

# Book Reviews

JOHN L. SORENSON. *Mormon's Map*. Provo: FARMS, 2000. ix; 154 pp. Maps, notes, index. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Martin H. Raish

I have tremendous respect for the many Book of Mormon studies John Sorenson has previously written. Having been privileged to work with him on some of these, I know he is a careful researcher who meticulously supports his positions with appropriate and important evidences. So I anticipated that *Mormon's Map* would be up to the standards I expect from him and FARMS. I was not disappointed.

*Mormon's Map* carefully and concisely accomplishes what it sets out to do: to help readers “gain a better understanding of Book of Mormon geography and the benefits associated with that [understanding]” (8). The map, though admittedly tentative, offers three “services” to readers of the Book of Mormon: to provide “a model that we can apply to stories from the record to check their consistency and perhaps shed new light on factors they involved that had not occurred to us before”; to “discern new questions about geography—that is, see gaps in our knowledge for which we might seek answers by consulting Mormon’s text anew”; and to summarize a set of criteria “against which to evaluate proposals for where in the external world Nephite lands were located” (127).

The book is organized around a series of questions, beginning with “Does geography in the Book of Mormon matter?” (2). Sorenson supplies an inspiring answer—that such knowledge can enhance our understanding and appreciation of the Nephites and their sacred record as well as enable us to “lift up [our] hearts and rejoice” by “penetrating as thoroughly as possible what was in the hearts and minds of the scripture makers at the time they wrote” (2).

In setting out to discover “the map in Mormon’s mind” (12), Sorenson first spells out five assumptions on which his efforts are based:

1. “the expressions ‘up,’ ‘down,’ and ‘over,’ when used in a geographical context, refer to elevation” (13);
2. “nature worked the same anciently as it does today. . . . A river implies the presence of a corresponding drainage basin” (13);
3. “ideas in the record will not necessarily be familiar or clear to us” (13);

4. “Book of Mormon terminology will not necessarily be clear to us, even in translation” (13);
5. when faced with competing explanations for a particular problem, we ought to seek the simpler one.

The remaining one hundred pages of the book deal with half a dozen aspects of the problem Sorenson addresses: the overall configuration of the land, the surface of the land, distances and directions, the Nephites’ environment and the ways they exploited it, civilization, and historical geography. For each chapter, Sorenson asks pointed questions, the sort we can imagine asking Mormon in person if we could, such as “What was the nature of the ‘narrow neck of land?’” (20) and “Where were the people of Zarahemla, or Mulekites, located before Mosiah<sub>1</sub>’s arrival among them?” (109). To each he presents short but thoroughly documented answers.

This documentation includes hundreds of references to scriptures and half a hundred citations to scholarly works in religion, anthropology, and history. Several of these are to earlier publications by Sorenson that contain still additional citations.<sup>1</sup> Together, these references provide persuasive support for his proposed locations of physical features, cities, and events. The book is further enhanced by seventeen smaller maps that clarify some of the more complicated or little understood events and issues, such as “The Amlicite Conflict” (63) and the “Possible Distribution of Cities Destroyed according to 3 Nephi 8–9” (119).

This is not to say that everything is clear and fits flawlessly together or that I agree with all of Sorenson’s conclusions. But for the overall scheme and most of the specifics, I find his arguments compelling. Where doubts remain, these are almost always because we lack essential information in the record.

Serendipitously, within a week or two of buying my copy of *Mormon’s Map*, I also discovered three fairly new books that tried to connect the Book of Mormon to the physical world.<sup>2</sup> It was instructive to read these and compare their criteria with those that Sorenson presented. One of these books, for example, has the River Sidon flowing to the south, toward the Land of Nephi,<sup>3</sup> rather than away from it to the north, as Sorenson concluded it must. I agree with Sorenson—such an arrangement is simply not justified by the ancient text.

Furthermore, this other author claims that the three references in the Book of Mormon to a “narrow neck of land” (Alma 22:32, Alma 65:3, Ether 10:20) refer to three distinct physical features, while Sorenson considers them all to be descriptions of the same element. Which is the correct understanding? I will leave you to decide, urging you to read *Mormon’s Map* slowly and carefully, to study the maps, and to reread the pertinent passages in the scriptures. It will be worth the effort.

However, I must remind you that trying to fit Mormon's map into the real world is but the third of the three "services" the map "can furnish" (127). Sorenson's more important goal is to help us better understand and appreciate the stories and people of the sacred text. I will close with an example of how this worked for me. Shortly after reading the explanation that the city of Nephi (or Lehi-Nephi) was higher in elevation than Zarahemla (32–33), I was reading Mosiah 7:1–4 and noticed how these verses consistently speak of people from Zarahemla traveling "up" to Nephi (see also Omni 1:13, where the people of Nephi originally fled "down" to the land of Zarahemla). I was reminded of the same relationship between Jerusalem and Jericho, the latter city being more than three thousand feet lower in elevation than the first, and the story of "a certain man [who] went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves" (see Luke 10:30). Having traveled the steep highway between these two cities, I can better appreciate this parable of the Good Samaritan and his experiences as he traveled "down" to Jericho.

Similarly, knowing that the people of the Book of Mormon also traveled up, down, over, and across in a world as real as that of the Bible can help us more fully "liken the concrete problems of the prophets' lives—their dilemmas and how they were delivered from them—to those we feel in our own lives" (3). *Mormon's Map* is an excellent aid to discovering "how God's dealings with them can be applied to our relationship with him" (3).

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1. For example, John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo: FARMS, 1992).

2. Jerry L. Ainsworth, *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* (n.p.: Peacemakers Publishing, 2000); Blaine M. Yorgason, Bruce W. Warren, and Harold Brown, *New Evidences of Christ in Ancient America* (Provo, Utah: Book of Mormon Research Foundation and Stratford Books, 1999); Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon, Version 2.2.55* (Provo: Tepran, 1999).

3. Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi*, 51–60.