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The Treason of the Geographers: Mythical “Mesoamerican” Conspiracy and the Book of Mormon

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THE TREASON OF THE GEOGRAPHERS: MYTHICAL “MESOAMERICAN” CONSPIRACY AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

Matthew Roper

Abstract: The claim that God revealed the details of Book of Mormon geography is not new, but the recent argument that there was a conspiracy while the Prophet was still alive to oppose a revealed geography is a novel innovation. A recent theory argues that the “Mesoamerican theory” or “limited Mesoamerican geography” originated in 1841 with Benjamin Winchester, an early Mormon missionary, writer, and dissident, who rejected the leadership of Brigham Young and the Twelve after 1844. This theory also claims that three unsigned editorials on Central America and the Book of Mormon published in the Times and Seasons on September 15 and October 1, 1842 were written by Benjamin Winchester, who successfully conspired with other dissidents to publish them against the will of the Prophet. Three articles address these claims. This first article addresses two questions: Did Joseph Smith, as some have claimed, know the details of and put forth a revealed Book of Mormon geography? Second, what is a Mesoamerican geography and does it constitute a believable motive for a proposed Winchester conspiracy?

The Lost City of Zarahemla: From Iowa to Guatemala and Back Again is the latest manifestation of an ideological movement currently popular on the periphery of Mormon culture.¹ John Neville, an attorney and part-time novelist, has spun a tale of conspiracy that may tantalize some readers but is more fiction than history. The argument that

1 See Matthew Roper, “Losing the Remnant: The New Exclusivist ‘Movement’ and the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 87–124; Roper, “Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 15–85.

Joseph Smith knew the details of Book of Mormon geography through revelation is not new, but the claim that there was a conspiracy while the Prophet was still alive to oppose a revealed geography is a notable innovation. Neville claims that what he calls the “limited Mesoamerican geography” originates in dissident Mormon circles beginning with Benjamin Winchester, an early convert and writer who left the Church after the death of Joseph Smith.² He claims that three unsigned editorials on Central America and the Book of Mormon published in the *Times and Seasons* on September 15 and October 1, 1842, were written by Winchester rather than Joseph Smith and close associates, as some scholars believe.³ According to Neville, “the articles are momentous because they place Book of Mormon events in Mesoamerica, specifically Guatemala. ... The articles are unusual because the Central American identification is at variance with other statements Joseph made placing Book of Mormon events in North America” (5). The publication of these articles was part of an elaborate scheme to get Winchester’s controversial ideas about the Book of Mormon in print:

In March 1841, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation naming the area of Iowa across from Nauvoo as Zarahemla. That same month, a man Joseph described as rotten at heart, who would injure the Church as much as he could, began a scheme to move Zarahemla to Guatemala. His efforts culminated in an article in the Church’s *Times and Seasons* on 1 October 1842. From that date until now, this man’s scheme has succeeded.⁴

Neville claims that Winchester — motivated by excessive zeal and convinced that his new idea would win more converts to the

2 See David J. Whittaker, “Early Mormon Pamphleteering.” (PhD Diss., Brigham Young University, 1982); Whittaker, “East of Nauvoo: Benjamin Winchester and the Early Mormon Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 21/2 (Fall 1995): 31–83; Stephen Fleming, “Discord in the City of Brotherly Love: The Story of Early Mormonism in Philadelphia,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 5/1 (Spring 1994): 3–28.

3 See Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and Atul Nepal, “Joseph Smith, the *Times and Seasons*, and Central American Ruins,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/2 (2013): 84–97.

4 John Neville, *The Lost City of Zarahemla: From Iowa to Guatemala and Back Again* (New York: Let Me Read It.com 2015), Back cover. As will be discussed in this article, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith ever believed that the Book of Mormon city of Zarahemla was in Iowa.

Church — conspired to get his ideas accepted and published. This new interpretation, Neville insists, contradicted Joseph Smith’s revelations that established that the Book of Mormon took place in North America and not Central or South America. He claims that the “Mesoamerican theory” of Book of Mormon geography has resulted in a number of “evils” that have “hurt” the Church, undermined faith in Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, and continues to have a baleful effect on its members.⁵ “The negative impact of Winchester’s Mesoamerican approach — ‘the evils that may result therefrom’ — may have started in the 1840s, but it continues today, perhaps more than ever” (191). It “permeates Church publications” including the *Ensign* and Church manuals (1, 191, 331). Neville decries “the widespread depiction of a Mayan influence, such as the Friberg paintings ... and numerous related books, videos, and even packaged tours” (5). “Other evils include essays addressing challenging

5 Neville hijacks the term *evils* from the words of George Q. Cannon, “The Book of Mormon Geography,” *Juvenile Instructor* (1 January 1890), 18–19, and misapplies the apostle’s words to the Mesoamerican approach to Book of Mormon geography. This is misleading. Cannon explained why the Church did not give official sanction to any map of Book of Mormon lands and noted that official endorsement of individual opinions might lead to confusion by giving them a stamp of approval that was not intended. No official map was to be adopted, while careful individual study Book of Mormon geography was encouraged. Neville complains that while the Church has no official position on the matter, that policy is undermined by artwork that depicts the Book of Mormon in a Mesoamerican setting (191). Ideas and images from Mesoamerica have certainly influenced Book of Mormon art, but this hardly constitutes official endorsement of any map. Under the old hemispheric view, Latter-day Saints assumed that Mesoamerica was always at least a *part* of the land spoken of in the Book of Mormon, so one can understand why it was commonly represented. Art can be a powerful influence, but it may or may not reflect accurate history and is not always intended to. More importantly, the question of which artwork is used in Church settings likely has more to do with the artist’s perspective and what appeals to the viewer than any attempt by Church leaders to sponsor geographical theories. In any case, I am not aware of any Church policy that would discourage or prohibit LDS artists from portraying North American Mound Builder settings. The artist, of course, cannot expect that his work will be accepted or appreciated. The key factor will always be its quality and the artist’s ability to influence the viewer. For an informative introduction to some of the challenges faced by artists see Anthony Sweat, “By the Gift and Power and Art.” In Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness Unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015), 229–43; Richard Oman, “Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life: A Cross-Cultural Perspective in Contemporary Latter-day Saint Art,” *BYU Studies* 32/4 (Fall 1992): 5–34.

issues on the Book of Mormon recently made available on the Church website which make reference to the unsigned *Times and Seasons* editorials on Central America and the work of LDS scholars who support a Mesoamerican interpretation, and also “Church-approved artwork” depicting the resurrected Savior’s visit to the Nephites in a Mesoamerican setting (191).⁶ “Even today, 174 years later in the year 2015,” the negative influence of Mesoamerican ideas “is seen inside every one of the Church’s thousands of chapels around the world” (1). But not to fear, writes Neville, “replacing Mesoamerica with North America will strengthen the faith of members, encourage missionaries, and remove an unnecessary stumbling block for investigators” (357).

Lost City reflects a “Heartland” ideology in need of a villain, and Neville seeks to make Winchester the scapegoat for what he considers an original sin of Mesoamerican geography. “Although this is not a criminal case,” Neville writes, “I pretended it was” (7). Neville’s placement of his arguments within the adversarial context of a courtroom invites the case for the defense. This requires a wider range than the specifics of Neville’s conspiracy theory and an examination of the assumptions he has made about the nature of revelation and Joseph Smith that do not fit the known historical facts. I will cover the important background in three articles. Each will examine a different facet of Joseph Smith’s connection with ideas about Book of Mormon geography and correlations with Central America.

1. Neville presents his case under the presumption that a crime was committed. In order to commit a crime against a revealed geography, there should be evidence for such a revelation. If not, there was no crime to begin with and the effort to establish means, motive, and opportunity is irrelevant. This article will address two issues. First, what did Joseph Smith believe about

6. In a post on his blog, “Book of Mormon Wars,” dated July 31, 2015, Neville stated that his goal is “to replace the article on lds.org titled ‘Book of Mormon and DNA Studies.’” He also wrote, “If it wasn’t on lds.org, this article could be on an anti-Mormon site.” <http://bookofmormonwars.blogspot.com/2015/07/the-goal.html>. According to Michael Otterson, the head of the Public Affairs Department, “Although highly competent LDS scholars prepared the initial drafts, they had extensive review by Church History staff and other scholars. Their review was followed by a rigorous reading for accuracy and balance by the Twelve before approval by the First Presidency.” <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/full-transcript-michael-otterson-address-at-fair-mormon-conference>

Book of Mormon geography?⁷ Were Joseph Smith's *views*, insofar as they can be known to us, based upon revelation, his own opinions, or a combination of both? Second, what exactly is a "Mesoamerican geography"? Does it constitute a believable motive for Winchester's theoretical "scheme"? Neville's argument rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of early geographical interpretations that requires correction and clarification.

2. Once the background context has been established, I will discuss the implications for Neville's theoretical conspiracy. A second article will discuss the influence of Stephen's and Catherwood's 1841 publication of *Incidents of Travel in Central America* on early thinking about the Book of Mormon, including that of Joseph Smith.
3. Having laid this historical foundation, a third article will then revisit the question of who authored the unsigned editorials in 1842. We will expand our pool of potential candidates for the authorship of those articles to include Benjamin Winchester and others in order to evaluate Neville's claims and then discuss the implications of our findings.

A Revealed Book of Mormon Geography?

Neville argues that the idea that Joseph Smith may not have been an expert on geographical information in the text of the Book of Mormon, that he may have had and expressed opinions and drew his own deductions about some matters such as geography, is "evil" and "undermines faith in the Prophet's calling as prophet, seer, and revelator" (192). He insists that because the Prophet spoke with angelic messengers, translated the Book of Mormon, and later went through the manuscript and made corrections to the text, that he was an expert on the *meaning* of the text. The issue of "what Joseph knew" about Book of Mormon geography ought to be approached as a research question, not a theological given. Neville insists that Joseph knew, but did not tell, or perhaps could not tell (164). But how can Neville know what Joseph knew if Joseph didn't say?

Latter-day Saint scripture suggests that prophets and seers received many revelations, but sometimes, for various reasons, did not always fully understand what the Lord had given them. Lehi saw the Tree of Life and much else in vision. Nephi saw the things that his father saw. When

⁷ For a previous discussion of this issue see Roper, "Joseph Smith, Revelation and Book of Mormon Geography," 15–70.

his brothers asked Nephi to explain one of the geographical features of the vision — the river — Nephi said it represented filthiness and “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 or be prepared and able to interpret every aspect of them. Alma’s teachings to Corianton about resurrection of the body provide additional insight (Alma 40:3–10, 16–22). Alma was careful to distinguish between what the Lord had revealed to him and what he had not. He knew of certain things only because he had made them a matter of diligent and persistent inquiry. He did not know the times appointed for resurrection of the body, but in the absence of more detailed information from God on the matter, saw nothing improper about expressing an opinion about it (Alma 40:20).

Writing with the wisdom of personal experience, Joseph Smith taught the Saints that “it <is> a great thing to enquire at the hand of God, or to come into his presence and we feel fearful to appro[a]ch him on subject[s] that are of little or no consequen[ce], to satisfy the enquiries of individuals.”⁸ There is nothing wrong with the study of Book of Mormon geography, and careful study of the text rewards the reader as many can attest, but in the Lord’s eyes, the need for *revelation* on the location of Zarahemla may not fall high on the spectrum of our eternal priorities. One might even be inclined to apply Alma’s teachings on faith to the geography of the Book of Mormon, “How much more cursed is he that knoweth ... than he that only believeth, or only hath cause to believe, and falleth into transgression” (Alma 32:19). The privilege we have to read the Book of Mormon, to carefully study the text and even develop our tentative and often faulty opinions, is a blessing if it leads us to follow its teachings.

Speaking of her husband’s activities during the translation of the Book of Mormon, Emma Smith remembered:

One time while he was translating he stopped suddenly, pale as a sheet, and said, “Emma, did Jerusalem have walls around it?” When I answered, “Yes,” he replied “Oh! I was afraid I had been deceived.” He had such a limited knowledge of history

8 Joseph Smith Jr. and F. G. Williams to John S. Carter, 13 April 1833, in Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, ed., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2014), 63.

at that time that he did not even know that Jerusalem was surrounded by walls.⁹

The passage is interesting for what it suggests about the difference between a text, even a text revealed through the gift and power of God, and its meaning. Joseph is reading the text of the Book of Mormon from the seer stone to his scribe. He sees the words on the stone, and then wonders if there was some mistake when it speaks of the “walls” of Jerusalem. He only knows about the walls of the city because the text says so. He has not seen a vision of the walls of Jerusalem. He is a first-hand witness of the revealed text but has no knowledge of its geographical accuracy beyond the report of Emma, who has heard of or read about the walls of Jerusalem but never been there herself. The text is divinely revealed, but for geographical understanding Joseph is dependent on a potentially fallible human source. “It is asserted by one of his principle followers,” wrote one critic with amazement, “that Jo, even at this day is profoundly *ignorant of the meaning of many of the words contained in the Book of Mormon.*”¹⁰ For the critic this seemed scandalous, but for Emma and the Saints, these intellectual limitations were evidence that the Book of Mormon translation was the work of God, not a fictional product of Joseph Smith’s imagination.

When left to his own, Joseph Smith was just as prone as any of us to make mistakes and sometimes express faulty opinions. Sometimes the Lord would correct him. Sometimes he did not. According to one report, “Joseph Smith said to D Ells, & to the Congregation that he for a length of time, thought on phreknoleagee [phrenology], & that he had a Revelation. the Lord Rebuking him sharply in Crediting such a thing; & further said there was no Reality in such a science But was the works of the Devil.”¹¹ In an interview with a reporter in 1843, the Prophet shared additional insight relating to his role as a prophet and revelator.

Speaking of revelations, he stated that when he was in a “quandary,” he asked the Lord for revelation, and when he could not get it, he “followed the dictates of his own judgement, which were as good as a revelation to him; but he never gave

9 Emma Smith interview with Edmund Briggs, 1856, in Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1:530–31.

10 “Gold Bible, No. 3,” *The Reflector* (Palmyra, New York), 1 February 1831, 92, emphasis added.

11 McIntire Minute Book, 5 January 1841, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 61.

anything to his people as revelation, unless it was revelation, and the Lord did reveal himself to him.”¹²

Joseph received revelations from God, but he did not always get a revelation when he asked for one. There would be no need for the Prophet to call attention to divine communication if everything he said was revelation. At those times when revelation on a question was not forthcoming he used “the dictates of his own judgement,” which generally served him well, but were of course still “his own” not God’s.

Jesse Crosby, an early convert, said that he once went with some friends to ask Brother Joseph his opinion on a public matter. “He told them he did not enjoy the right vouchsafed to every American citizen, that of free speech. He said to them that when he ventured to give his private opinion on any subject of importance his words were often garbled and their meaning twisted and then given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him.”¹³ The fact that most of what Joseph said does not come to us first-hand but through the accounts and recollections of others suggests the need for caution in our interpretation of secondary historical sources.

Neville cites the account of Joseph Smith’s mother Lucy Mack Smith suggesting Joseph Smith’s revelatory knowledge of some aspects of Nephite culture. This account, he writes, “remains the most comprehensive description of Joseph Smith’s familiarity with Book of Mormon culture and setting.” (265). Lucy’s wrote her recollection of these evening conversations just over two decades after the events they describe. She recalled,

In the course of our evening conversations Joseph would give us some of the most amusing recitals which could be imagined he would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent their dress their maner of traveling the animals which they rode The cities that were built by them the structure of their buildings with every particular of their mode of warfare their religious worship—as particularly as though he had spent his life with them.¹⁴

12 “The Prairies, Nauvoo, Joe Smith, the Temple, the Mormons, etc.,” *The Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette* 58 (15 September 1843): 3.

13 Mark L. McConkie, *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 99.

14 Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of the Lucy Mack Smith Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 345. Spelling

If the Lord revealed certain things to the Prophet about ancient Book of Mormon people and culture, did this include the details of Book of Mormon geography? It is worth observing that while Lucy wrote of some cultural elements that Joseph seemed to be familiar with, geography is not one that she mentioned. Being the translator, even an inspired translator of an ancient text, does not necessarily make one an expert on the geography of that text. Joseph was surprised when he learned that Jerusalem had walls. This suggests that he could be as surprised by the text as we might be. If the Lord saw fit to reveal the details of geography to Joseph Smith, He could of course do so, yet one could also conceivably see a rock, a tree, a building, a city, or a man in vision and yet not know or fully understand the surrounding geographical details.

At the time the Book of Mormon came forth, it conflicted with popular perceptions of native American culture. David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, remembered the challenge this seemed to pose. As reported in an interview with a reporter for the *Chicago Times*:

When they were first commanded to testify of these things, they demurred and told the Lord the people would not believe them for the book concerning which they were to bear record told of a people who were *educated* and *refined*, dwelling in *large cities*; whereas all that was then known of the early inhabitants of this country was the filthy, lazy, degraded and ignorant savages that were roaming over the land. “The Lord told us, in reply that he would make it known to the people that the early inhabitants of this land had been just such a people as they were described in the book, and he would lead them to discover the *ruins of the great cities*, and they should have *abundant evidence* of the truth of that which is written in the book, all of which,” said Mr. Whitmer, “has been fulfilled to the very letter.”¹⁵

Whitmer’s recollection is of interest in light of Mother Smith’s comments about Joseph Smith’s “evening conversations.” The earliest Latter-day Saints referred to “mounds” and what some took to be the

in the original.

15 David Whitmer Interview with James H. Hart, 21 August 1883, *Deseret Evening News*, 4 September 1883, in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 98. Emphasis added.

remains of Indian “forts,” small buildings, and other structures as evidence for pre-Columbian civilization. No Latter-day Saint writer mentioned large pre-Columbian “cities” until 1833 when W. W. Phelps published a brief report of the ruins of Otolum (Palenque) in “Central America.” That report described the ruins of the city as extending twenty miles (a claim later proved to be exaggerated) and the remains of a “palace” and other buildings with sculptured human figures. “The neighboring country for many leagues distant, contains remains of ancient labors of its people, bridges, reservoirs, monumental inscriptions, subterraneous edifices, &c.”¹⁶ It is reasonable to assume that Whitmer, who lived in Jackson County, Missouri, knew of this report. This article and subsequent discoveries by Stephens and Catherwood would have confirmed the Lord’s promise to the Book of Mormon witnesses. In this context, Lucy’s reference to “the cities that were built,” “the structure of their buildings,” and “their mode of warfare” could explain Joseph Smith’s later interest in *Incidents of Travel in Central America*.

Groundhog Day and Zelfh

Neville cites the 1834 account of Zelfh from the published *History of the Church* as evidence that Joseph Smith opposed placing Book of Mormon events in Mesoamerica (54). In citing that account, Neville gives no historical background for this story or the sources it is based on. There is, for example, no reference to Ken Godfrey’s essential study.¹⁷ The entry on Zelfh in the published *History of the Church* was not written by Joseph Smith and is not a contemporary account but is a hodgepodge of seven documents written by other men in Zion’s Camp who wrote about the event. When examined, these sources leave many issues unclear, including who exactly Zelfh was, whether he had anything to do with the lands or events described in the Book of Mormon text, or if he lived at a much later time. As historian Ken Godfrey concludes:

If the history of the church were to be revised today using modern historical standards, readers would be informed that Joseph Smith wrote nothing about the discovery of Zelfh, and that the account of uncovering the skeleton in Pike County is based on the diaries of seven members of Zion’s Camp, some

¹⁶ “Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Central America,” *Evening and Morning Star*, 1/9 (February 1833): [p. 71].

¹⁷ Kenneth W. Godfrey, “The Zelfh Story,” *BYU Studies* 29/2 (Spring 1989): 31–56.

of which were written long after the event took place. We would be assured that the members of Zion's Camp dug up a skeleton near the Illinois River in early June 1834. Equally sure is that Joseph Smith made statements about the deceased person and his historical setting. We would learn that it is unclear which statements attributed to him derived from his vision, as opposed to being implied or surmised either by him or by others. Nothing in the diaries suggests that the mound itself was discovered by revelation.

Furthermore, readers would be told that most sources agree that Zeph was a white Lamanite who fought under a leader named Onandagus (variously spelled). Beyond that, what Joseph said to his men is not entirely clear, judging by the variations in the available sources. The date of the man Zeph, too, remains unclear. Expressions such as "great struggles among the Lamanites," if accurately reported, could refer to a period long after the close of the Book of Mormon narrative, as well as to the fourth century AD. None of the sources before the Willard Richards composition, however, actually say that Zeph died in battle with the Nephites, only that he died "in battle" when the otherwise unidentified people of Onandagus were engaged in great wars "among the Lamanites."

Zeph was identified as a "Lamanite," a label agreed on by all the accounts. This term might refer to the ethnic and cultural category spoken of in the Book of Mormon as actors in the destruction of the Nephites, or it might refer more generally to a descendant of the earlier Lamanites and could have been considered in 1834 as the equivalent of "Indian" (see, for example, D&C 3:18, 20; 10:48; 28:8; 32:2). Nothing in the accounts can settle the question of Zeph's specific ethnic identity.¹⁸

The issue again is not whether Joseph Smith received revelation on the warrior named Zeph (that much seems clear from the historical sources), but if what he learned in that revelation had anything to do with the geography of the scriptural text. On that question precise language

18 Kenneth W. Godfrey, "What is the Significance of Zeph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 70–79; See also Roper, "Joseph Smith, Revelation and Book of Mormon Geography," 62–70.

of the Prophet would make a difference, but the historical sources do not allow us to determine with clarity his precise language, or if some of the language recorded in these secondary sources reflected Joseph's own opinions or those of others.

Neville was fully aware of this background on Zeph, including what I had written about it in 2010, well before the publication of *Lost City* in late February 2015.¹⁹ It is very disappointing that he only cites the passage on Zeph from the *History of the Church* without addressing the work and arguments of historians. This is misleading but follows an unfortunate pattern set by others in the so-called Heartland movement.

In 2007 Rodney Meldrum began distributing DVDs promoting his so-called Heartland theory of the Book of Mormon. In the series he cited statements from Ken Godfrey, John Sorenson, and me, which he characterized as undermining Joseph Smith's inspired prophetic teachings. In 2008 a detailed response to Meldrum's claims was made available through FAIR, which included a discussion of the Zeph issue.²⁰ In 2009 Meldrum published a book, *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and the United States of America*, in which he repeated much of what he taught in his DVDs and continued to cite the Zeph story in the *History of the Church* to support his claims that Joseph Smith's revelations included the details of Book of Mormon geography.²¹

On March 11, 2010, I wrote to Rod Meldrum and asked him why he continued to cite the current *History of the Church* version of the Zeph story as authoritative and supportive of his claims, without addressing or acknowledging that it was not written by Joseph Smith. I referred him to the articles written by Ken Godfrey discussing the sources on Zeph. "Why," I asked, "do you claim, based upon what he has written, that Godfrey questions or attempts to discredit the inspired

19 Since June 2014, Neville has run a blog devoted to attacking proponents of a Mesoamerican interpretation of the Book of Mormon, including me. In a post on December 7, 2014, he describes what I have written about Zeph as "deceptive" and falsely characterizes my writings as undermining the faith of Church members and "casting doubt on the early brethren." His comments were originally made on Daniel Peterson's Patheos blog "Sic et Non" under the handle MKeys, an allusion to his novel *Moroni's Keys*. <http://bookofmormonwars.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-tone-of-discussion.html>

20 <http://www.fairmormon.org/reviews-of-dna-evidence-for-book-of-mormon-geography>

21 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).

words of Joseph Smith and cast doubt on the validity of Joseph Smith's inspiration?" I then explained my concerns:

If you previously read Godfrey's work on the Zelph story you already know that the passage on Zelph in the current edition of the *History of the Church* has a complex history. For example, in the Manuscript History of Joseph Smith reference to "Cumorah" and several other words were crossed out in the original manuscript. When the *History of the Church* was first published in 1904 this was reflected in that edition where the crossed out words were omitted from the text. It was only later in the second edition that the crossed out words referring to the Hill Cumorah in the Zelph story were put back in without any explanation that the words had been crossed out in the original Manuscript History. This was also explained to you in the response to your 2007 DVD prepared by FAIR in section 3 pages 7–10 of that work. In your 2009 book *Prophecies and Promises* you again simply cite the most recent edition of the *History of the Church* on page 106 without any explanation of the history behind this passage, accusing those who disagree with you of dismissing Joseph Smith as Prophet. I must confess that I find this puzzling and a little troubling, as most of your readers would not know that there is more to the story here. Isn't this data important and relevant to the question of *what* Joseph Smith actually knew and *actually said* about Zelph and how it *may* or *may not* relate to Book of Mormon geography? Obviously people make mistakes, and nobody knows everything, but given the subject matter and how hard you come out against those who differ with your interpretations and the fact that you have been repeatedly provided with information on these questions, I find and I think that many other fair-minded people would find this omission troubling.²²

Meldrum responded the following day refusing to answer my questions unless I promised to keep his response private.²³ This I refused to do since the claims and accusations he was making were public and thus required a public explanation or correction. I responded:

22 Matthew Roper to Rodney Meldrum, 11 March 2010.

23 Rodney Meldrum to Matthew Roper, 12 March 2010.

In your public presentations, your DVDs, your website and publications you state certain things and make certain claims about what happened in Church history and what Joseph Smith knew about Book of Mormon geography. You are also on record stating certain things and making certain claims in public and making insinuations about myself and others and our loyalty to the Church, Joseph Smith, and his revelations. I do not take such accusations lightly, nor can I, given who I represent at BYU and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. I do not want to believe that you and your co-author have made these claims and accusations out of malice or other base motives, but some of your claims and statements frankly puzzle me, as they seem unsustainable and even reckless

I understand there may be circumstances in which it would be advisable and perhaps proper to keep correspondence confidential. I don't object to that under certain circumstances. As a general rule and a way of life, however, this is not wise. I am not interested in your personal life. My questions deal specifically with what you have publicly stated, presented, distributed, or published, some of it about me. I was seeking clarification of public things which relate to these issues which you should, I would think, be willing, perhaps even anxious, to justify or explain. Under such circumstances, why would you want to keep your answers to these rather simple questions confidential?

Since it is you and not I who have repeatedly made these things a public matter, it would, I think, be to your advantage to *openly* respond to my questions and justify why you have said the things that you have, that is, if they can be justified.²⁴

Afterwards I wrote an article published in the *FARMS Review* in which I responded to *Prophecies and Promises*.²⁵ There I discussed the Zeph issue in detail, but I did not make reference to the above correspondence at that time in the hope that he would address these concerns in any future work. The following year, however, Meldrum published another book, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America's Heartland: A Visual*

24 Matthew Roper to Rodney Meldrum, 12 March 2010.

25 Roper, "Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography," 62–69.

Journey of Discovery. The book contained colored pictures of the Illinois mound, again citing the same passage from current edition of the *History of the Church* without any further explanation or acknowledgement of Godfrey's work or my article in the *FARMS Review*.²⁶ Neville's work, now enthusiastically promoted by Rod Meldrum, continues this irresponsible and misleading pattern.

Nephite as a Cultural Term

Neville claims that Joseph Smith's letter to Emma Smith in June 1834 during Zion's Camp shows that Joseph Smith rejected a Central American geography (54). In a letter to Emma on June 4, 1834, Joseph wrote

The whole of our journey, in the midst of so large a company of social honest and sincere men, 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.²⁷

Neville assumes that "plains of the Nephites" is a geographical clue to the scriptural text. He reasons it may refer to "plains of Heshlon" (Ether 13:28) or the "plains of Agosh" (Ether 14:15), but that would make them the plains of *the Jaredites* rather than "plains of the Nephites" (54). As an alternative, he suggests linking Joseph's words to the "plains of Nephiah" (Alma 52:20; 62:18). This is of course total speculation. The "plains of the Nephites" and the "plains of Nephiah" may or may not be the same but certainly *need* not be. They could just as well be the "plains of Onandagus" or the "plains of Zelph" or something else entirely.²⁸ Any place where "Nephites" once lived *anywhere* in the Americas might qualify. Early Latter-day Saints viewed *all* native Americans in North and South America as descendants of the seed of Nephi and his brethren, so the words "plains of the Nephites" are useless as a clue to external Book

26 Rod. L. Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America's Heartland: A Visual Journey of Discovery* (New York: Digital Legend, 2011), 30, 32.

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

28 Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 241–42; Mark Alan Wright, "Heartland as Hinterland: The Mesoamerican Core and North American Periphery of Book of Mormon Geography," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2015): 111–29.

of Mormon geography. Perhaps they were not intended to be. It makes more sense to read Joseph's use of "Nephite" in the letter as a cultural term rather than a geographical clue to the text.

In 1838 the Prophet received a revelation about Spring Hill in North Missouri, which is now included in Section 116 of the Doctrine and Covenants. A great deal of folklore has circulated in the past about the hill, based upon statements of some early associates of the prophet who visited the place. Were the remains of Adam's altar still there? Was there a Nephite altar on the site? Information on the naming of the hill at Adam-ondi-Ahman comes from a document written in Missouri by George W. Robinson, but was not written by Joseph Smith himself. That entry states:

We came to Col. Lyman Wight's who lives at the foot of Tower Hill, a name appropriated by Pres smith, in consequence of the remains of an old Nephitish Alter an Tower ... which was called Spring Hill a name appropriated by the bretheren present, But afterwards named by the mouth of [the] Lord and was called Adam Ondi Awmen [Adam-ondi-Ahman], because said he it is the place where Adam shall come to visit his people, or the Ancient of days shall sit as spoken of by Daniel the Prophet.²⁹

Note that the brethren present first found some archaeological remains on the hill that were thought to look "Nephitish." A revelation through the Prophet Joseph comes "afterwards" but says nothing about the validity of any previous "Nephitish" association, only that Adam once dwelt in the region (that would be long before the Book of Mormon anyway) and that one day there would be a future meeting prophesied by Daniel. Joseph Smith reportedly remarked later that Adam, when he dwelt there thousands of years before, had offered sacrifice but never appears to have associated any of the extant remains there with Adam, although later brethren speculated about this:

So what did Robinson mean when he said they discovered the remains of a "Nephitish" structure? It is important to note that the early Latter-day Saints clearly believed that the native North American tribes were descendants of the earlier Nephite-Lamanite civilization. With this belief, Robinson probably used the word "Nephitish" to indicate that the

29 *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals. Volume 1:1832–1839*, 271.

structure or altar was built by, or originated with, the North American Indians. He may have also used “Nephitish” to mean that the altar was of ancient origin. Therefore, what Robinson was attempting to describe were the remains of what appeared to be a sacred altar structure erected by early Native Americans.³⁰

This perspective can be seen in the writings of the Prophet’s close associates from Zion’s Camp, those “social, honest, and sincere men” he wrote about to his wife. Orson Pratt, for example, in his brief summary of the Book of Mormon story, writes that the “arts and sciences flourished to a great extent” among *the Nephites* in their days of righteousness and that they “were a *civilized, enlightened* . . . people.” The Lamanites, when they dwindled in unbelief, were not. Pratt described the Mulekites, who had a corrupted language and lacked any written records, as “only in a *partial state of civilization*,” which they rectified when united with Mosiah’s people.³¹ Pratt associated *Nephites* with arts and sciences, written language, and other elements of civilization.

Wilford Woodruff, whose journal provides a key source on the Zeph story, was another trusted associate of the Prophet. In later years he visited Arizona and New Mexico, where he encountered first-hand native American groups of the region. Observed cultural differences led him to think that some of these groups were more “Nephitic” than “Lamanite.” In a letter to John Taylor and the Twelve he shared some of these observations.

I view my visit among the Nephites one of the most interesting missions of my life, although short. I say Nephites because if there are any Nephites on this continent we have found them among the Zunis, Lugumas [Lagunas], and Isletas, for they are a different race of people altogether from the Lamanites. I class the Navajoe [Navajo], Moquis [Hopi], and Apaches with the Lamanites, although they are in advance of many Indian tribes of America. I class the Zunis, Lagumas [Lagunas], and Isletas among the Nephites.

30 Alexander L. Baugh, “1838: Joseph Smith in Northern Missouri,” in Richard Holzapfel, ed., *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2010), 305. See also 305–7.

31 Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 17–18, emphasis added.

The Zunis are in advance of the Navajoes, Apaches, or any other Lamanites. The Lagumas are much above the Zunis, and the Isletas are far above them all in wealth, in beauty, cleanliness, or order of their homes and persons, the adornment of their dwellings, their industry and indefatigable labors, and in their virtue, and in the purity of their national blood. Their bearing and dignity in their intercourse with strangers, and, above all else, the expansion of their minds and their capacity to receive any principle of the Gospel, such as endowments or sealing powers, fully equal the minds of any of the Anglo Saxon race. ...

They have their own laws, police courts, and judgement seat. They are very rich. ... They allow no white man or Mexican to mix with them in their blood; all their marriages are of their own tribe. ...

I look upon the Isletas as the most industrious and hard laboring people of any I ever met (the Latter-day Saints not excepted). This Nephite village has a field of corn ten miles in length and one in width. It lies north and south of their village and is irrigated. The corn is quite as good as any I ever saw in Utah and perfectly clean; not a weed could be found in a hundred acres. They have also twenty-one vineyards bordering on their city and a thousand vines to each vineyard, some of them sixty years of age, all kept perfectly clean and loaded with the finest of fruit and as heavy a crop as I ever saw in St. George. The vines stand from two to four feet in height and, in the fall of the year, each vine has a mound of earth formed around it until it is covered out of sight. In the Spring it is uncovered and the earth leveled. This is an immense work. They have also many apple, pear, and peach orchards, all ripe as well as the grapes. Isletas is occupied only by the Nephites themselves. There are no Mexicans or white men. The houses generally are made of adobe, cement, or concrete and plastered. The outside walls are as white as snow, and the floors are made of mortar of plaster, very smooth and many of them neatly carpeted. ... I found in Isletas and in other villages of the Nephites the same kind of crockery and stoneware

painted in all its brilliant colors that we find in the remains of their ancient cities, or in ruins of the ancient inhabitants. All of their water jugs and main crockery are of this material, for they still hold the art of making and painting it.³²

Woodruff's characterization of cultural elements he perceives as positive (fine buildings, industry, agriculture, cleanliness, laws, and government) are, from his perspective (that of a nineteenth-century, Connecticut-born farmer), "Nephite," while less positively perceived ones (nomadic lifestyle, warlike nature) are "Lamanite."

Mormon pioneers who explored the southwestern Rockies were fascinated by Anasazi ruins found in the mountain cliffs, some of which they supposed were built by the Gadianton robbers, "which the Book of Mormon describes as a wicked, savage, warlike and bloodthirsty people, who lived in the mountain fastnesses." They attributed others to the Nephites, "a civilized, industrious, enterprising people who feared God, dwelt in cities, cultivated the arts and sciences, and occupied a rich fertile land."³³ Nephites in mid-nineteenth century Mormon perception built cities, cultivated the arts and sciences, and engaged in agriculture.

Early settlers in the Salt River Valley region of Arizona encountered pre-Columbian remains of walls and irrigation canals of Hohokam culture. Mormons who settled near Mesa, Arizona, associated these remains with the Nephites. A collection of photographs in the Church History Library taken of undeveloped land near Mesa, Arizona, around 1900 by James W. LeSueur is called, "Ancient Nephite Ruins near Mesa Arizona." These show what appear to be the remains of old walls and irrigation canals. One of these is described as a "wall" surrounding a "Nephite castle." Another shows several levees of an "Old Nephite Canal" and notes, "Ancient Nephites had 123 miles of Canal Systems in Salt River Valley, Arizona." The photographs were taken not far from the early Arizona Mormon settlement of Lehi.³⁴ In light of this pattern of associating Nephite with civilization, Joseph's reference to the plains

32 Wilford Woodruff to President John Taylor and Council, 15 September 1879, in Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 521–28.

33 "Ancient Ruins in America," *The Mormon*, 28 April 1855.

34 James LeSueur, "Ancient Nephite Ruins near Mesa, Arizona," photographs, PH 1455, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Richard Francaviglia, *The Mapmakers of New Zion: A Cartographic History of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015), 180, Figure 5.16 and 5.17. See also J. W. LeSueur, *Indian Legends* (Independence: Zion's Printing, 1927), 22, 79, 328–31.

of the Nephites seems more like a cultural reference than a geographical one.

Manti

Neville alludes to “third-hand accounts” in which “Joseph identified an area in southern Missouri as the ancient site of Manti,” which supports his argument for a North American location (334). This is based upon a diary entry from Samuel Tyler who traveled with the Kirtland Camp in 1838 to Missouri (not to be confused with the 1834 Zion’s Camp).³⁵ In his journal entry for September 25, 1838, Tyler wrote,

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.³⁶

Historical analysis of the relevant documents show that Joseph Smith was not present when Tyler made this entry but was several counties away in Far West. The wording about Manti, if from Joseph Smith, is not contemporary with the journal entry and may or may not be influenced by hearsay. Tyler does not attribute this wording to Joseph Smith or revelation. A similar entry subsequently drafted for the Manuscript History of the Church seems to have been essentially based upon the Tyler entry but was not written until after the death of Joseph Smith and was not published until 1854 in the *Millennial Star*. When Andrew Jensen published the entry in the *Historical Record* in 1888, he added, without explanation, the words “which the Prophet said” immediately before the sentence about Manti, although this was not in the original manuscript.

In 1938 Joseph Fielding Smith published an article in the *Deseret News* citing the Tyler Journal and the published (*Millennial Star*) version of the Manuscript History entry to support an argument for a Missouri location. In 1956, that article, along with many of Smith’s sermons and writings were published without modification in a popular compilation,

35 Alexander L. Baugh, “Kirtland Camp, 1838: Bringing the Poor to Missouri,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/1 (2013): 58–61.

36 Journal of Samuel D. Tyler, 25 September 1838, MS 1761, Church Historian’s Department, Salt Lake City, emphasis added.

Doctrines of Salvation, through which the idea for an ancient Manti location in Missouri became more widely known in LDS circles. He never spoke on or addressed the issue of Book of Mormon geography after he became President of the Church.

In an earlier study I discussed a second important contemporary source, the Elias Smith journal.³⁷ This entry written on the same day reads:

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.

Rather than suggest that the ancient site of Manti was in Randolph County Missouri, the Elias Smith entry indicates plans for a future settlement to be called by that name. B. H. Roberts in his compilation of the *History of the Church* incorporated the Elias Smith wording into the entry for that day and did not use either the Tyler Journal or the Manuscript History entry. This is how it still stands in the published *History of the Church* today in volume 3, page 144.

I would conclude, based upon the known evidence, that the Joseph Smith at some point designated the site in Randolph County as a settlement for a future stake that would be named Manti. The actual words, however, make a difference. The problem is not Joseph Smith's prophetic authority but *our* limitations due to the inability to recover what Joseph may have actually said on this point. Did Joseph say it was "the ancient site of Manti spoken of in the Book of Mormon," or did he say that it was "where the city Manti is to be built"? Do the words in these reports reproduce Joseph's statement word for word? How much does what Tyler and Smith reported in good faith reflect the ideas and speculation of local brethren with whom they interacted? Did they assume on their own, based on the proposed name of the settlement,

37 Matthew Roper, "How much weight can a single source bear? The case of Samuel D. Tyler's Journal entry," *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/1 (2013): 54–57.

that it might have been the ancient site of Manti as well?³⁸ That seems reasonable to me, but who can say? Since Joseph Smith was not present at the time, and the two reports are not the same, *we* cannot simply put words into the Prophet's mouth and conclude that both sources are correct. And one cannot build a reliable geography on such uncertainties.

Zarahemla

In 1903, a large group of Latter-day Saint students, teachers, and General Authorities met in Provo, Utah, to discuss the question of Book of Mormon geography. The organizers thought it might be nice if the group could come to a unified view of the location of Zarahemla mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Differences of opinions were expressed. Some argued that Zarahemla was in South America; others thought it might have been in Honduras. The news report suggests that some had strongly held opinions about this and other geographical matters and argued forcefully for their respective positions. According to the report:

President [Joseph F.] Smith spoke briefly and expressed the idea that the question of the situation of the city 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 so vital importance as the principles of the Gospel.

Later he “again cautioned the students against making the union question — the location of cities and lands — of equal importance with the doctrines contained in the book.”³⁹ President Smith's counsel to not make issues of Book of Mormon geography, such as the location of Zarahemla, a matter of equal importance to the doctrines contained in the Book of Mormon is consistent with the counsel of current Church leaders and provides a notable contrast with advocates of the “Heartland” theory, such as Meldrum and Neville and others who falsely accuse those who disagree with their interpretations of dismissing or undermining the prophetic authority of Joseph Smith. In October 1929, Anthony W. Ivins of the First Presidency said:

38 Meldrum and Neville make the same assumption about Zarahemla.

39 “Book of Mormon Students Meet,” *Deseret Evening News*, 25 May, 1903. This was reprinted in the *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/2 (2013): 108–10.

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 geographical matters. It does not make any difference to us. There has never been anything yet set forth that definitely settles the question. ... 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.⁴⁰

Recently, some Latter-day Saints, finding a dearth of evidence for a revelation on Book of Mormon geography, have tried to squeeze one from Section 125 of the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴¹ This revelation invited the Saints to gather at appointed locations, including settlements in Iowa, where they might build up stakes of Zion. “And 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” (D&C 125:31). The revelation says nothing about where the ancient Nephite city of Zarahemla was located, but Neville writes as if he really wished that it had (330, 332). He suggests that the revelation may have been “the Lord’s warning to Joseph about Winchester’s imminent promulgation of a Mesoamerican approach to promoting the Book of Mormon” (143, note 114). He claims that the

40 Anthony W. Ivins, *Conference Report*, April 1929, 15–16.

41 Porter and Meldrum, *Prophecies and Promises*, 115–17; Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America’s Heartland*, 78–81; Neville, *The Lost City of Zarahemla*, 180, 330, 332. It may be of interest to note that the publication of Neville’s *Lost City* in February 2015 coincided with the announcement of efforts promoted by Wayne May and Rod Meldrum to purchase land in Iowa to excavate what they suggest to followers may be the ancient temple of Zarahemla. The promoters seem to envision a kind of Disneyland-like historical park. “If the temple site is verified, the plan is to continue the archaeological excavations at the site and begin the development of a new Native American Cultural Center along the lines of the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii, complete with Native American villages, cultural museums, attractions, stages for performances, river boat rides across the Mississippi between Zarahemla and Nauvoo, etc. We believe that this will also contribute to the revitalization of Nauvoo and bring further positive interest and attention to the Church and its mission.” Meldrum states, “This could be an opportunity of a lifetime to be a part of a project that may forever change the understandings of the ancient history of America as well as validate in an unprecedented way the historicity of the Book of Mormon itself, the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Church he restored. ... I would like to invite you to join with other fellow ‘Heartlanders’ to help us raise the funds for the purpose of conducting the archaeological studies and dig.” <http://www.bookofmormonevidence.org/feature.php?id=29>

Zarahemla editorials were “a direct challenge to the 1841 revelation in Section 125 about Zarahemla” (180). It is unclear how a Mesoamerican interpretation of Book of Mormon geography could directly challenge something that the revelation does not mention.

In a previous article I observed that the verse says nothing about the location of the ancient site of Zarahemla.⁴² That remains the case. As a secondary argument I had cited several journal entries that apparently called the Iowa settlement “Zarahemla” before the revelation in Section 125 was given. Based upon the information available to me at that time, this seemed a valid secondary argument. In May 2013 I learned of several apparent anomalies in those sources that suggest these entries, at least the parts mentioning Zarahemla, were likely written later than the dates had suggested to me. I hope at some point in the future to examine the originals myself and revisit the matter. For the present I will assume those sources do not support my earlier argument. Still, we lack certain specifics on how the revelation was received. Did Joseph Smith and his brethren discuss the matter beforehand? Had they previously considered the name Zarahemla as a possible designation and then submitted it to the Lord for confirmation? The name itself need not have been a geographical clue to have held significance.

The name Zarahemla would have reminded the Saints of the Book of Mormon and invited them to liken their experiences to those of Lehi’s people. When the Saints were driven from Missouri, they had to flee from danger and persecution. One of several places they found refuge was in Iowa. In the Book of Mormon, groups of refugees also found safety and refuge in Zarahemla. It was a place where those who believed in the scriptures and in the words of the living prophets could gather and receive protection, just as the Latter-day Saints who believed in the words of Joseph Smith and the words of Book of Mormon prophets could settle. As such, the name seems appropriate. Both Manti and Zarahemla were Book of Mormon cities, but perhaps significantly, they were *fortified* cities as well. The Lord characterized the first stake in Kirtland as a “*strong hold*” (D&C 64:21), a term that evokes the Iowa settlement’s namesake in the Book of Mormon (Helaman 1:20), a place that at times was well fortified (3 Nephi 3:23–26). Of course, most stakes in the past and today are not named after Book of Mormon or even biblical locations, but perhaps the Lord thought it fitting in Joseph Smith’s day to give these two settlements — Manti in Missouri and Zarahemla in Iowa — names that would remind them and future readers of what a stake of Zion is

42 Roper, “Joseph Smith, Revelation and Book of Mormon Geography,” 56–58.

intended to be: a defense and a refuge for the Saints (D&C 115:6). This admittedly reflects my own thinking and speculation, but it makes more sense than an approach that tries to force a revelation and geographical interpretation out of a passage where none exist.

Book of Mormon Geography and Winchester

Neville exaggerates the importance of Winchester's writings and underestimates the influence of earlier writers of whose works he seems unaware. In 1837 Parley P. Pratt published *A Voice of Warning*, which has been described as "the most important of all the non-canonical LDS books"⁴³ In 1839 Pratt published a second edition, revised and enlarged, which included an expanded section on the Book of Mormon. Givens and Grow note that this pamphlet, which "remained among the most widely read Mormon works for several decades after his death," also "proved exceptionally effective as a missionary tool. ... Pratt's writings, which deeply influenced other Mormon authors, particularly his equally prolific younger brother Orson, not only helped convert thousands to Mormonism but also shaped the Mormon theological system."⁴⁴ It was Pratt's "greatest theological contribution as a Latter-day Saint, ... a work that served the church as its most powerful proselytizing tool — after the Book of Mormon — for more than a century."⁴⁵ "For the first few years of the Church's existence, little besides the Book of Mormon could ground Mormon theology or expound doctrine, and early Latter-day Saints seldom used the Book of Mormon in that regard."⁴⁶ In fact, during this early period of Church history, "next to the Book of Mormon itself, Pratt's book soon became the principal vehicle presenting Mormonism

43 Peter Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church*. Volume One 1830–1847, 69. *Voice of Warning* was not the quite the first Mormon missionary tract or the first to outline the tenets of the Latter-day Saints, but it was the first to emphasize the differences between Mormonism and orthodox Christianity. It established a formula for describing the Church's basic doctrines, and it included biblical proof texts, arguments, and examples that would be used by Mormon pamphleteers for a hundred years. It was also an extremely effective missionary tract, and before the close of the century it would go through more than thirty editions in English and be translated into Danish, Dutch, French, German, Icelandic, Spanish, and Swedish," Crawley, 71.

44 Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism*, 6

45 Givens and Grow, 90.

46 Givens and Grow, 114.

to the Latter-day Saint faithful and the general public alike.⁴⁷ “But for narrative exposition, one that aspired to lay out in readable format the essence of Mormonism for member and non-Mormon alike, *Voice of Warning* had no peer and, for any decades, little competition.”⁴⁸

The first publications Benjamin Winchester produced are two small pamphlets from 1840. Neither addresses the question of Book of Mormon geography. The first of these, *An Examination of a Lecture by the Rev. H. Perkins*, is unremarkable.⁴⁹ The second, *The Origin of the Spalding Theory*, had more lasting significance as a response to the Spalding theory and the information it provides on Doctor Philastus Hurlbut whom Winchester knew and claimed as a relative.⁵⁰ In 1841, while in Philadelphia, Winchester published a short-lived periodical entitled the *Gospel Reflector*. This periodical commenced in January 1841 and continued until the June 15, 1841, issue, after which it was discontinued. “Generally the *Gospel Reflector* treats a broad range of doctrinal subjects. The ideas themselves were not new to the Mormon printed record, but their defense marshaled a nearly comprehensive collection of biblical citations and examples, many appearing in a Latter-day Saint publication for the first time.”⁵¹ Some of the articles that appeared there were subsequently reprinted in other Latter-day Saint periodicals such as the *Times and Seasons*. It also was greatly influenced by earlier Latter-day Saint publications:

Like other Mormon periodicals, it borrowed liberally from its predecessors. For example, a chronology showing the creation of Adam exactly 6,000 years before (pp. 20–21) is reprinted from the third number of the *Evening and Morning Star*: the seventh Lecture on Faith (pp. 77–83) is from the Doctrine and Covenants ... Oliver Cowdery’s letters to W.W. Phelps (pp. 137–76) are taken from the first volume of the *Messenger and Advocate*; Sidney Rigdon’s article on the Millennium (pp. 287–93) and his letter to John Whitmer on the New Testament church (pp. 293–96) are republished from the second volume

47 Givens and Grow, 103–104.

48 Givens and Grow, *Parley P. Pratt*, 114–15.

49 Benjamin Winchester, *An Examination of a lecture delivered by the Rev. H. Perkins* ... (1840).

50 Benjamin Winchester, *The Origin of the Spaulding story, concerning the Manuscript Found: with a short biography of Dr. P. Hurlbert* ... (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilbert, 1840).

51 Crawley, *Descriptive Bibliography*, 145.

of the *Evening and Morning Star* and the fourteenth number of the *Messenger and Advocate*; and the final issue (pp. 297–311) is largely made up of abstracts from the Doctrine and Covenants.

But Winchester wrote much of the text, and here the influence of Parley Pratt's *Voice of Warning* — explicitly acknowledged in the first number (p. 18) — is pervasive. Winchester's essays on spiritualizing the scriptures (pp. 29–32), the kingdom of God (pp. 37–42, 49–72), gospel dispensations (pp. 84–89), continued revelation (pp. 89–98), the Book of Mormon (pp. 105–36), the restoration of Israel (pp. 220–43), the Resurrection (pp. 244–46), and the millennium (pp. 246–72), all derive from the second edition of *Voice of Warning* ... occasionally borrowing from it verbatim.⁵²

Of particular interest to the question of Book of Mormon geography are two articles published in the March 1 and March 14, 1841, issues. Both of these cited biblical proof texts in support of the Book of Mormon and the necessity of modern revelation. In the March 1 article, Winchester introduced the Book of Mormon with a brief account of its recovery from the hill by Joseph Smith and then referenced reports of “various relics of antiquity” to prove that “America has been inhabited by an enlightened people, far in advance of the savage state of the red men of the forest.” Winchester also quoted from the work of Elias Boudinot to support the idea that the North American Indians were of Israelite origin. In the March 15 issue, Winchester briefly describes Lehi's journey from Jerusalem into the wilderness, and then across the ocean to the American land of promise. Winchester indicates that in their final wars the Nephites fled Northward to the hill in New York where the Nephites were destroyed and Moroni buried the plates, adding that “the Indians of America are the descendants of the Lamanites.”⁵³

In 1841 Winchester and Erastus Snow published *An Address to the citizens of Salem and vicinity*.⁵⁴ Neville attributes the ideas on the Book of Mormon in this pamphlet to Winchester (50, 57), when the Book of Mormon content was actually taken from Parley Pratt's 1840

52 Crawley, *Descriptive Bibliography*, 146.

53 Benjamin Winchester, “The Claims of the Book of Mormon Established—It also Defended,” *The Gospel Reflector* 1/6 (15 March, 1841): 124–25.

54 Erastus Snow and Benjamin Winchester, *An Address to the citizens of Salem and vicinity* (Salem, 1841).

publication, *An Address by a minister of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To the People of the United States*.⁵⁵

The bulk of the pamphlet (pp. 3–8) is a summary of Mormon beliefs taken primarily from Orson Pratt’s *Remarkable Visions* (item 82), and Parley Pratt’s *An Address to the People of the United States* (item 111), which is quoted directly at one point and which undoubtedly suggested the title. In its argument that not all of God’s revelations are in the Bible, it uses Parley’s list of prophetic books referred to but not included in the Bible (see item 80), which Winchester reprinted twice in the *Gospel Reflector* (item 95).⁵⁶

Winchester subsequently published two other works in 1842 and 1843. These included his reference tool, *Synopsis of the Holy Scriptures, and Concordance*,⁵⁷ and his 1843 book, *A History of the Priesthood from the beginning of the world to the present Time*.⁵⁸ Only the last chapter of *A History* dealt with the Book of Mormon and is a minor reworking of his earlier Book of Mormon writings from the *Gospel Reflector*.⁵⁹

What is a “Mesoamerican Geography”?

The limited Mesoamerican geography, according to Neville, was “first set out by Benjamin Winchester” (191). This is repeatedly emphasized by the author throughout his book and in fact provides the *primary* motive for Neville’s imagined conspiracy to get Winchester’s work surreptitiously published in the fall of 1842. Winchester summarized the Book of Mormon account in two articles, published in March 1841:

55 Parley P. Pratt, *An Address by the minister of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to the people of England* (Manchester, 1840). Neville mistakenly attributes the words “flood of light” to Winchester when they actually come from his quotation of Pratt’s 1840 *Address*. The 1841 Snow and Winchester pamphlet introduced the discussion on the Book of Mormon with, “Elder P. P. Pratt writes upon this subject thus.”

56 Crawley, 172.

57 Benjamin Winchester, *Synopsis of the Holy Scriptures, and concordance, in which the synonymous passages are arranged together ...* (Philadelphia: Book and Job Printing Office, 1842).

58 Benjamin Winchester, *A History of Priesthood from the beginning of the world to the present time ...* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilbert, 1843).

59 Crawley, 229.

Six hundred years BC, according to the Book of Mormon, Lehi, who was a righteous man, was fore-warned of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonish captivity, who was commanded by the Lord, took his family and fled into the wilderness. ...

They set sail, and in a proper time they landed, as we infer from their record, somewhere on the Western coast of South America. They immediately commenced tilling the earth, and erecting mansions for dwelling places. ... They frequently had long and tedious wars with the Lamanites, and were often driven before them. They were constantly emigrating to the North. At length they commenced settlements in the region of country, not far from the Isthmus of Darien, and while in those parts they advanced farther in science and arts, than at any time previous; and built more spacious cities, and buildings than they did before.

The Lord foreseeing that they would not repent, commanded Mormon to collect the writings of his forefathers — their revelations and prophecies, &c., and make an abridgment of them, and engrave them upon new plates, (their manner of keeping records was to engrave them on metallic plates.) But in consequence of their wars, and their flight to the North, to escape the Lamanites, he did not live to finish this work; and when the final destruction of the Nephites drew near, he gave the records to his son Moroni, who lived to see their final extermination, or destruction by the hands of the Lamanites.

...

Moroni was then commanded to deposit this record in the earth. ... It remained safe in the place where it was deposited, till it was brought to light by the administration of angels, and translated by the gift, and power of God.⁶⁰

This deposit was made about the year four hundred and twenty, on a hill then called Cumora, now in Ontario County, where it was preserved in safety, until it was brought to light by no less than the ministry of angels, and translated by inspiration.⁶¹

60 Winchester, "Claims of the Book of Mormon Established, 124–26.

61 Winchester, "Claims of the Book of Mormon Established, 105.

Here, Neville writes, Winchester “establishes the outline of what would be the Mesoamerican theory of Book of Mormon geography” (29). This includes his “inference about where Lehi landed” (42), and what the author calls “the Isthmus of Darien theory” (183). Neville thinks Winchester’s approach was new and different because he was the first to make “specific ties between The Book of Mormon and archaeological findings not only in North America, but also in Central America” (43), including “Guatemala” (42), and is the first to assert “a Mesoamerica setting” for the events in Mormon’s text (185) and “the first to link The Book of Mormon to specific Central American sites” (266).

All of this is wrong. What Winchester actually describes is not the “Mesoamerican” view but the traditional hemispheric interpretation of Book of Mormon geography. This theory placed events in the narrative throughout North and South America. Inherent in the hemispheric model is the obvious assumption that Central America was the narrow neck of land with the dividing line between the land northward and southward at the Isthmus of Darien in Panama. So the idea of Central America as a setting for at least some events described in the Book of Mormon was always a basic element of the old hemispheric theory. It was not an 1841 innovation of Winchester as Neville contends.

A representative example typical of this view can be found in Orson Pratt’s very popular 1840 missionary pamphlet, *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of The Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*.⁶²

Pratt briefly describes the Jaredite story.

We learn from this very ancient history, that at the confusion of languages, when the Lord scattered the people upon all the face of the earth, the **Jaredites**, being a righteous people, obtained favour in the sight of the Lord, and were not confounded. ... [T]hey were marvellously brought across the great deep to the shores of **North America**. Accordingly, in process of time, they became a very numerous and powerful people, occupying **principally North America**; building

62 Orson Pratt, *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of The Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840). “The success of *Remarkable Visions* as a missionary tract is reflected in its numerous editions. Three times it was reprinted in New York, in 1841 and 1842. ... It was repeatedly published in English, Danish, Dutch, and Swedish,” Crawley, 129.

large cities in all quarters of the land; being a civilized and enlightened nation. ... [T]hey were entirely destroyed.⁶³

Pratt then gives an account of the migration of Lehi's colony and their settlement in the land of promise.

This remnant of Joseph were also led in a miraculous manner from Jerusalem. ... [T]hey came to the great waters, where, by the commandment of God, they built a vessel, in which they were safely brought across the great Pacific ocean, and **landed upon the western coast of South America.** ...

This remnant of Joseph, soon after they landed, separated themselves into two distinct nations. This division was caused by a certain portion of them being greatly persecuted, because of their righteousness, by the remainder. The persecuted nation emigrated towards the **northern parts of South America**, leaving the wicked nation in possession of the **middle and southern parts of the same.** The former were called **Nephites**, being led by a prophet whose name was Nephi. The latter were called **Lamanites.** ...

The Lord gave unto them **the whole continent** for a land of promise. ... Arts and sciences flourished to a great extent. Various kinds of machinery were in use. Cloths, of various kinds, were manufactured. Swords, cimeters, axes, and various implements of war were made, together with head-shields, arm-shields, and breastplates, to defend themselves in battle with their enemies. And in the days of their righteousness, they were a civilized, enlightened, and happy people. ...

[In their wars with the Lamanites] tens of thousands were very frequently slain, after which they were piled together in great heaps upon the face of the ground, and covered with a shallow covering of earth, which will satisfactorily account for those ancient mounds, filled with human bones, so numerous at the present day, **both in North and South America.**⁶⁴

Pratt also describes the Mulekite colony.

63 Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 15–16.

64 Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 16–18.

Another remnant were brought out of Jerusalem; some of whom were descendants of Judah. They **landed in North America**; soon after which they **emigrated into the northern parts of South America**, at which place they were discovered by the remnant of Joseph, something like four hundred years after.

The second colony ... **landed in North America, and emigrated from thence, to the northern parts of South America**; and about four hundred years after, they were discovered by the Nephites. ...

They were called the **people of Zarahemla**. ... The Nephites united with them, and taught them the Holy Scriptures, and they were restored to civilization, and became one nation with them. And in process of time, the **Nephites began to build ships near the Isthmus of Darien**, and launch them forth into the western ocean, in which great numbers sailed a great distance to the northward, and began to colonize **North America**.⁶⁵

After the time of Christ, as described by Pratt, the people of Lehi fell into wickedness and were destroyed.

A great and terrible war commenced between them, which lasted for many years and resulted in the complete overthrow and destruction of the Nephites. **This war commenced at the Isthmus of Darien** and was very destructive to both nations for many years. At length, the **Nephites were driven** before their enemies, a great distance to the **north, and north-east**; and having gathered their whole nation together, both men, women, and children, they encamped on, and round about the hill Cumorah, where the records were found, which is in the State of **New York**.⁶⁶

Pratt's popular and influential pamphlet was published a year before Winchester published his own outline of the Book of Mormon narrative in the *Gospel Reflector*, but similar and earlier descriptions of the hemispheric view can be found in publications from 1830 onward as reflected in the following examples:

65 Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 18.

66 Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 21.

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.⁶⁷

[Lehi and his family] **landed on the coast of South America**, where they increased very fast, and the Lord raised up a great many prophets among them. They built cities, and encouraged the arts and sciences. . . . The first battle was fought nigh to **the straits of Darien**, and the last at a **hill called Comoro**, when all the Christians were hewn down but one prophet.⁶⁸

Six hundred years before Christ a certain prophet called Lehi went out to declare and promulgate the prophecies to come; **he came across the water into South America**. . . . **The last battle** was that was fought among these parties was on the very ground where the plates were found, but it had been a running battle, for they **commenced at the Isthmus of Darien and ended in Manchester**.⁶⁹

In the Book of Mormon . . . a remnant of the branches or seed of Joseph are represented as crossing the sea, and settling this continent of **North and South America**.⁷⁰

[Lehi's family] sailed in a south east direction and **landed on the continent of South America** in Chile thirty degrees south Latitude.⁷¹

The prophets Lehi and Nephi came out with a colony from Jerusalem, in the days of Jeremiah the Prophet, and after

67 S. A., "The Golden Bible, or, Campbellism Improved," *Observer and Telegraph*, Hudson, Ohio, 18 November 1830, emphasis added.

68 "Mormonism," *Franklin Democrat*, Pennsylvania, reprinted in the *Fredonia Censor*, 7 March, 1832, emphasis added.

69 "The Orators of Mormon," *Catholic Telegraph*, 14 April 1832, emphasis added.

70 William Smith, "Evidences of the Book of Mormon," *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 3/4 January 1837): 434.

71 Frederick G. Williams, *The Life of Dr. Frederick G. Williams Counselor to the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo: BYU Studies, 2012), 437. On the background of this statement see "Did Lehi Land in Chile? An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement," in Williams, 437–52.

wandering for eight years in the wilderness of Arabia, came to the sea coast, built a vessel ... and finally landed in safety on the coast of what is now called Chili in *South America*.⁷²

[Lehi's party] crossed the ocean, *landing on the west coast of Chile*, near the place where Valparaiso now stands. ... They went north and *settled in New Granada*, but in going north they found a people calling themselves the *people of Zarahemla* ... not far from where the city of Carthage now stands near the Magdalena river, called in the Book of Mormon the Sidon. ... [Lamanites] *drove the Nephites out of Zarahemla, and the Isthmus of Darien became to dividing line between the two powers*. ... The Nephites were gradually *driven north*, and at last were totally destroyed near the hill of Cumorah, in the State of *New York*, about 400 years after Christ.⁷³

[Lehi's people] becoming divided into two nations had become spread over *both North and South America*, one of these divisions was called Lamanites and dwelt in the country of *South America*; and the other division called Nephite, in *North America*. ... This war commenced at the *Isthmus of Darien*, and was more or less destructive to both nations, until at length the Nephites were *driven* before their enemies *north and north-east* to a great distance; when gathering their whole nation together both men, women and children, they encamped on and round about the hill Cumorah near where Palmyra, *N. Y.*, now stands.⁷⁴

Winchester's 1841 reference to the "Isthmus of Darien" merely reflects a hemispheric view that was known from 1830 and throughout the nineteenth century. This idea was commonly held. Why would Winchester need to form an elaborate conspiracy to do something that everybody was doing and had been doing since the year the Book of Mormon was published?

72 Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 22–23.

73 "Ancient American History," *Millennial Star* 31/2 (11 January 1868): 22–23. This was a synopsis of a lecture delivered by George A. Smith at the Seventy's Hall in Salt Lake City on 4 December 1867.

74 William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa: 1883), 36.

Central American Antiquities

In his March 1, 1841, article for the *Gospel Reflector*, Winchester discussed evidence of pre-Columbian antiquities in support of the Book of Mormon.

Now when the antiquarian traverses the Western wilds, he has the privilege to behold the relics of a once enlightened nation, who understood arts and sciences to some extent. He there can walk upon the ruins of once magnificent cities abounding in wealth and prosperity, but now depopulated, and lying in heaps of massive ruins. And if he is onward with his researches — he gazes upon numerous forts, mounds, obelisks, and catacombs, which he marks with wonder and amazement. When he surveys the Southern part of North America — he there can feast his mind upon the works of antiquity until it is absorbed in contemplating the scenes of destruction that have come upon this nation of the dead, and leveled their cities in ruins. In Guatemala he can survey the ruins of a once splendid, beautiful, and populous city, perhaps as ever was on the globe; (we allude to the city of Otolum near Pulenque,) and while wandering through these heaps of massive ruins, he beholds the remains of large temples, and palaces, which exhibit the work of human ingenuity. With a closer observation he discovers a fine display of architectural genius in the construction of these once splendid edifices. In viewing with more avidity still, he beholds in these huge buildings the works of science — an immense quantity of hieroglyphics. Hence he no longer doubts but what America was inhabited by an enlightened nation anterior to its discovery by Columbus. ...⁷⁵

For Winchester, the Book of Mormon account provided a reasonable explanation for questions that vexed the wondering observer of these ruins. He then cited a description from a report that described these ruins.

The ruins of a city in Central America are among the most striking of such. This city, called Palenque (the name of a town not far off; other antiquarians call it Otolum) lies two

75 Winchester, "Claims of the Book of Mormon Established," 106.

hundred and fifty miles from Tobasco, lat. about 15° N. And there were discovered not such buildings as those erected by the Druids, of rough and misshapen stones, but such as those in which kings dwell — built of *hewn* stones. The appearance of these ruins shows a nation once existed there highly skilled in mechanical arts, and in a state of civilization far beyond anything that we have been led to believe of the aborigines, previous to the time of Columbus. A distinguished antiquarian of New York has received from this city a beautiful specimen of the fine arts — an idol of pure gold. This has emphatically been called the Thebes of America. In surveying its ruins, the traveller is led to believe that it was founded at as early a period as the renowned cities of Egypt.

How immense this city! It is supposed to have been sixty miles in circumference, and that it contained a population of nearly three millions. Great were its commercial privileges — even now the broad and beautiful Otolum rolls along its desolated borders.” “One of the principal structures revealed to the eye of the antiquarian is the *teaculi* or temple. Its style of architecture resembles the Gothic. It is rude, massive and durable. Though resembling the Egyptian edifices, yet this and the other buildings are peculiar, and are different from all others hitherto known. The entrance of the temple is on the east side by a portico more than one hundred feet in length, and nine feet broad. The rectangular pillars of the portico have their architraves adorned with stucco work of shields and other devices.” “The antiquity of this city is manifest not only from its nameless hieroglyphics and other objects; but from the age of some of the trees growing over buildings where once the hum of industry and the voice of merriment were heard. The concentric circles of some of these trees were counted, which showed that they were more than nine hundred years of age. The antiquities of America spread from the great lakes of the North and the West to Central America, and the Southern parts of Peru on the South; from the Alleghany Mountains on the East, to the Rocky Mountains on the West, and even from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean.⁷⁶

76 Winchester, “Claims of the Book of Mormon Established,” 108. Compare A. Davis, *Lecture on the Antiquities of Central America, and on the discovery of*

Winchester then cited another passage from Josiah Priest's *American Antiquities*:

This account which partly describes the ruins of a stone city seventy-five miles [108] in circuit (length 32 English miles, greatest breadth 12 miles,) full of palaces, monuments, statues, and inscriptions: one of the earliest seats of American civilization about equal to Thebes of Egypt, and well calculated to inspire me with hopes that they would throw a great light over American History, when more properly examined.⁷⁷

Winchester concludes this particular argument:

We might multiply a catalogue of extracts from different authors upon this subject; but we forbear, believing that enough has already been said to convince every candid mind that America has been inhabited, previous to its discovery by Europeans, by an enlightened and civilized race of people. However, if any one should wish to learn farther concerning the antiquities of America, we recommend him to A. Davis' "Discovery of America by the North-men." J. Priest's "American Antiquities," Mr. Hill's Do.; and Baron Humboldt's "Travels in South America."⁷⁸

According to Neville, "Benjamin Winchester was the first to link the Book of Mormon to specific Central American sites" (266), but this is not the case. He never linked those ruins to any city named in Mormon's account. Winchester's article mentioned the discovery of Otolum (Palenque) to prove "that America has been inhabited by an enlightened people, far in advance of the savage state of the red men of the forest."⁷⁹ Earlier writers had been making that argument long before 1841.

In April 1833, while preaching in Illinois, Parley P. Pratt and William McLellin reported several encounters with a local Reverend Mr. Peck.⁸⁰

New England by the Northmen five hundred years before Columbus (New York and Boston: Bartlett and Company, Dutton and Wentworth, 1840), 5–7.

77 Winchester, "The Claims of the Book of Mormon Established," 108–109. Compare Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities* (Albany: Hoffman and White, 1833), 241.

78 Winchester, "The Claims of the Book of Mormon Established," 109.

79 Benjamin Winchester, "The Object of a Continuation of Revelation," *The Gospel Reflector*, 1/5 (1 March 1841): 97.

80 William McLellin Journal III, April 14–21, 1833, in Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin 1831–1836* (Urbana and Chicago:

In his autobiographical recollection of the encounter written years later, Pratt described Peck as “a man of note, as one of the early settlers of Illinois, and one of its first missionaries.” He was also a man of some learning and edited a local newspaper at Rock Spring. In one meeting, Peck attacked the Book of Mormon. According to Pratt, “He said there were no ruined cities, buildings, monuments, mounds, or fortifications, to show the existence of such a people as the Book of Mormon described. . . . He said further that the fortifications and mounds of this country were nothing more than works of nature.”⁸¹ The following year, Peck published his *Gazetteer of Illinois*, which described local features of the state including some of the mounds and fortifications that were the subject of local interest. We do not have the words he spoke to Pratt and McLellin during his 1833 lectures, but the following extracts from his 1834 work suggests the kinds of arguments Latter-day Saints might have expected from a relatively informed critic of the time when they mentioned Midwestern mounds as evidence for the Book of Mormon.

The existence of “Mounds” in this, and other western states, has been assumed as substantial proof, amounting to demonstration, of a race of men of enterprising habits, and far more civilized than the present race of aborigines. But it is now seriously questioned whether these mounds are the work of art. I know not that any writer ever ventures to attack this supposition till John Russell, esq. sent forth his essay in the Illinois Magazine, or March, 1831. Mr. Russell is a citizen of this state, and well known as a writer of considerable talents and literary acquirements. He has had opportunity of examining for himself, many of those mounds, of various dimensions. He maintains they are not artificial, and offers objections to their being productions of human art, not easily obviated.

But there are mounds in the west, that exactly correspond in shape with these supposed antiquities, and yet from their size most evidently were not made by man. . . .

Of one thing the writer is satisfied, that very imperfect and incorrect data have been relied upon and very erroneous

University of Illinois Press, 1994), 114–17; Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 69–70.

81 Pratt, *Autobiography*, 69.

conclusions drawn, upon western antiquities. Whoever has time and patience and is in other respects qualified to explore this field of science, who will use his spade and eyes together and restrain his imagination from running riot amongst the mounds, fortifications, horseshoes, medals, and whole cabinets of relics of the “olden time,” will find very little more than the indications of rude savages, the ancestors of the present race of Indians.

Of ancient military works, I have long been convinced that not half a dozen such structures ever existed in the west before the visits of Europeans. Enclosures of various sizes, and perhaps for different purposes, with an embankment of earth, three or four feet high, and a trifling ditch out of which the earth was dug, undoubtedly were formed. In all probability some of these embankments unclosed their villages; others the residence of their chiefs or head men. But what people, savage, barbarous, civilized, or enlightened, even constructed a fortification around five or six hundred acres, with a ditch in the inside! Or what military people made twenty or thirty such forts, within two or three miles! At any rate I am confident these immense armies of military heroes never visited Illinois. ...

Those who are particularly desirous of information concerning the millions of warriors, and the bloody battles in which more were slain than ever fell in all the wars of Alexander, Caesar, or Napoleon, with a particular description of their military works, would do well to read the “Book of Mormon,” made out of the “golden plates” of that distinguished antiquarian Joe Smith! It is far superior to some modern productions on western antiquities, because it furnishes us with the names and biography of the principal men who were concerned in these enterprises, with many of the particulars of their wars for several centuries. But seriously, the attention of scientific men is invited to this subject.⁸²

Pratt recalls responding to Peck’s argument.

To do away with the Book of Mormon, we are called upon to believe that the temples, statues, pyramids, sculptures,

82 J. M. Peck, *A Gazetteer of Illinois ...* (Jacksonville: R. Goudy, 1834), 54–55, 53–54.

monuments, engravings, mounds and fortifications, now in ruins on the American continent, are all the works of Nature in her playful moments; that the bones of slumbering nations were never clothed upon with flesh, and that their sleeping dust was never animated with life. This is too monstrous; it is too marvelous, too miraculous for our credulity; we can never believe that these things are the works of Nature, unaided by human art; we are not so fond of the marvelous.⁸³

This rebuttal suggests that by 1833 Mormon arguments for pre-Columbian civilization were expanding to include evidence from Central America as well as the North American Midwest. Just months before the encounter, the February 1833 issue of the *Evening and Morning Star* published a report of the ruined city of Palenque. The report cited an extract from the *London Literary Gazette* describing “a city and its suburbs” with buildings and “statues of stone” and “monumental inscriptions” and other evidence of civilization “prior to the fourteenth century.” The editor, W. W. Phelps, considered it “good testimony” for the Book of Mormon. He also suggested that “should ruins of many cities be discovered, it would be no more than a confirmation of what was once on this land of the Lord.”⁸⁴ Pratt’s reference to statues, sculptures, monuments, and engravings is consistent with the content of that report and suggests he was familiar with the article in the *Star* and used it to supplement his rebuttal to Peck’s claim that there were no ruined pre-Columbian cities in America.

In his 1839 revised and expanded version of *A Voice of Warning*, Pratt introduced passages from Josiah Priest’s *American Antiquities*, which described the remains of Palenque, the same passage cited later by Winchester in the *Gospel Reflector* in 1841. Pratt’s 1839 edition, as noted already, was extremely popular and widely distributed. He also referenced another description of the ruined city published in the *Family Magazine* in 1833.⁸⁵

It is stated in the *Family Magazine*, No. 34, p. 266, for 1833, as follows: “Public attention has been recently excited respecting

83 Pratt, *Autobiography*, 70.

84 “Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Central America,” [71]. See also Mitchell K. Schaefer, ed., *William E. McLellin’s Lost Manuscript* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2012), 168–69.

85 “Ruins of an Ancient American City,” *Family Magazine* 1/34 (7 December 1833): 266.

the ruins of an ancient city found in Guatemala. It would seem that these ruins are now being explored, and much curious and valuable matter in a literary and historical point of view is anticipated. We deem the present a most auspicious moment, now that the public attention is turned to the subject, to spread its contents before our readers, as an introduction to future discoveries during the researches now in progress.”

The following are some of the particulars, as related by Captain Del Rio, who partially examined them, as above related, 1787: From Palanque, the last town northward in the province of *Ciudad Real de Chiapa*, taking a south-westerly direction, and ascending a ridge of highland that divides the kingdom of Guatemala from Yucatan, at a distance of six miles, is the little river *Micol*, whose waters flow in a westerly direction, and unite with the great river Tulijah, which bends its course towards the province of *Tabasco*. Having passed Micol, the ascent begins, and at half a league, or a mile and a half, the traveller crosses a little stream called Ololum; from this point heaps of stone ruins are discovered, which render the roads very difficult for another half league, when you gain the height whereon the stone houses are situated, being still fourteen in number in one place, some more dilapidated than others, yet still having many of their apartments perfectly discernible.

A rectangular area, three hundred yards in breadth by four hundred and fifty in length, which is a fraction over fifty-six rods wide, and eighty-four rods long, being, in the whole circuit, two hundred and eighty rods, which is three-fourths of a mile, and a trifle over. This area presents a plain at the base of the highest mountain forming the ridge. In the centre of this plain is situated the largest of the structures which has been as yet discovered among these ruins. It stands on a mound or pyramid twenty years high, which is sixty feet, or nearly four rods in perpendicular altitude, which gives it a lofty and beautiful majesty, as if it were a temple suspended in the sky. This is surrounded by other edifices, namely, five to the northward, four to the southward, one to the southwest, and three to the eastward — fourteen in all. In all directions, the fragments of other fallen building are seen extending along the mountain that stretches east and west either way

from these buildings, as if they were the great temple of worship, or their government house, around which they built their city, and where dwelt their kings and officers of state. At this place was found a subterranean stone aqueduct, of great solidity and durability, which in its course passes beneath the largest building.

Let it be understood, this city of Otolum, the ruins of which are so immense, is in North, not South America, in the same latitude with the island Jamaica, which is about 18 degrees north of the equator, being on the highest ground between the northern end of the Caribbean sea and the Pacific ocean, where the continent narrows toward the isthmus of Darien, and is about 800 miles south of New Orleans.

The discovery of these ruins, and also of many others, equally wonderful in the same country, are just commencing to arouse the attention of the schools of Europe, who hitherto have denied that America could boast of her antiquities. But these immense ruins are now being explored under the direction of scientific persons, a history of which, in detail, will be forthcoming, doubtless, in due time; two volumes of which, in manuscript, we are informed, have already been written, and cannot but be received with enthusiasm by Americans. ... We might fill a volume with accounts of American Antiquities, all going to show that this country has been peopled with a people, who possessed a knowledge of the arts and sciences; who built cities, cultivated the earth, and who were in possession of a written language.

The notion of a *ruined* city in Central America reminded Pratt of the account of destruction in 3 Nephi, which he suggested might provide a reasonable explanation.⁸⁶

In the spring of 1840, an anonymous critic who described himself as a “Philanthropist of Chester Co.” published a pamphlet attacking the Book of Mormon and the Mormons. “This Book of Mormon,” he wrote, “presupposes among the Indians, at the time of its compilation and engraving, a knowledge of the arts and sciences ... reading, writing, engraving, gold-beating, &c., but the present race of Indians have no

⁸⁶ Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* ... Second Edition, Revised (New York: J. W. Harrison, 1839), 126–143.

recollection or tradition of reading or writing ever being among them.” Shortly thereafter S. Bennett, a Latter-day Saint of Philadelphia, published a reply. “Anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with American antiquities, or Indian traditions, will find abundant evidence to establish the fact. (See Priest’s *American Antiquities*, also a work on the discovery of America, by the Northmen by A. Davis).”⁸⁷ The “Philanthropist” was unimpressed with Mound Builder evidence. “A thousand opinions, sir, concerning the aborigines of this country, is not proof of the truth of the book. ... But are there not mounds, forts, and the remains of towns, that show that the inhabitants of this country were once acquainted with the arts and sciences? I answer that these remains will not prove any greater degree of perfection in the arts, than that which was exhibited among the Mexicans, when first visited by the Spanish. No remains of antiquity, which can be proved to be the work of the inhabitants of this country, previous to its discovery, will constitute even so much as a shadow of proof, that the sciences of reading a writing ... were even known here.”⁸⁸ If the Indians were of Israel, he reasoned, they would not have forgotten the “arts and sciences” of civilization.

Winchester wrote several letters reporting his missionary activities in 1839,⁸⁹ 1840,⁹⁰ 1841,⁹¹ and two separate pamphlets in 1840,⁹² but none of these addressed the question of pre-Columbian antiquities. He never wrote about the subject until March 1841. At that time he mentioned reports of the ruins of Otolum as evidence for pre-Columbian civilization, like earlier writers, but drew no correlation between that site and any city named in the Book of Mormon text. Winchester’s 1841 writings show no awareness of Stephens and Catherwood’s discoveries, suggesting that he only learned of them later.

87 S. Bennett, *A Few Remarks by way of reply to an anonymous scribbler calling himself A Philanthropist disabusing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of the slanders and falsehoods which he has attempted to fasten upon it* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking & Guilbert, 1840), 3–4.

88 A Philanthropist of Chester County, *Mormonism Unmasked, showed to be an impious imposture, and Mr. Bennett’s Reply answered and refuted* (Philadelphia: T. K. & P. G. Collins, 1840), 4–5.

89 Benjamin Winchester to E. Robinson and Don Carlos Smith, 18 June 1839, *Times and Seasons* 1/1 (November 1839), 2–9.

90 Benjamin Winchester, 10 February 1840, *Times and Seasons* 1/7 (May 1840): 104.

91 Benjamin Winchester, 12 November 1841, *Times and Seasons* 3/2 (15 November 1841), 604–6.

92 Winchester, *An Examination*, 1840; *The Origin of the Spaulding Story*, 1840.

Neville thinks that Winchester may have co-authored several reports of George Adams lectures that were published in the *Bostonian* in 1842 and reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* (97–118). The most significant of these was reprinted in the September 1, 1842, issue. It reports that Adams “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.”⁹³ If, as Neville suggests, Winchester wrote or co-authored this report, it is a description of Adams’s arguments not Winchester’s and Adams did not link specific Central American cities with those in the Book of Mormon. Winchester only reports that he mentioned Stephens to refute the civilization argument against the Book of Mormon, which missionaries had been doing for years.

The idea that Winchester would need to be secretive about getting his writings on the Book of Mormon into print also seems unlikely when we remember that he had no difficulty publishing books in 1842 and 1843. What was to stop him from expressing his views? *A History of Priesthood*, published in 1843, has an entire chapter on the Book of Mormon. Here was an excellent opportunity to disseminate his views, but the chapter is little more than a reworking of his 1841 writings with a few minor changes.⁹⁴ In 1841, he wrote that Lehi landed “somewhere on the western coast of South America.” In 1843 he wrote ambiguously that they “safely landed upon this land.” His 1843 geographical perspective, like that in 1841, is still broad and hemispheric. He mentioned Central American discoveries in both his 1841 and 1843 writings, but in 1841 he could only quote from the older less reliable reports about Otolum, not from Stephens and Catherwood’s more recent and accurate volumes. In 1843 he still wrote vaguely of “the remains of these cities and temples, [that] are to be seen in Central America, and elsewhere, in both the north and South parts of the continent; the discovery of which has excited the curiosity and astonishment of the learned so much of late.”⁹⁵ The ruins were evidence for civilization, but he drew no correlation between them and specific Book of Mormon cities.⁹⁶ His failure to mention Stephens

93 “[From the *Bostonian*] Mormons, or, ‘Latter Day Saints,’” *Times and Seasons* 3/21 (1 September 1842), 899–900.

94 Crawley, 229.

95 Winchester, *A History of the Priesthood*, 130.

96 “The recent discoveries of American antiquities, such as the remains of once splendid cities, spacious temples and edifices, an extensive quantity of

or Catherwood by name or reference any actual details from their 1841 and 1843 books, not even so much as a page number, suggests only superficial knowledge, and that even by 1843, Winchester's geographical conceptions of the Book of Mormon had not changed much since 1841. The 1842 report of the Boston lecture shows that he had heard of their discoveries, but never made much use of them if his writings are any indication. Neville, in fact, presents no evidence that Winchester owned or even so much as read Stephens and Catherwood. Yet this is the man who we are to believe wrote the unsigned 1842 editorials on Central America in the *Times and Seasons*! For the purported mastermind of the "Mesoamerican" idea of Book of Mormon geography, that seems odd to say the least. The evidence from Winchester's known writings strongly weigh against such a theory.

Neville's Winchester is a fairy-tale figure — the evil genius behind the limited Mesoamerican geography, an idea that originated in the rotten heart of a dissident, was promoted by apostates and beguiles our thinking about the Book of Mormon. "It has marked the Church, but hopefully not forever" (187). He pursues the accused with zeal, determination, and creativity to find means, motive, and opportunity for what turns out to be an imaginary crime, a "scheme" where none was needed to publish ideas that were never controversial. He really has no idea of what a Mesoamerican geography is. He just knows that he's against it.

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hieroglyphics, catacombs, obelisks, aqueducts, viaducts, &c, &c., is sufficient to convince any rational person" not of the location of Zarahemla, but "that a nation existed upon this continent ... who were enlightened, and understood the arts and sciences," Winchester, *A History of Priesthood*, 137.

