 1836 by any account that was extant in America, from which it could have been extracted?⁵⁰

- He introduced an account of many American antiquities together with the discoveries lately made by Mr. Stevens, that all go to prove that the American Indians were once an enlightened people and understood the arts and sciences, as the ruined cities and monuments lately discovered fully prove. . . . The Book of Mormon was not only a history of the dealings of God with the descendants of Joseph on *this continent*, previous to the crucifixion of our Lord, but also an account of the gospel as established among them by the personal appearance of Christ on this continent.⁵¹
- When the Book of Mormon first made its appearance among men, it was looked upon by many as a wild speculation. . . . We were then told that the inhabitants of *this continent* were, and always had been, a rude barbarous race, uncouth, unlettered, and without civilization. But when they were told of the

50. John E. Page, "To a Disciple," *Morning Chronicle* (Pittsburgh, PA), 1 July 1842, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3234>.

51. From the *Weekly Bostonian*, 9 July 1842; reprinted in *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* (Liverpool, England), September 1842, 87, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3311>.

various relics that have been found indicative of civilization, intelligence and learning; when they were told of the wealth, architecture and splendor of ancient *Mexico*; when recent developments proved beyond a doubt, that there was ancient ruins in *Central America*, which, in point of magnificence, beauty, strength and architectural design, would vie with any of the most splendid ruins of the *Asiatic continent*; when they could trace the fine delineations of the sculptor's chisel, on the beautiful statue, the mysterious hieroglyphic, and the unknown character, they began to believe that a wise, powerful, intelligent and scientific race had inhabited *this continent*.⁵²

- He says “there were ruins known to exist in Central America, (the lands he says, I said belonged to Ephraim, &c. but I contend that *it is North and South America both that includes the promised land* to the branches of Joseph) long before 1830, true the ruins of the city of Ottolum was known; but Stevens visited altogether 43. In a court yard in one, he found an enclosure made of stone, and inside of this enclosure was a stone covered with Hieroglyphics. See Vol. II p. 121 and 2. Read page 147, B. Mormon and see what it tells you concerning a certain stone, and the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, and this stone, and city after city, that it spoke of and described their situation, and who built them, when it came forth,—has been discovered since by Mr. Stephens for the first time, for he says “*There they lay like the rock built city of Edom, unvisited, unsought for, and utterly unknown.*” I could refer the candid reader (if my limits would permit) to numerous testimonies of the kind. In Vol. II. p. 184, he gives a description of a place of sacrifice, with Idols standing near it. In B. M. p. 511, we have it recorded, that the Lamanites, took the Nephites prisoners, and sacrificed both women and children to their Idol Gods. If all this be the effect of chance, or guess work, it is guessing mighty straight, is it not Mr. W.? y-e-s. But Mr. W. says “Mr.

52. “Ancient Records,” *Times and Seasons*, 1 May 1843, 185, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,3810>.

Stephens gives it as his opinion, that there is nothing to indicate Egyptian or Hebrew origin, among these ruins.” Read again Mr. W. Vol. II. page 296 and 347, deducing Egyptian origin and concerning the embalming room. Then read Mr. Norman’s travels in *Central America* in 1840, and see what he says about it, before you expose your ignorance any more.⁵³

- We come now to inquire where has the seed of Joseph gone to? If they had taken up their residence in any part of what is technically called the old world would not history have informed us of the fact? There is no place except *North and South America* to which they could have gone, if the old world furnishes no trace of them. The *continent of America* is the only place where the prophecies concerning Joseph and his seed could be fulfilled.⁵⁴
- The Book of Mormon informs us that Christ visited *this continent* after the resurrection, and we believe it, because it is in perfect accord with the glorious attributes of Jehovah. He would never leave *one half of the world* in darkness on the subject of revelation, and then punish his creatures eternally for not believing what they never heard. Let orthodox preachers and believers in that doctrine make the most they can from this statement.⁵⁵
- At the time that book was translated there was very little known about ruined cities and dilapidated buildings. The general presumption was, that no people possessing more intelligence than our present race of Indians had ever inhabited *this continent*, and the accounts given in the Book of Mormon concerning large cities and civilized people

53. W. I. Appleby, *Mormonism Consistent! Truth Vindicated, and Falsehood Exposed and Refuted: Being a Reply to A. H. Wickersham* (Wilmington, DE: Porter & Nafe, 1843), 17–18, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3595>.

54. George J. Adams, *A Lecture on the Authenticity & Scriptural Character of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: J. E. Farwell, 1844), 17, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3886>.

55. Adams, *Authenticity & Scriptural Character of the Book of Mormon*, 22, emphasis added.

having inhabited this land, was generally disbelieved and pronounced a humbug. Priest, since then has thrown some light on this interesting subject. Stephens in his “Incidents of Travels in *Central America*,” has thrown a flood of testimony, and from the following statements it is evident that the Book of Mormon does not give a more extensive account of large and populous cities than those discoveries now demonstrate to be even in existence.⁵⁶

- As to the original inhabitants of *the continent of America*, the Book of Mormon, backs up the description of immense “ruins” in *Central America*, dispels all doubt.⁵⁷
- For this reason we copy the foregoing eulogy on General Joseph Smith, one of the greatest men that ever lived on the earth; emphatically proved so, by being inspired by God to bring forth the Book of Mormon, which gives the true history of the natives of *this continent*; their ancient glory and cities:— which cities have been discovered by Mr. Stevens in *Central America*, exactly where the Book of Mormon left them.⁵⁸

During the Prophet’s tenure as editor, writers for the *Times and Seasons* used similar language to describe the evidence for the Book of Mormon found throughout the Americas:

- Babylon, Ninevah, nor any of the ruins of the Levant could boast of more perfect sculpture, better architectural designs, and more imperishable ruins, than what are found on *this continent*. *Stephens and Catherwood’s* researches in *Central America* abundantly testify of this thing. The stupendous ruins, the elegant sculpture, and the magnificence of the ruins of *Guatamala*, and other cities, corroborate this statement, and show that a great and mighty people—men of great minds,

56. “Ancient Ruins,” *Times and Seasons*, 1 January 1844, 390, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,4146>.

57. “Ancient Ruins,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 December 1844, 746, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,4088>.

58. *Times and Seasons*, 1 April 1845, 855, emphasis added, accessed 12 August 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,9449>.

clear intellect, bright genius, and comprehensive designs inhabited *this continent*. Their ruins speak of their greatness; the Book of Mormon unfolds their history.⁵⁹

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary defined a continent as "a great extent of land, not disjoined or interrupted by a sea; a connected tract of land of great extent; *as the Eastern, and Western Continent*. It differs from an isle only in extent."⁶⁰ Here, as defined in the language of Joseph Smith's day, we have the idea of two main continents—a new, western or American continent and an old or eastern one. "Formerly two continents were reckoned, the Old and the New; the former comprising Europe, Asia, and Africa, which form one continuous mass of land; the latter, North and South America, forming another."⁶¹ In their discussions of the Book of Mormon, early writers also spoke in terms of two main continents. Variants of this conception were common, as can be seen from the following examples:

- The Holy Bible professes to be a history of the peopling of the *old continent*—the Golden Bible of the *new continent*.⁶²
- If Moses and the prophets, Christ and his apostles, were the real authors of the bible, chiefly revealed and written on *the continent of Asia*, was not the book of Mormon also written by men who were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, on *the continent of America*? And did not Jesus Christ as truly appear on *the continent of America*, after his resurrection, and choose twelve apostles to preach his gospel; and did he not

59. "American Antiquities," *Times and Seasons*, 15 July 1842, 860, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3419>.

60. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), s.v. "continent," emphasis added.

61. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "continent," 5.a., emphasis added, accessed 23 September 2010, <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

62. William Owen, "A Comparison between the Book of Mormon and the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, or The Golden Bible vs. The Holy Bible," *Free Enquirer* (New York), 10 September 1831, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,399>.

deliver his holy doctrine, and teach the same to numerous multitudes on *this American continent*?⁶³

- A history of the inhabitants who peopled *this continent, previous to its being discovered to Europeans by Columbus*, must be interesting to every man.⁶⁴
- My last letter was mainly confined to the book of Mormon, which rarely fails to bring to my mind something about *the Indians*, whose history and doings, upon *this western continent*, it unfolds as plainly, as the bible does those of the *Israelites on the eastern continent*.—Having such a view before me, I have concluded to add a second part to my last letter, and give a few ideas concerning the Indians and Israelites.⁶⁵
- The bible was written by a people upon the *Eastern continent*, but the Book of Mormon by a people upon *this continent*.⁶⁶
- A nation whose “bones are dried” and whose ruined temples and monuments have reposed for ages in silent, solemn, and awful grandeur, has now spoken from the dust and revealed to the world their history, and with it their prophecies and their testimony of Jesus as the risen Messiah and the Saviour of the world, not of *Asia* only, but of *America* also.⁶⁷
- [Speaking of the destruction mentioned in 3 Nephi] The Lord of heaven could not allow sin on *this continent* in the char-

63. Eli Gilbert to Oliver Cowdery, 24 September 1834, *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH), October 1834, 10, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,914>.

64. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, “Letter VII,” *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH), July 1835, 157, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,1036>.

65. W. W. Phelps to Oliver Cowdery, “Letter No. 11,” *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, OH), October 1835, 193, emphasis added, accessed 9 June 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,1041>.

66. E. Snow and Benjamin Winchester, “An Address to the Citizens of Salem (Mass.) and Vicinity,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 November 1841, 582, emphasis added, accessed 2 July 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3033>.

67. Parley P. Pratt, “A Letter to the Queen of England,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 November 1841, 594, emphasis added, accessed 2 July 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3041>.

acter of the people, no more than he could on the *Eastern continent*.⁶⁸

- The days are but few, thank the most high, before the Book of Mormon will be ranked with the Bible, as one of the best of heaven's blessings: one the ecclesiastical history of the *eastern* and the other of the *western continent*.⁶⁹

Porter and Meldrum's confused and highly strained interpretations result from a failure to understand the meanings of the terms discussed above. This is apparent in their discussion about the New Jerusalem. In his abridgment of the book of Ether, the prophet Moroni says that Ether prophesied of the latter days and the promises concerning the land:

And that it was the place of the New Jerusalem, which should come down out of heaven, and the holy sanctuary of the Lord. Behold, Ether saw the days of Christ, and he spake concerning a New Jerusalem upon *this land*. And he spake also concerning the house of Israel, and the Jerusalem from whence Lehi should come—after it should be destroyed it should be built up again, a holy city unto the Lord; wherefore, it could not be a new Jerusalem for it had been in a time of old; but it should be built up again, and become a holy city of the Lord; and it should be built unto the house of Israel. And that a New Jerusalem should be built upon *this land*, unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph, for which things there has been a type. (Ether 13:3–6)

Moroni used the phrase “this land” in referring to the future city of the New Jerusalem. Porter and Meldrum insist that “this surely must indicate that the land where both Ether and Moroni were writing from must have been within the boundaries of the present day nation of the United States of America, which is plainly understood to

68. John E. Page, “To a Disciple,” *Morning Chronicle* (Pittsburgh, PA), 1 July 1842, emphasis added, accessed 2 July 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3233>.

69. Page, “To a Disciple.”

contain the New Jerusalem by revelation” (p. 56). In support of their restrictive heartland view, they quote the Prophet Joseph Smith:

Now many will feel disposed to say, that this New Jerusalem spoken of, is the Jerusalem that was built by the Jews on *the eastern continent*: But you will see, from Revelations 21:2, there was a New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband; that after this, the Revelator was caught away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and saw the great and holy city descending out of heaven from God. Now there are two cities spoken of here. As everything cannot be had in so narrow a compass as a letter, I shall say with brevity, that there is a New Jerusalem to be established on *this continent*, and also the Jerusalem shall be rebuilt *on the eastern continent*. (p. 55, emphasis added)

Porter and Meldrum then offer their interpretation:

The Prophet Joseph Smith here declares that “this land” shall be the place of the New Jerusalem and adds that it is to be “established on this continent.” Here the prophet links “this continent” with the “very spot of land” for the New Jerusalem *indicating that it was not a hemispherical setting of which he was thinking*. Joseph knew where the New Jerusalem was to be built, what “continent” and what “spot of land” that was prophesied of in the Book of Mormon, and they are *all within the confines of North America and the Unites States*. (p. 55)

This misreading of the Prophet’s words is striking. Clearly we are to understand the phrase “*this continent*,” where the New Jerusalem is to be established, in the same way that we understand the corollary, juxtaposed term “*eastern continent*,” where the old Jerusalem was built. Taking the Prophet’s own words as a guide, one logically equates “*this continent*” with “western continent,” which is consistent with the early hemispheric interpretation of these promises. The Prophet employs similar usage in the 1842 Wentworth Letter:

This book also tells us that our Saviour made his appearance upon *this continent* after his resurrection, that he planted the gospel here in all its fulness, and richness, and power, and blessing; that they had apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers and evangelists; the same order, the same priesthood, the same ordinances, gifts, powers, and blessing, as was enjoyed *on the eastern continent*.⁷⁰

The most reasonable interpretation of the evidence is that the Prophet referred to all the Americas when he spoke of “this continent.”

Porter and Meldrum further argue:

Even though in the early 1800s the American continent was defined by Noah Webster’s dictionary to be all of North and South America, later refinements divide North America from South America as two distinct and separate continents. If a North American geographic setting is applied, then Joseph’s statement remains true both then and now, but if a South American setting is used, then Joseph’s statement was true only during his time, and is no longer true because Joseph was never on the South American continent. (p. 93)

The logic of this statement escapes me. How do *later* refinements have anything to do with how *Joseph Smith* used the word in his day, and why would a later usage after the Prophet’s death make his earlier usage wrong? The English dictionary of Joseph Smith’s day suggests a broader usage. Joseph Smith’s own writings suggest a broader usage. Latter-day Saints and non-Latter-day Saints read it broadly. Subsequent prophets and apostles use the term similarly, but Porter and Meldrum insist that “this land” and “this continent” can refer only to the land of the United States and that to suggest that “this continent” might include the entire hemisphere with Central and South America “would mean that either Joseph or Moroni made a mistake

70. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842, 707–8, accessed 25 October 2010, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3453.

in the description and the use of the demonstrative in pointing to ‘which’ continent” (p. 93).

“*This Country*”

In his 1842 letter to John Wentworth, the Prophet Joseph Smith gave an account of Moroni’s visit in which the angel informed him about the existence and location of the plates of the Book of Mormon. In this account, the Prophet wrote:

I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country [America], and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was [also] made known unto me. . . . The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit *this country*. This book also tells us that our Savior made his appearance upon *this continent* after his resurrection, that he planted the gospel here in all its fulness, and richness, and power, and blessing; that they had apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers and evangelists; the same order, the same priesthood, the same ordinances, gifts, powers, and blessing, as was enjoyed on the eastern continent.⁷¹

“It is important to note,” write Porter and Meldrum, “that the statements of Joseph contained in this letter boldly testify of his inspiration and the revelations on matters pertaining not only to the record and the history of the people, but also the land where it took place” (pp. 98–99). They continue:

The Prophet reveals in the above quote that the “remnant” of the people in the Book of Mormon are the “Indians that now inhabit *this country*,” [not all natives in the Western Hemisphere]. The Prophet Joseph then continues with the statement that “*This book* also tells us that our Savior made *His appearance upon this continent* after His resurrection;

71. Smith, “Church History,” 707–8, emphasis added.

that He planted the Gospel here.” . . . He states that the Savior appeared on “this continent” as recorded in the Book of Mormon. This should clearly indicate that the continent of South America is not included. Central or Mesoamerica is considered to be a part of the North American continent, but not a part of Joseph’s “this country” which unmistakably refers to the area and “country” in which he lived. (pp. 100–101)

The authors’ conclusions are not grounded in historical context and the usage of the time. They mistakenly assume that the words “this continent” must by definition exclude South America, but those words, as we have seen, do not exclude *any* portion of the Americas but are consistent with the hemispheric view of the Book of Mormon espoused by early Latter-day Saints. While the word *country* can sometimes refer to a nation such as the United States, it could also refer to “any tract of land, or inhabited land; any region, as distinguished from other regions.”⁷² “This country” can be read in a broad and generic sense, contrasting the land or region of the Americas from the eastern land or region of Europe or the land or region of Asia.⁷³ That this is Joseph Smith’s meaning can be shown from the Prophet’s writings and those of his close associates. In an article published in 1841, Parley P. Pratt, who was one of the earliest missionaries to the Lamanites, described the American Indians of North, Central, and South America as “Lamanites” inhabiting “a *country* of more than seven thousand miles long, and two thousand broad, extending from the frozen and scarcely explored regions of Hudson’s Bay on the north, to the extremity of Cape Horn, or the southern end of South America, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific, east and west.”⁷⁴ In July 1842,

72. Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “country.”

73. The Prophet speaks of those Native Americans who *now* inhabit this country. The word *now* suggests that they may have previously lived elsewhere, so the statement about “this country” does not necessarily tell us where in the land they may have lived before or during Book of Mormon times.

74. “Present Condition and Prospects of the American Indians, or Lamanites,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* (Manchester, England), 2 July 1841, 41, emphasis added, accessed 8 July 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u?/BOMP,2697>.

while Joseph served as editor of the *Times and Seasons*, the terms “this continent” and “this country” were used to include Central America:

If men, in their researches into the history of *this country*, in noticing the mounds, fortifications, statues, architecture, implements of war, of husbandry, and ornaments of silver, brass, &c.—were to examine the Book of Mormon, their conjectures would be removed, and their opinions altered; uncertainty and doubt would be changed into certainty and facts; and they would find that those things that they are anxiously prying into were matters of history, unfolded in that book. They would find their conjectures were more than realized—that a great and a mighty people had *inhabited this continent*—that the arts sciences and religion, had prevailed to a very great extent, and that there was as great and mighty cities on this continent as on the continent of Asia. Babylon, Ninevah, nor any of the ruins of the Levant could boast of more perfect sculpture, better architectural designs, and more imperishable ruins, than what are found on *this continent*. *Stephens and Catherwood’s* researches in *Central America* abundantly testify of this thing. The stupendous ruins, the elegant sculpture, and the magnificence of the ruins of *Guatamala*, and other cities, corroborate this statement, and show that a great and mighty people—men of great minds, clear intellect, bright genius, and comprehensive designs inhabited this continent. Their ruins speak of their greatness; the Book of Mormon unfolds their history.⁷⁵

In a letter written on 16 November 1841, thanking John Bernhisel for sending him a copy of Stephens and Catherwood’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, the Prophet said that “of all histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of

75. “American Antiquities,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 July 1842, 860, emphasis added, accessed 8 July 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?BOMP,3419>.

this country it is the most correct luminous & comprihensive.”⁷⁶ Here again, the use of “this country” to include Central America in connection with the Book of Mormon is unmistakable. This was just months before the Prophet wrote his letter to John Wentworth. So when he speaks of “the aboriginal inhabitants of *this country*” and the Indians “that now inhabit *this country*,” there can be little doubt that he and others were thinking in terms of all the Americas and not only the United States.

Has Book of Mormon Geography Been Revealed?

We have seen that phrases such as “this land,” “this continent,” and “this country” as used by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries lend no support for the limited North American “heartland” interpretation of Book of Mormon geography. Do other teachings of Joseph Smith provide evidence for that view? Porter and Meldrum think so, but as we will see, the examples they offer as support turn out to be nonexamples.

The Wentworth Letter

We have already cited the 1842 Wentworth letter, which, according to Porter and Meldrum, shows that Joseph Smith’s knowledge of Book of Mormon history was extensive. “Joseph Smith knew and was shown, as he testifies, who exactly the Book of Mormon people were, where they came from, their origins, how they and their civilization progressed. He also knew them so intimately as to understand their very laws and governmental system, as he recorded in the Wentworth Letter and as recorded by his mother” (p. 101). There is no doubt that the Lord revealed many things to the Prophet Joseph Smith, but at issue here is whether those things included the details of Book of Mormon geography.

As quoted earlier, in the Wentworth Letter, Joseph wrote:

76. Joseph Smith to John Bernhisel, 16 November 1841, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 533.

I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country [America], and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was [also] made known unto me.⁷⁷

Joseph stated that the angel gave him “a brief sketch” of these matters, not a long and detailed one that would give him an intimate knowledge of the intricacies of the Book of Mormon or its geography. In fact, all the things he describes are discussed in more detail in the record itself. The Book of Mormon speaks of the Israelite heritage of pre-Columbian peoples; tells where Lehi and his family came from; describes their journey from Jerusalem to America; details aspects of their growth, progress, civilization, laws, and governments under their kings and judges; records their fall from righteousness; and foretells the destiny of their descendant peoples. Significantly, of all the things that the Prophet said that Moroni revealed to him, the geography of the Book of Mormon narrative was not one of them.

In a recollection first recorded in 1845, the Prophet’s mother described family activities between the time Moroni first appeared in 1823 and the time when Joseph obtained the plates:

During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them.⁷⁸

Mother Smith recalled Joseph discussing the ancient inhabitants of the Americas, how some of them dressed and traveled, their ani-

77. Smith, “Church History,” 707.

78. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith, by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 83.

mals, their cities, their buildings, their mode of warfare, and their religious worship. Yet, as with the Wentworth Letter, there is no mention of geography in Lucy's description. This would lead one to conclude that of those things revealed to the Prophet, geography was not one of them.

A Newspaper Account

On 2 February 1833, the *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer* published part of a letter written by Joseph Smith that spoke of the Book of Mormon:

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians; having been found through the ministration of an holy Angel, translated into our own language by the gift and power of God, after having been hid up in the earth for the last fourteen hundred years, containing the word of God which was delivered unto them. By it, we learn, that our western tribes of Indians, are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them, and unto it, all the tribes of Israel will come, with as many of the gentiles as shall comply with the requisitions of the new covenant.⁷⁹

In reference to this account, Porter and Meldrum contend that “it cannot be claimed that Joseph had no knowledge about geography or that he never claimed any inspiration on the matter as has been done by many who support a setting contrary to the words of Joseph Smith” (p. 104). However, the Prophet said nothing in his letter about the ancient geographical setting of the Book of Mormon narrative. He spoke, rather, of the “land of America” (not the United States alone). He also referred to the American “Indians” a term that we have already seen was used in Joseph Smith’s day to refer to any Americans of Pre-Columbian descent. He spoke generally of the western tribes of Indians (most Indians at the time lived west of Rochester, New York).

79. Joseph Smith, “Mormonism,” *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer* (Rochester, NY), 2 February 1833, accessed 8 July 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?/BOMP,690>.

He did not say that some Indians are descendants of Book of Mormon peoples and other are not.

Joseph Smith's 1835 Account of Moroni's Visit

Next Porter and Meldrum cite a statement from the Prophet Joseph Smith in which he gave an account of the visit of Moroni:

He told me of a sacred record which was written on plates of gold, I saw in the vision the place where they were deposited, he said the indians, were the literal descendants of Abraham he explained many things of the prophesies to me.⁸⁰

According to Porter and Meldrum, “Joseph Smith was given, by revelation from a messenger of God (Moroni), the knowledge that the American Indians are the actual descendants of the house of Israel through Abraham. There are a number of documented occurrences of the prophet Joseph claiming to have had revelation on this matter, and each time he clearly indicated that the Native Americans in North America are the literal descendants, or ‘remnant’, of the Book of Mormon history” (p. 104).

Latter-day Saints have always believed that Abraham and Israel and Lehi were among the ancestors of Native American peoples. There is no support, however, for the authors’ claim that the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that the Native Americans of North America are the prophesied remnant while those of Central or South America are not. Latter-day Saint prophets and apostles have consistently taught that all Native American peoples are heirs to the promises spoken of in the Book of Mormon.⁸¹ Nor does the Prophet’s letter reveal a detailed knowledge of Book of Mormon geography.

Early Interactions with Native Americans

On 12 August 1841, a group of Sac and Fox Indians visited Nauvoo. As reported in the *History of the Church*, the Prophet Joseph Smith treated them with respect and gave them counsel.

80. Joseph Smith Journal, 9 November 1835, in *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1, 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 88–89.

81. See my discussion in “Losing the Remnant,” in this issue of the *Review*.

I conducted them to the meeting grounds in the grove, and instructed them in many things which the Lord had revealed unto me concerning their fathers, and the promises that were made concerning them in the Book of Mormon. I advised them to cease killing each other and warring with other tribes; also to keep peace with the whites; all of which was interpreted to them.⁸²

Porter and Meldrum argue that this account shows that the Prophet knew by revelation that these Indians were Lamanites and by implication that other groups were not (pp. 114–15). However, acknowledging the prophetic ancestry of these visitors, Joseph Smith did not exclude others. He spoke of what the Lord had revealed to him concerning the promises made to the fathers concerning them in the Book of Mormon. He also gave them counsel that is found in the Book of Mormon—that they should live peacefully (Mormon 7:4). Nothing in this passage quoted above suggests that the Prophet spoke of anything other than what the Lord had revealed through the Book of Mormon itself. And, again, the account says nothing of Book of Mormon geography or a revelation on that subject.

On 22 and 23 May 1844, Joseph Smith was visited by a group of Sac and Fox Indians who were living in Iowa. He told them that the

Great spirit wants you to be united and live in peace. Found a book (presenting the Book of Mormon) which told me about your fathers and Great spirit told me. You must send to all the tribes you can and tell them to live in peace and when any of our people come to see you treat them as we treat you.⁸³

Porter and Meldrum argue that Joseph’s words to this group of Indians show that the Book of Mormon promises and teachings could not also have reference to Native American peoples of Central and South America since “just days before his martyrdom, the Prophet repeated

82. *History of the Church*, 4:401.

83. Joseph Smith Journal, 23 May 1844, in Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 482.

again his understanding in relation to who the remnant Lamanites were” (p. 114). But Joseph’s language is not exclusive. He did not claim that these visitors were Lehite and other groups were not. It is also worth noting again that this reference says nothing about Book of Mormon geography or any revelation not already made clear in the Book of Mormon.

Zarahemla

In March 1841, in a revelation now known as section 125 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord counseled the Saints in Iowa to gather at several appointed locations:

What is the will of the Lord concerning the saints in the Territory of Iowa? Verily, thus saith the Lord, I say unto you, if those who call themselves by my name and are essaying to be my saints, if they will do my will and keep my commandments concerning them, let them gather themselves together unto the places which I shall appoint unto them by my servant Joseph, and build up cities unto my name, that they may be prepared for that which is in store for a time to come. Let them build up a city unto my name upon the land opposite the city of Nauvoo, and let the name of Zarahemla be named upon it. And let all those who come from the east, and the west, and the north, and the south, that have desires to dwell therein, take up their inheritance in the same, as well as in the city of Nashville, or in the city of Nauvoo, and in all the stakes which I have appointed, saith the Lord. (D&C 125:1–4)

Porter and Meldrum use this revelation to support their theory about the location of the ancient Zarahemla. Noting that the Book of Mormon speaks of the New Jerusalem as geographically distinct from Jerusalem (Ether 13:5), they argue that since the Lord called the Iowa settlement “Zarahemla” in revelation, it must be the same location mentioned in the Book of Mormon; otherwise, the Lord would have called the Iowa site “New Zarahemla” rather than “Zarahemla” to clarify the difference in location. “There is no indication that He named it for any other purpose than to establish an understanding

of where the ancient city may have stood” (p. 111). Really? The name *Zion*, besides referring to the Lord’s people (Moses 7:18), can refer to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:1); the City of Enoch (Moses 7:19, 63); Jackson County, Missouri (D&C 66:6); or the city to be built there (D&C 57:2). Each is a different geographical location named “Zion” by the Lord; none is called “New Zion.”

More important, Porter and Meldrum’s theory rests upon the assumption that it was the Lord who first designated the Iowa gathering site as Zarahemla. This, however, is not the case. On 2 July 1839, Joseph Smith and other church leaders visited the site in question. The entry published in the *History of the Church* reads as follows:

Spent the forenoon of this day on the Iowa side of the river. Went, in company with Elders Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith, and Bishops Whitney and Knight, and others, to visit a purchase lately made by Bishop Knight as a location for a town, and advised that a town be built there, *and called Zarahemla*.⁸⁴

The last three words of this entry, “and called Zarahemla,” were not written by Joseph Smith but were written into the “Manuscript History of Joseph Smith” by Elder Willard Richards when he recorded the history for that date sometime after the Prophet’s death in 1844.⁸⁵ However, referring to the settlement as “Zarahemla” before the March 1841 revelation is consistent with other historical evidence showing that the Saints already referred to the site by that name. Brigham Young, who began keeping a regular journal in early 1839, recorded that on 2 July 1839 “Brothers Joseph, Hyrum and others came over the river to Montrose, and went out on the prairie and looked out the sight for a city for the Saints, *which was called Zarahemla*.”⁸⁶ Elias Smith,

84. *History of the Church*, 3:382, emphasis added.

85. “Manuscript History of Joseph Smith,” 2 July 1839, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. See also *History of the Church*, 3:382, emphasis added; Dean C. Jessee, “The Writing of Joseph Smith’s History,” *BYU Studies* 11/4 (Summer 1971): 439–73; and Howard C. Searle, “Willard Richards as Historian,” *BYU Studies* 31/2 (Spring 1991): 41–62.

86. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young: 1801–1844*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 2 July 1839, emphasis added.

a cousin of Joseph Smith, recorded in his journal for 24 June 1839 the following: “Moved from Commerce to Lee County, Iowa Territory, and went on the farm bought of F. P. Blevins.”⁸⁷ In his journal for 16 August 1840, he recorded the death of the Prophet’s brother Don Carlos and noted that there was a “Conference at *Zarahemla*” on that day.⁸⁸ These early references to the name of the Iowa settlement previous to March 1841 indicate that the Saints referred to it as *Zarahemla* long before the revelation in question. There is no indication in these early sources that this designation was based upon revelation or even that it was Joseph Smith’s idea. This evidence suggests, rather, that the name did not originate with the March 1841 revelation and that the Lord was referencing a location already known among the Saints by that name. The purpose of the revelation was most likely to counsel the Saints to gather at the appointed place and not, as the authors suggest, to reveal the ancient location of a Book of Mormon city. The Saints did what they would often do—name places they lived after places mentioned in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. There is no compelling reason to associate the Iowa settlement with ancient *Zarahemla*.

Manti

Porter and Meldrum claim that Joseph Smith declared the ancient Book of Mormon city of Manti to be located near Huntsville, Randolph County, Missouri. They cite two documents as support. The first is an entry from the journal of Samuel D. Tyler, a Latter-day Saint who traveled with the Kirtland Camp to Missouri in 1838.⁸⁹ The second is an excerpt from the Manuscript History of the Church.⁹⁰ Based upon these two references, the authors claim, “The Prophet Joseph, according to these diary accounts, revealed where the Book of Mormon

87. Elias Smith Journal, 24 June 1839, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

88. Elias Smith Journal, 16 August 1840, emphasis added.

89. The Kirtland Camp refers to a group of Kirtland Saints who traveled to Missouri in 1838 and should not be confused with the 1834 Zion’s Camp.

90. The authors’ discussion here appears to be entirely dependent upon the 1938 article by Joseph Fielding Smith in the *Church News*, 10 September 1938, which was later reprinted in *Doctrines and Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:239.

city of Manti was located” (p. 110). Tyler’s journal for 25 September 1838 reads as follows:

We passed thro Huntsville, Co. seat Randolph Co. Pop. 450 & three miles further we bought 32 bu. of corn of one of the brethren who resides in this place (66) There are several of the brethren round about here & *this is the ancient site of the City of Manti, which is spoken of in the Book of Mormon* & this is appointed one of the Stakes of Zion and it is in Randolph Co. Mo. 3 miles west of the Co. seat.⁹¹

Contrary to the authors’ belief, there is no evidence that Tyler was reporting something he heard Joseph Smith say to the Kirtland Camp. In fact, the Prophet was not even present at the time. He did not travel with the Kirtland Camp from Ohio to Missouri but was already living in Far West, several counties away.⁹² Tyler never explains where he heard this information, nor does he attribute the ideas about the city Manti to Joseph Smith or a revelation on Book of Mormon geography. What was the source of this local hearsay? Was it based upon something Joseph Smith said, or does it reflect speculation among the local brethren? How accurately was it reported? The Tyler journal does not provide answers for these questions.

The second source the authors cite as evidence that ancient Manti was in Missouri is the Manuscript History of the Church. The relevant entry, for 25 September 1838, reads as follows:

The camp passed through Huntsville in Randolph County which has been appointed as one of the stakes of Zion, and is the ancient site of the City of Manti and pitched tents at Dark Creek, Salt Licks, seventeen miles. It was reported to the camp that one hundred and ten men had volunteered from Randolph and gone to Far West to settle difficulties.⁹³

91. Journal of Samuel D. Tyler, 25 September 1838, MS 1761, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, emphasis added.

92. Joseph Smith Journal, 25 September 1838, in Jesse, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Joseph Smith Papers*, 1:329.

93. “Manuscript History of Joseph Smith,” 25 September 1838, 829.

This second source, however, is not a contemporary journal written by the Prophet or by anyone else in the Kirtland Camp in 1838; it was actually written by Willard Richards after the Prophet's death. Comparative evidence suggests that Richards's entry was based upon the Tyler journal entry.

**TYLER JOURNAL,
25 SEPTEMBER 1838**

We *passed thro Huntsville, Co. seat Randolph Co. Pop. 450 & three miles further we bought 32 bu. of corn of one of the brethren who resides in this place (66) There are several of the brethren round about here & this is the ancient site of the City of Manti, which is spoken of in the Book of Mormon & this is appointed one of the Stakes of Zion & it is in Randolph Co. Mo. 3 miles west of the Co. seat. We progressed on 3 miles further to Dark Creek, Salt Licks, & pitched. . . . 17 miles. 733 + 17 = 750 Miles. . . . We hear that 110 men have volunteered to save being drafted & have gone from this Co. to Far West to settle some disturbances between the Missourians & Mormons & that they are collecting forces from many other Co's to settle perhaps they know not what themselves.*

MANUSCRIPT HISTORY, 1843?

The camp *passed through Huntsville in Randolph County* which has been *appointed as one of the stakes of Zion, and is the ancient site of the City of Manti and pitched tents at Dark Creek, Salt Licks, seventeen miles. It was reported to the camp that one hundred and ten men had volunteered from Randolph and gone to Far West to settle difficulties.*

When this portion of the history was first published in the *Millennial Star* in 1854, the entry read essentially the same as it did

in Richards's handwritten manuscript.⁹⁴ However, when church historian Andrew Jenson prepared it for publication in the *Historical Record* in 1888, he incorrectly assumed that the Prophet Joseph Smith was the source of this information. Consequently, Jenson inserted the words "which the Prophet said" immediately before the part of the sentence about Manti, making it read "which the Prophet said was the ancient site of the city of Manti."⁹⁵

Fortunately, there is another source, not cited by the authors, that sheds light upon the question. Elias Smith, a cousin to Joseph Smith, also kept a contemporary journal of the travels and activities of the Kirtland Camp. On this same day, 25 September 1838, he recorded the following:

We came through Huntsville the county seat of Randolph where we were told before we arrived there we should be stopped but saw nothing of the kind when we came through the town and heard no threats whatever, but all appeared friendly. 1½ miles west of Huntsville we crossed the east branch of Chariton and 1½ miles west of the river we found Ira Ames and some other brethren near the place *where the city of Manti is to be built* and encamped for the night on Dark creek 6 miles from Huntsville.⁹⁶

Elias Smith did not equate the land near Huntsville, Missouri, with the *ancient* location of Manti, but he indicated that this was the place where a *future* settlement named after the ancient one was "to be built." In light of the above, it would appear that the Missouri Saints in 1838 initially anticipated the establishment of a future settlement and stake of Zion in the region, much as they did later with the Zarahemla settlement in Iowa. Neither the Samuel Tyler nor Elias Smith journals,

94. "History of Joseph Smith," *Millennial Star*, 13 May 1854, 296. This is the source cited by Joseph Fielding Smith.

95. "Kirtland Camp," *The Historical Record*, July 1888, 601.

96. Elias Smith, "Journal of the camp of the Seventies during their journey from Kirtland to Far West," 25 September 1838, MS 4952, folder 2, Church History Library, emphasis added.

however, attribute these plans to any prophetic revelation on ancient Book of Mormon geography.

When church historian B. H. Roberts was preparing the *History of the Church* for publication, he reviewed original sources upon which the Manuscript History was based and revised parts of the narrative accordingly. Although it was apparently unavailable to earlier historians who wrote the Manuscript History, Roberts utilized the Elias Smith account instead of the portion of the Manuscript History based upon the Tyler journal. The entry for 25 September 1838, as first published in 1905 and all subsequent editions of the *History of the Church*, says that the village of Huntsville, Missouri, was “near the place where the city of Manti is to be built.”⁹⁷ Any attribution to the Prophet Joseph Smith or to Huntsville being the location of the ancient site was removed. Church leaders apparently felt that the words “the place where the city of Manti is to be built”—rather than “the ancient site of the city of Manti”—more accurately reflected what was said.⁹⁸ In any case, there is no authoritative link between Huntsville, Missouri, and the site of ancient Manti (or any other location mentioned in the Book of Mormon).

Zelph and the Question of Book of Mormon Geography

In support of their argument for a revealed Book of Mormon geography limited to North America, Porter and Meldrum cite the well-known passage on Zelph in the current edition of the *History of the Church*:

The visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us was a white Lamanite, a large, thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was known from the hill Cumorah or eastern sea to the Rocky mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part—one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from

97. *History of the Church*, 3:144.

98. Lamar C. Berrett, ed., *Sacred Places: A Comprehensive Guide to Early LDS Historical Sites: Missouri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 521.

a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.⁹⁹

Porter and Meldrum contend that upon the discovery of Zelph's remains the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith "important facts that pertain to the geographical setting of the Book of Mormon" (p. 105) and that "Joseph received a revelation from God and a vision of the past" not only about Zelph but also about "precisely where particular events of the Book of Mormon took place" (p. 106). If Zelph or Onandagus was "known from 'the Hill Cumorah or eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains'" (p. 106), then the hill where the Nephites and the Jaredites had their final battles was in New York, not Mesoamerica. The reference to the last great struggle with the Lamanites and Nephites "would exclude Mesoamerica" (pp. 106–7). Based upon this information, the authors conclude that "the Lord, through Joseph, could not have been any clearer that this very mound was within the boundaries of the Book of Mormon lands" (p. 107).

The evidence cited, however, is highly problematic. First, church leaders have advised caution about drawing unwarranted conclusions from the Zelph account. Elder John A. Widtsoe was familiar with the Zelph story but cautioned, "This is not of much value in Book of Mormon geographical studies, since Zelph probably dated from a later time when Nephites and Lamanites had been somewhat dispersed and had wandered over the country."¹⁰⁰ Second, the wording in the current edition of the *History of the Church*, which the authors cite, varies significantly from that of the first edition, published in 1904:

The visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose skeleton we had seen was a white Lamanite, a large thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus,

99. *History of the Church*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 2:79–80.

100. John A. Widtsoe, "Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?," *Improvement Era*, July 1950, 547.

who was known from the eastern sea to the rocky mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part—one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, during a great struggle with the Lamanites.¹⁰¹

In the 1950s Fletcher Hammond noted the variation between the 1904 edition and the second edition, published in 1948. In an attempt to determine the original reading, Hammond sought and obtained permission to examine the original Manuscript History of the Church.

Preston Nibley, assistant Church historian, and I, on August 29, 1957, carefully examined a microfilm copy of the original pen-and-ink entry of the Zelph incident in the Prophet's journal, and Brother Nibley has authorized me to say that the 1904 edition of the Documentary History of the Church, Vol. II at pages 79 and 80 correctly reports the "Zelph" incident; and that that part of the [1948] edition of the same history which differs from it is erroneous. That is to say that the Prophet Joseph did not say: "Onandagus who was known from the *hill Cumorah, or, eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains;*" but he did say: "Onandagus, who was known from *the eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains;*" he did not say Zelph was killed "during *the last great struggle of the Lamanites and the Nephites;*" but he did say Zelph was killed ["in a battle . . . during *a great struggle with the Lamanites.*"]¹⁰²

How did the additional wording get into the published *History of the Church*? In order to answer this question, it helps to know something about the primary sources upon which the Manuscript History was based, something that is strikingly missing from Porter and Meldrum's book and public presentation.

101. *History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1904), 79–80.

102. Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon*, 102–3. This was actually the Manuscript History, not the Prophet's journal.

The primary study of the Zelph episode was published in *BYU Studies* by Latter-day Saint historian Kenneth Godfrey in 1989.¹⁰³ Godfrey collected and reprinted each of the six primary sources on Zelph as well as Joseph Smith's 1834 letter to his wife Emma mentioning the "plains of the Nephites." He then analyzed each account of the episode as well as the background behind the entry in the published *History of the Church*. Godfrey stated:

These records are generally consistent with one another, but they leave a number of details in doubt. Who was Zelph? Was he a Nephite or a Lamanite? When did he die? What army was he in? . . . The answers to these questions cannot be given with certainty from the complex historical sources that resulted from this event. While this means that Book of Mormon scholars must remain tentative in drawing implications from this notable incident, *it does not diminish the fact that Joseph was moved by the spirit of revelation to speak about Zelph and his noble past in connection with Book of Mormon peoples or their descendants.*¹⁰⁴

Godfrey showed that the Prophet Joseph himself did not record the incident, and so we are dependent upon the accounts of six other members of Zion's Camp who were present during or near the time of the event. When these accounts are analyzed, it becomes clear that the Prophet received revelation about an individual named Zelph, but it is unclear what, if any, relationship Zelph and his activities may have had to the events and the geography of the Book of Mormon narrative.

A main source for the Zelph story was Wilford Woodruff's journal. In 1834 Woodruff was a recent convert who traveled with Zion's Camp. He recorded information about Zelph, some of which was later used by Willard Richards to write the Manuscript History. Woodruff

103. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *BYU Studies* 29/2 (1989): 31–56. See also Kenneth W. Godfrey, "What Is the Significance of Zelph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 70–79.

104. Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 33, emphasis added.

apparently did not write down his account of the event until several weeks later, perhaps after the camp's arrival in Missouri. He recorded:

While on our travels we visited many of the mounds which were flung up by the ancient inhabitants of this continent probably by the Nephites & Lamanites. We visited one of those Mounds and several of the brethren dug into it and took from it the bones of a man. . . . Brother Joseph had a vision respecting the person. He said he was a white Lamanite. The curs was taken from him or at least in part. He was killed in battle with an arrow. The arrow was found among his ribs. One of his thigh bones was broken. This was done by a stone flung from a sling in battle years before his death. His name was Zelph. Some of his bones were brought into the Camp and the thigh bone which was broken was put into my waggon and I carried it to Missouri. Zelph was a large thick set man and a man of God. He was a warrior under the great prophet /Onandagus/ that was known from the hill Camorah /or east sea/ to the Rocky mountains. The above knowledge Joseph received in a vision.¹⁰⁵

Woodruff's account, when examined against the other five accounts, raises questions in relation to what may have been revealed at the time about Book of Mormon geography. William Hamblin observes:

Woodruff's statement about Joseph mentioning Cumorah in the Zelph incident is unique among the six near-contemporary accounts, indicating that Joseph himself probably did not use the term, which was, rather, an interpolation of Woodruff. The question thus becomes, did Joseph himself originally use the word Cumorah as recorded by Woodruff's "known from the hill Camorah [*sic*] to the Rocky Mountains," or did he say "known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains," as recorded by McBride? None of the other accounts mentions ei-

105. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 1:10.

ther the Hill Cumorah or the Atlantic Ocean. Woodruff himself shows ambiguity on this point by inserting the phrase “or east sea” in his text. If Joseph had used the word Cumorah, we would expect it to appear in more of the early accounts of the incident. That the word Cumorah does not appear in other accounts demonstrates that the reference to Cumorah is probably Woodruff’s interpretation of what Joseph was saying, but not Joseph’s actual word.¹⁰⁶

This view that the geographical references may not reflect what the Prophet said finds further support in the fact that the wording about the hill Cumorah mentioned only by Woodruff was first written and then very clearly crossed out in the Manuscript History account of the incident. Godfrey explains:

In 1842 Willard Richards, then church historian, was assigned the task of compiling a large number of documents and producing a history of the church from them. He worked on this material between 21 December 1842 and 27 March 1843. Richards, who had not joined the church until 1836, relied on the writings or recollections of Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, and perhaps others for his information regarding the discovery of Zelph. Blending the sources available to him, and perhaps using oral accounts from some of the members of Zion’s Camp, but writing as if he were Joseph Smith, historian Richards drafted the story of Zelph as it appears in the “Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1.” With respect to points relative to Book of Mormon geography, Richards wrote that “Zelph was a white Lamanite, a man of God who was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus who was known from the [*hill Cumorah is crossed out in the manuscript*] eastern Sea, to the Rocky Mountains. He was killed in battle, by the arrow found among his ribs, during a [*last crossed out*] great struggle with the Lamanites” [*and Nephites crossed out*].

106. Hamblin, “Apologist for the Critics,” 477.

Following the death of Joseph Smith, the *Times and Seasons* published serially the “History of Joseph Smith.” When the story of finding Zeph appeared in the 1 January 1846 issue, most of the words crossed out in the Richards manuscript were, for some unknown reason, included, along with the point that the prophet’s name was Omandagus. The reference to the hill Cumorah from the unemended Wilford Woodruff journal was still included in the narrative, as was the phrase “during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.”

The 1904 first edition of the seven-volume *History of the Church*, edited by B. H. Roberts, repeats the manuscript version of Richards’s account. However, in 1948, after Joseph Fielding Smith had become church historian, explicit references to the hill Cumorah and the Nephites were reintroduced. That phrasing has continued to the present in all reprintings.¹⁰⁷

In an article published in 1995, Latter-day Saint historian Donald Cannon reviewed each of the primary sources relating to the Zeph story. Oddly, Cannon did not address the emendations in the Woodruff journal passage, its influence on the text of the Manuscript History entry, and the subsequent changes in the published *History of the Church*, all of which have direct bearing on the question of what Joseph Smith may or may not have known about Book of Mormon geography.¹⁰⁸ Cannon emphasized the reliability of each of the primary witnesses who recorded the event and the general consistency of their testimony, factors that were never disputed by Godfrey. Cannon’s evaluation of the sources, though brief and less complete, essentially mirrored Godfrey’s and did not dispute the basic historical facts. He concluded, “The journal accounts of Joseph Smith’s activities and his letter indicate that he believed that Book of Mormon history, or at least a part of it, transpired

107. Godfrey, “What Is the Significance of Zeph?,” 74–75.

108. Donald Q. Cannon, “Zeph Revisited,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Illinois*, ed. H. Dean Garrett (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1995), 97–111.

in North America.” He also cautioned that “we not reject the story of Zelph and its relationship to Book of Mormon geography.”¹⁰⁹ The question, however, was not what Joseph Smith and others believed, but *which, if any*, of these geographical views were based upon revelation. Cannon did not find that the historical sources regarding Zelph supported a limited North American setting, nor did he argue against a Mesoamerican setting for some Book of Mormon events, but he expressed hope that LDS scholars would “further investigate the connections between Central America and North America.”¹¹⁰ In a 1999 follow-up article to his earlier study, and responding in part to Cannon’s unfounded claim that he had discredited what Joseph Smith said or “sought to discredit the Zelph Story,”¹¹¹ Godfrey summarized his earlier findings, concluding, “I agree with historian Don Cannon that ‘we not reject the story of Zelph and its relationship to Book of Mormon geography;’ rather, we should be aware of how the story came to us as well as how it became a part of the history of the church.”¹¹² That background suggests that the Zelph story neither refutes nor supports the idea of a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon.

“Plains of the Nephites”

In June 1834, the Prophet dictated a letter to Emma that mentioned experiences of his journey from Ohio to Missouri with Zion’s Camp. He spoke of “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as proof of its divine authenticity.”¹¹³ I think it likely that Joseph Smith alluded to the Zelph episode in this letter, although he did not mention the warrior by name, his vision, or the details of what he may have learned through revelation. It is clear that he associated the mounds and bones encountered during the journey

109. Cannon, “Zelph Revisited,” 108–9.

110. Cannon, “Zelph Revisited,” 109.

111. Cannon, “Zelph Revisited,” 108, 111 n. 20. He offers no evidence for this claim.

112. Godfrey, “Significance of Zelph,” 77.

113. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 345–46.

with the remains of Nephites. It is unclear, however, what geographical information this statement might convey about Mormon's narrative, since "plains of the Nephites" is not a geographical designation in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon indicates that many Nephites and Lamanites migrated from the land with which the Book of Mormon is concerned to other regions (Alma 63:4–9; Helaman 3:3–16). Even those who migrated northward were eventually "hunted, and driven forth" and "scattered upon the face of the earth" (Helaman 3:16). We are left to wonder if Zelph died in battle defending Mormon's people in the late fourth century AD or if he perished defending a group of people who had previously migrated to parts of North America during or after Book of Mormon times. In any event, Joseph Smith's reference to the mounds, plains, and bones of the Nephites does not specify where in the Americas the events described by Mormon took place.

Joseph Smith, Central America, and the Book of Mormon

Porter and Meldrum favor early statements of Joseph Smith about the Book of Mormon above those expressed later during his years in Nauvoo. In doing so they create a distorted picture of the Prophet's views and claims. This is reflected in a chart found in the appendix to *Prophecies and Promises* (pp. 213–15). The chart provides a list of six criteria by which historical documents, including scriptural passages and statements of Joseph Smith about the Book of Mormon, can be evaluated and graded for reliability. The criteria include whether the statement was canonized as scripture, received by revelation, written in Joseph's hand, signed by Joseph, written in other handwriting, and not signed by Joseph or the author is unknown. The first three categories are grouped under "strongest," the last three as "weakest." More than a third of the statements on the chart come from scriptural passages in the Doctrine and Covenants. This is superfluous since Latter-day Saints do not doubt the reliability of the scriptures. What may be doubted is the appropriateness of applying such passages in a restrictive way that would exclude other parts of the Americas from

the land of promise or exclude Native Americans living outside the United States from being considered Lamanite.

Section 125 of the Doctrine and Covenants gets strong marks in the chart, but, as noted already, there is no reason to suppose that the name of the Iowa settlement was ever intended to identify the location of ancient Zarahemla. The Wentworth Letter, Joseph Smith's letter to the *American Revivalist*, and mention in the *History of the Church* of the visit from Sac and Fox Indians are given high marks, but as shown above, these sources say nothing about any revelation on Book of Mormon geography. The Zelph account is oddly lumped into one category rather than six separate accounts. It receives strong marks because Joseph Smith received a revelation, but weak marks because the accounts were written in the hand of others. It would have been more informative for the authors to treat each account separately. To give the Zelph account high marks, however, is somewhat problematic since the question is not whether Joseph Smith had a revelation, but whether the revelation on Zelph included information on geography. The evidence, as we have seen, does not appear to support that conclusion. Other items listed are factually wrong, seemingly intended to show that the evidence for Joseph's interest in Central America is weaker. Joseph Smith's 1834 letter to Emma Smith mentioning the "plains of the Nephites" receives a strong rating for being in Joseph Smith's own hand and being signed by him, while the Prophet's 1841 letter to John Bernhisel is rated weak because it was not written in the Prophet's own hand. In fact, both letters were dictated to scribes and signed by Joseph Smith and have equal evidentiary value.¹¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, documents and publications that appear during the Nauvoo period are all given weak ratings, including articles that appeared under the editorship of Joseph Smith. As such, the chart is not a particularly helpful or accurate guide to Joseph Smith's views.

The year 1841 saw the publication of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, by John Lloyd Stephens, with

114. Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 344, 533. Joseph's letter to Emma is written in the hand of James Mulholland, while the Bernhisel letter is written in the hand of John Taylor.

illustrations by Frederick Catherwood.¹¹⁵ This work not only recounted Stephens and Catherwood's travels to the region but also described for the first time many of the ruins found in what is now known as Mesoamerica. It was an instant success and was widely praised in the national press. A survey of literature on the Book of Mormon during the Nauvoo period demonstrates that Latter-day Saints were also interested in these discoveries and were quick to compare them with the claims of the Book of Mormon.

Porter and Meldrum contend that these associations between ancient Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon are inconsistent with the teachings and revelations of Joseph Smith:

The Prophet was clear and concise in his statements about Book of Mormon geography, yet doubtless, the allure and enticement of the majestic Mesoamerican ruins, and a burning desire for tangible proof seems to have infused the hearts and minds of at least a few of the early Church leaders including members of the Twelve who were very close to the Prophet Joseph. (p. 107)

This statement implies that early church leaders such as John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff were led astray by the desire for proof and thus ignored or discarded the teachings of Joseph Smith. Is this position consistent with the historical evidence?

Church members in Nauvoo became aware of Stephens and Catherwood's discoveries through an article published in the 15 June 1841 issue of the *Times and Seasons*. At this time the periodical was under the editorship of the Prophet's brother Don Carlos Smith and Robert B. Thompson, who noted the significance of the explorers' discoveries for Latter-day Saints in an article entitled "American Antiquities—More Proofs of the Book of Mormon."¹¹⁶ Several months later, John Bernhisel, a recent convert then serving as bishop over the

115. John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841).

116. "American Antiquities—More Proofs of the Book of Mormon," *Times and Seasons*, 15 June 1841, 440–42, accessed 27 October 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,8931>.

Saints in New York City, purchased a copy of the two-volume work, and on 8 September he wrote to Joseph Smith to inform him that he was sending a copy of the set “as a token of my regard for you as a Prophet of the Lord.”¹¹⁷ Bernhisel asked Wilford Woodruff, who was returning home from his apostolic mission in Great Britain, to carry the set back to the Prophet in Nauvoo, which he did.¹¹⁸

On the way home, Woodruff spent part of his time reading the work and was enthusiastic about its contents. On 13 September he recorded the following in his journal:

I spent the day in reading the 1st vol of INCIDENTS OF TRAVELS IN Central America Chiapas AND Yucatan BY JOHN L STEPHEN’S I felt truly interested in this work for it brought to light a flood of testimony in proof of the book of mormon in the discovery & survey of the city Copan in Central America A correct drawing of the monuments, pyramids, portraits, & Hieroglyphics as executed by Mr Catherwood is now presented before the publick & is truly a wonder to the world. Their whole travels were truly interesting.¹¹⁹

On 16 September he recorded that he had “perused the 2d Vol of Stephens travels In Central America Chiapas of Yucatan & the ruins of Palenque & Copan. It is truly one of the most interesting histories I have read.”¹²⁰ Happy to be home, Woodruff arrived in Nauvoo on 6 October.¹²¹

117. John Bernhisel to Joseph Smith, 8 September 1841, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 533.

118. “I received \$40 dollars of Dr John M Bernhisel for President Joseph Smith also Stephens travels in central America in 2 volums also one letter.” Wilford Woodruff Journal, 9 September 1841, in Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:124.

119. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 13 September 1841, in Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:126.

120. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 16 September 1841, in Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:126.

121. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 6 October 1841, in Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 2:131–32.

Joseph Smith dictated a letter to John Bernhisel on 16 November 1842 thanking him for the gift:

I received your kind present by the hand of Er [Elder] Woodruff & feel myself under many obligations for this mark of your esteem & friendship which to me is the more interesting as it unfolds & developes many things that are of great importance to this generation & corresponds with & supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon; I have read the volumes with the greatest interest & pleasure & must say that of all histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country it is the most correct luminous & comprehensive.¹²²

This letter shows unequivocally that Joseph Smith shared the excitement about these discoveries generated among his associates. It also, in effect, signaled his approval of such interests in connection with the Book of Mormon, an interest that can be seen in subsequent Latter-day Saint literature. Of particular interest are five articles that appeared in the *Times and Seasons* in 1842 when Joseph Smith served as editor. These articles, two signed “editor” and three left unsigned, promoted the work of Stephens and Catherwood among Latter-day Saints. These articles highlight Latter-day Saint interest in discoveries and also the feeling that they were consistent with and supportive of the claims of the Book of Mormon. At the same time, the evidence shows that varied interpretations of this data were entertained by Latter-day Saint writers and their leaders. I will focus on the question of Joseph Smith’s involvement and authorship of five *Times and Seasons* articles that were published under his tenure as editor. Then, after reviewing Joseph Smith’s role as editor of the *Times and Seasons*, I will indicate what wordprint analysis may suggest about the question.

122. Joseph Smith to John Bernhisel, 16 November 1841, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 533. The letter was in the hand of John Taylor.

Joseph's Concern with the *Times and Seasons* and His Editorship

Between 1839 and 1841, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles fulfilled an important mission to Great Britain, resulting in the conversion of several thousand British Saints.¹²³ This mission proved to be a blessing to the church as well as the quorum itself, but it was sometimes difficult for the Prophet to be separated from some of his closest and most diligent associates. This is reflected in some of the challenges associated with the *Times and Seasons*. In the spring of 1839, Elias Smith, Hiram Clark, and others traveled to Far West, Missouri, where they dug up and retrieved the printing press and the type that had been used to print the short-lived *Elder's Journal* in the summer of 1838.¹²⁴ These were brought back to Nauvoo, and the first issue of the *Times and Seasons* was printed in November 1839 under the editorship of Ebenezer Robinson and the Prophet's younger brother Don Carlos Smith.¹²⁵ On 1 December 1840, this partnership was dissolved and Don Carlos became the sole editor of the paper. Sometime afterward, the Prophet's scribe and friend Robert B. Thompson joined Don Carlos as editor. When the Prophet's brother died in August 1841, Ebenezer Robinson joined Thompson. When Thompson died just twenty days later, Robinson again became the editor and was joined by Gustavus Hill. Both would serve as editors until early 1842.

In the fall of 1841, the Prophet began expressing concerns about Robinson and Hill's ownership and operation of the paper. By this time, most of the Twelve had returned from Great Britain, and Joseph was increasingly anxious to place someone else in charge of the paper. On 20 November, Brigham Young recorded: "I met with six others of the Twelve in council, at my house, on the subject of the *Times and*

123. For a superb treatment of the subject, see James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David Whittaker, *Men with A Mission: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles, 1837–1841* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

124. *History of the Church*, 4:398; and Kyle R. Walker, "As Fire Shut Up in My Bones": Ebenezer Robinson, Don Carlos Smith, and the 1840 Edition of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Mormon History* 36/1 (Winter 2010): 6–9.

125. *Times and Seasons*, November 1839, 1–2, 16, accessed 27 October 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,9203> and <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,9210>.

Seasons, the Quorum not being satisfied with the manner Gustavus Hill had conducted the editorial department.”¹²⁶ On 30 November,

it was voted that Ebenezer Robinson be solicited to give up the department of printing the *Times and Seasons* to Elder Willard Richards.

Voted, that if Brother Robinson does not comply with this solicitation, Elder Richards be instructed to procure a press and type, and publish a paper for the Church.

Moved by Elder Young, and seconded by Elder Woodruff, that Lyman Wight and John Taylor present these resolutions to Brother Robinson.¹²⁷

On 17 January 1842, Brigham Young recorded that he “met in council with the Twelve at Joseph’s office. We consulted in relation to the printing and publishing, the council being unanimously opposed to E. Robinson’s publishing the *Book of Mormon* and other standard works of the Church, without being counseled so to do by the First Presidency.”¹²⁸ On 28 January the Prophet received a revelation in which the Lord told him,

Go and say unto the Twelve, that it is my will to have them take in hand the editorial department of the *Times and Seasons*, according to that manifestation which shall be given unto them by the power of my Holy Spirit in the midst of their counsel, saith the Lord. Amen.¹²⁹

On this same day Brigham Young wrote the following: “The Lord having revealed, through Joseph, that the Twelve should take in hand the editorial department of the *Times and Seasons*, I bought the printing establishment, for and in behalf of the Church, from Ebenezer Robinson, at a very exorbitant price. The reason I paid such a price was, because the Prophet directed the Twelve to pay him whatever he

126. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, 20 November 1841; compare *History of the Church*, 4:454.

127. *History of the Church*, 4:463.

128. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, 17 January 1842.

129. *History of the Church*, 4:503.

asked. One item of his bill was \$800, for the privilege of publishing the *Times and Seasons*, or good will of the office.”¹³⁰ On 3 February Wilford Woodruff recorded that

after consulting upon the subject the quorum appointed Elders J. Taylor & W Woodruff of the Twelve to Edit the Times & Seasons & take charge of the whole esestablishment under the direction of Joseph the Seer. Accordingly I left my station at the Nauvoo provision store & commenced this day to labour for the church in the printing esestablishment.

Elder Taylor & myself spent the afternoon in taking an invoice of the printing esestablishment & met in council in the evening at Joseph[s] store.¹³¹

On 19 February 1842, Woodruff indicated that “Joseph the Seer is now the Editor of that paper & Elder Taylor assists him in writing while it has fallen to my lot to take charge of the Business part of the esestablishment.”¹³² Woodruff did not specify precisely what Taylor’s writing assistance entailed. In the 1 March 1842 issue of *Times and Seasons*, the Prophet announced that he was undertaking editorship of the paper. “This paper commences my editorial career, *I alone stand for it, and shall do for all papers having my signature henceforward*. I am not responsible for the publication, or arrangement of the former paper; the matter did not come under my supervision. JOSEPH SMITH.”¹³³ It seems clear that this statement disavows Joseph’s sanction for previous editions of the *Times and Seasons*, the “former paper.” (As I have shown, Joseph and the Twelve disapproved of how Hill and Robinson had been handling things.) Joseph also declares his willingness to endorse “all papers having my signature henceforward.” This seems more than an endorsement of individual articles, but rather of newspapers for which he is listed as editor. The term *papers* does not

130. *Manuscript History of Brigham Young*, 28 January 1842.

131. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 3 February 1842. The price was \$6,600. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 4 February 1842, emphasis added.

132. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 19 February 1842.

133. *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842, 710, emphasis added, accessed 27 October 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,9155>.

mean documents in this context; it means newspapers published with Joseph as editor. The 1 March 1842 issue of the paper bore the note “The Times and Seasons is edited by Joseph Smith.”¹³⁴ The Prophet transferred editorial responsibilities for the paper to John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff no later than 12 November 1842.¹³⁵

What are we to make of Joseph’s role as editor? Evidence suggests that this title was not an empty one. In addition to Joseph’s known contributions, sources indicate that he read page proofs and sometimes collected and supplied content material to be used for the paper, including poetry from other newspapers. For most of his tenure, he was in or near Nauvoo and frequently visited and worked at the printing office and counseled with fellow apostles, including John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff. The Prophet was still in hiding from his enemies during September 1842, but he stayed close enough so he could continue to work quietly and address church business as opportunity allowed. Sometimes he was able to stay at home, where he managed to pose for a portrait for several days. Significantly, both Woodruff and Taylor were seriously ill during this time. “I commenced work this day,” Woodruff recorded on 19 September, “for the first time for 40 days.”¹³⁶ This means that Woodruff had been absent from the printing office for more than five weeks previous to 19 September. On 21 September the Prophet recorded that he had also met with John Taylor, “who is just recovering from a severe attack of sickness” and that he counseled Taylor “concerning the printing office.”¹³⁷ The two met again two days later. We do not know how long Taylor had been ill, but the fact that the two had been seriously ill suggests that the Prophet may have had to bear additional editorial burdens at that time. In any case, the fact that he met with Taylor several times suggests that Joseph was concerned and involved in editorial matters even when in hiding. Regardless of who wrote the *Times*

134. *Times and Seasons*, 15 March 1842, 718, accessed 27 October 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,9810>.

135. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 7–12 November 1842.

136. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 19 September 1842.

137. *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Vol. 2: Journal, 1832–1842*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 482.

and Seasons articles linking the Book of Mormon to Central America, Joseph Smith could not have been unaware of what was being written. Indeed, even if those articles were written by John Taylor or Wilford Woodruff, clearly Joseph knew what was being written.

During Joseph Smith's tenure as editor, the *Times and Seasons* published numerous articles of doctrinal and historical significance to the church. This content included the Prophet's translations of the Book of Abraham, the Wentworth letter, early installments of the "History of Joseph Smith," and two important letters from him on instructions relating to baptism for the dead. When we examine the content of the *Times and Seasons* during this period, we find that he rarely if ever signs his name "Joseph Smith" unless he is reproducing a letter or document written for a venue besides his own paper. Excluding items attributed to other contributors to the paper, there were two kinds of editorial articles and commentary: those signed "Ed" or "Editor(s)" and those left unsigned. Material attributed to the editor(s) included articles on doctrinal subjects such as baptism, baptism for the dead, the Holy Ghost, detecting false spirits and evil influences, revealed knowledge, and the government of God. In addition, several articles dealt with the Book of Mormon. Unsigned editorial material touched on persecution, the city of Nauvoo, the temple, apostasy, local events, and Central American ruins (the last item was treated three times).

The time came when Joseph Smith needed to turn his attention elsewhere. Wilford Woodruff wrote that the Prophet "wished us to take the responsibility of the printing Office upon ourselves & liberate him from it."¹³⁸ John Taylor formally took over as editor with the 15 November 1842 issue, in which the Prophet wrote:

I beg leave to inform the subscribers of the *Times and Seasons* that it is impossible for me to fulfil the arduous duties of the editorial department any longer. The multiplicity of other business that daily devolves upon me, renders it impossible for me to do justice to a paper so widely circulated as the

138. Wilford Woodruff Journal, 7–12 November 1842.

Times and Seasons. I have appointed Elder John Taylor, who is less encumbered and fully competent to assume the responsibilities of that office, and I doubt not but that he will give satisfaction to the patrons of the paper. As this number commences a new volume, it also commences his editorial career.
JOSEPH SMITH.

John Taylor wrote immediately thereafter:

The patrons of the Times and Seasons will unquestionably be painfully disappointed on reading the above announcement. We know of no one so competent as President Joseph Smith to fill the editorial chair, of which the papers that have been issued since he has been editor are sufficient evidence.

We do not profess to be able to tread in the steps, nor to meet the expectation of the subscribers of this paper so fully as our able, learned and talented prophet, who is now retiring from the field; but as he has promised to us the privilege of referring to his writings, books, &c., together with his valuable counsel, when needed, and also to contribute to its columns with his pen when at leisure, we are in hopes that with his assistance, and other resources that we have at our command, that the Times and Seasons will continue to be a valuable periodical, and interesting to its numerous readers.

JOHN TAYLOR.¹³⁹

To summarize the historical data:

1. Joseph Smith was well aware of the discoveries in Central America by Stephens and Catherwood.
2. He was, as were his close associates, very interested in the Central American discoveries and felt that they were important and should be known, and in his view they corresponded with and supported the claims of the Book of Mormon.

139. *Times and Seasons*, 15 November 1842, 8, accessed 27 October 2010, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/u/?NCMP1820-1846,8383>.

3. Joseph Smith was the editor of the *Times and Seasons* from about 1 March to 15 October 1842.

4. Between March and October 1842, the only men said to be working in the printing office were Joseph Smith, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff.

5. Five articles endorsing the work of Stephens and Catherwood were published while Joseph Smith was editor.

6. While acting as editor, Joseph Smith received assistance in writing from John Taylor.

Wordprint Analysis and the Question of Authorship

I have recently had the privilege of working with statistician Paul Fields and several of his associates on several projects involving the Book of Mormon. These projects deal with authorship attribution for a number of texts of interest to Latter-day Saints. *Authorship attribution* attempts to identify the author of a text based on writing style. Using quantitative measures to describe an author's writing style is technically called *stylometry* but is commonly referred to as *wordprint analysis*. The premise behind these studies is that an author has a unique style of writing and that his or her written work can be identified if a stylistic "fingerprint" is discernible in a document. One area of interest is the authorship of the *Times and Seasons* articles on the Book of Mormon that appeared in 1842. Because of the many pressures that Joseph Smith was under during 1842, my assumption has been that the unsigned articles of 15 September and 1 October 1842 were written by John Taylor.¹⁴⁰ Professor Fields and I are preparing a detailed treatment of our research that will be published by the Maxwell Institute.

One mathematical tool used in a stylometric investigation is *discriminant analysis*. This technique finds a linear combination of features that "discriminates" among items in known classes, just as plants or animals are categorized into species based on distinguishing features. The

140. Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 245–48.

discriminant function provides a formula that quantifiably characterizes items in known groups so that a new item of unknown group membership can be classified into the proper groups based on its features. In authorship attribution, noncontextual words are the features used to describe writing style. Noncontextual words do not convey the author's message, but they are the function words an author uses to construct his or her message. Examples of noncontextual words are *and, but, however, on, the, upon*. Interestingly, the frequency with which an author uses such words distinctively characterizes his or her writing style and can reveal the author's identity in comparison to other authors.

To investigate the probable authorship of the three small, unsigned editorials in the *Times and Seasons* that referred to "Zarahemla," we put them into one 1,000-word block so there would be sufficient data to measure word frequencies. Next we took texts from Joseph Smith's signed editorials, the editorials signed "Ed" or "Editor(s)," and the unsigned editorials appearing in the *Times and Seasons* from April through October 1842. These were segmented into thirty-six 1,000-word blocks to correspond in size with the "Zarahemla" text.

We also took writing samples from John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff, who were the only two other possible contributors to the editorials. We selected texts that were as close to the editorial genre as were available and encompassed the 1842 time frame. (Thus we did not utilize texts from Woodruff's diaries, since his personal writing style differs from his more public exposition.) We compiled thirty 1,000-word blocks for Taylor and twenty-four 1,000-word blocks for Woodruff, giving a total of ninety texts that we could use to build the discriminant function to test the probable authorship of the "Zarahemla" text. Next we identified seventy noncontextual words in the ninety writing sample blocks that best distinguished the writing styles of Smith, Taylor, and Woodruff. Using these words as the distinctive literary features for the candidate authors, we developed the discriminant function that would classify each writing sample into a group corresponding with the correct author 100 percent of the time. Although this is a seventy-dimensional problem, we can project

the relative relationships between the five groups—Smith, Taylor, Woodruff, Editor, and Unsigned—onto a two-dimensional plot.

The plot shows that the writing styles of Smith, Taylor, and Woodruff are clearly distinguishable. However, Smith, Editor, and Unsigned are not distinctively different. This is evidence that the editorials signed “Editor” and the unsigned editorials were likely written by Joseph Smith. Also shown on the plot is the composited “Zarahemla” editorial. It is clearly closest to the Smith-Editor-Unsigned group, providing evidence that Joseph Smith is the most likely author.

Cluster analysis is another tool for data exploration that is useful in authorship attribution. A cluster analysis groups items into pairs that are closest to each other based on literary features but without using the information about known group membership. This provided additional evidence that the “Zarahemla” editorial fits best with the “Editor” and “Unsigned” groups. Moreover, we could see some evidence that the work in the editorial office in 1842 could have been highly collaborative since the writing samples of the three authors were spread throughout the clusters. Further, we could see that John Taylor might have worked closely with Joseph in writing some of the editorials since his style seemed to be partially manifested in some of the “Editor” and “Unsigned” texts. In addition, some of the pairings indicated some evidence that Wilford Woodruff influenced some of Joseph’s writing as well.

Conclusion

In 1843 Joseph Smith acknowledged in an interview with a reporter from the *Pittsburgh Gazette* that he was indeed a prophet and that the Lord did reveal himself to him, but he also explained that he did not always get revelation when he asked for it. “Speaking of revelations, he stated that when he was in a ‘quandary,’ he asked the Lord for a revelation, and when he could not get it, he ‘followed the dictates of his own judgment, which were as good as a revelation to him; but he never

gave anything to his people as revelation, unless it was revelation.”¹⁴¹ The preponderance of evidence does not support the claim that Joseph Smith’s revelations included details about Book of Mormon geography, but rather suggest that this, as with many other questions, was an issue in which Joseph Smith, as time allowed him to give it attention, followed the dictates of his own judgement and expressed his own opinion. It seems that when Joseph used terms such as “this land,” “this continent,” or “this country,” he was adopting the wording of his associates who viewed the Book of Mormon in broad terms inclusive of all the Americas. The claim that these terms were intended to exclude any portion of the Americas or its peoples from the promises and prophecies in that book is unfounded. The evidence demonstrates that Joseph shared the interest of his fellow Latter-day Saints in any discoveries that might shed light on the authenticity and historicity of the Book of Mormon, wherever they came from, including those from Central America. He never seems to have given any indication that these opinions were based upon more than a certain knowledge that the Book of Mormon was true and that one day the Lord would make all things clear. There is likewise no indication that he ever set forth a detailed geographical model for the Saints. As editor of the *Times and Seasons*, he oversaw the publication of five articles on these discoveries. Authorship attribution analysis through wordprint analysis lends no support for the claim that these articles were ghostwritten by others. This analysis, together with historical evidence, suggests that Joseph Smith was not editor in name only. Instead, he was very much involved in the oversight, writing, and preparation of these articles on the Book of Mormon, with John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff possibly providing some input as well.

I believe these findings underscore the wisdom of the neutrality of the Brethren on the question of Book of Mormon geography. We cannot avoid the hard work, faith, and earnest study that some questions require by an easy appeal to something Joseph Smith or someone else

141. “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, etc.,” *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, 15 September 1843, in *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Vol. 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 443.

has said. The sincere and diligent study of Book of Mormon geography can be a worthy endeavor if kept in perspective. Each reader of the Book of Mormon must judge the scholarly merits and value of such work. Hopefully, we will each judge wisely and hold fast to every good thing (1 Thessalonians 5:21). In the meantime, differences of opinion about the details of Book of Mormon geography and other questions of secondary importance need not be a cause of stumbling. The counsel of Franklin D. Richards seems applicable:

Tell the Saints that if this stone does not seem to fit into the great building of their faith just now, to roll it aside. You can help them to roll it aside out of their way, so that they will not stumble against it while at their daily duties, and it will be but a very short time till they will find a place in their building where no other stone will fit, then it will be on hand all right, and will come into its place in the building without the sound of hammer or chisel.¹⁴²

142. Franklin D. Richards, *Millennial Star*, 26 August 1854, 534–35.

