

Book of Mormon Geography

Overview

The Book of Mormon includes a history of an ancient people who migrated from the Near East to the Americas. This history contains information about the places they lived, including descriptions of landforms, natural features, and the distances and cardinal directions between important points. The internal consistency of these descriptions is one of the striking features of the Book of Mormon.

Since the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830, members and leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have expressed numerous opinions about the specific locations of the events discussed in the book. Some believe that the history depicted in the Book of Mormon—with the exception of the events in the Near East—occurred in North America, while others believe that it occurred in Central America or South America. Although Church members continue to discuss such theories today, the Church’s only position is that the events the Book of Mormon describes took place in the ancient Americas.

The Prophet Joseph Smith himself accepted what he felt was evidence of Book of Mormon civilizations in both North America and Central America. While traveling with Zion’s Camp in 1834, Joseph wrote to his wife Emma that they were “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 and their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity.”¹ In 1842, the Church newspaper *Times and Seasons* published articles under Joseph Smith’s editorship that identified the ruins of ancient native civilizations in Mexico and Central America as further evidence of the Book of Mormon’s historicity.²

The Church does not take a position on the specific geographic locations of Book of Mormon events in the ancient Americas. Speculation on the geography of the Book of Mormon may mislead instead of enlighten; such a study can be a distraction from its divine purpose.

Individuals may have their own opinions regarding Book of Mormon geography and other such matters about which the Lord has not spoken. However, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles urge leaders and members not to advocate those personal theories in any setting or manner that would imply either prophetic or Church support for those theories. All parties should strive to avoid contention on these matters.

Speaking of the book’s history and geography, President Russell M. Nelson taught: “Interesting as these matters may be, study of the Book of Mormon is most rewarding when one focuses on its *primary* purpose—to testify of Jesus Christ. By comparison, all other issues are incidental.”³

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1. 1. Letter to Emma Smith, June 4, 1834, in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Volume 4: April 1834–September 1835*, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey and others (2016), 57; spelling standardized.
2. 2. “Traits of the Mosaic History, Found among the Azteca Nation,” *Times and Seasons*, June 15, 1842, 818–20; see also “American Antiquities,” *Times and Seasons*, July 15, 1842, 858–60. Although it is not clear how involved Joseph Smith was in writing these editorials, he never refuted them.
3. 3. Russell M. Nelson, “A Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” October 1999 general conference.