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Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies

Daniel C. Peterson, Matthew Roper,
and William J. Hamblin

On Alma 7:10 and the Birthplace of Jesus Christ

CRITICISM PAPERS

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This paper is part of a series of F.A.R.M.S. papers intended to give clear, concise answers to criticisms that have been raised against the Book of Mormon. As can be seen in the footnotes, much is owed to previous researchers who have addressed these criticisms. The foundation wishes to thank Matthew Roper for his help in gathering and summarizing large portions of the raw material for this series of papers. The authors wish to thank Robert Durocher for his help with this paper.

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On Alma 7:10 and the Birthplace of Jesus Christ

Daniel C. Peterson, Matthew Roper, and William J. Hamblin

One of the most popular anti-Mormon claims is that the Book of Mormon gives the wrong location for the birth of Jesus Christ. "The Book of Mormon teaches that Jesus Christ was born at Jerusalem (Alma 7:10)," says one representative anti-Mormon volume. "Of course, the Bible teaches He was born at Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1)." However, since Bethlehem is five or six miles from Jerusalem, and is a distinct town, the critics claim that "Alma 7:10 is clearly a false prophecy."¹

It is sometimes rather difficult to see the point of this hoary old anti-Mormon chestnut.² After all, no Latter-day Saint has ever interpreted the Book of Mormon as claiming that Jesus was born in Jerusalem rather than in

¹ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1992), 364; cf. 353.

² Elder Parley P. Pratt was giving a sound response to this already in 1838: "This you say, is a contradiction of his being born in Bethlehem, (a little place, six miles from Jerusalem,) but mark the local difference in the places where each was spoken. One prophet stands in the vicinity where the thing was fulfilled, and points out the exact location, (Bethlehem.) The other stands on the other side of the globe, from Jerusalem, and addresses a people who knew but little concerning the localities of the various towns and villages of Judea. The prophet speaks in general terms concerning a thing which should transpire in the land of Jerusalem, as they had a general idea of the great capitol city and country, from whence they sprang, rather than a distinct idea of all its villages. This is in perfect accordance with all the circumstances under which they wrote, and a great proof in favour of the Book of Mormon; because an imposter, in forging a book, would have said Bethlehem; for every school boy knows, that Bethlehem is the place where the Lord was born." (Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled . . . Sutherland Exposed*. . . . [1838], 19.)

Bethlehem. Alma 7:10 does not even mention the *city* of Jerusalem. Rather, the text reads: "And behold, he [Jesus] shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem *which is the land of our forefathers*." The Jerusalem at which Jesus was to be born is thus quite clearly called a *land*, not a *city*. As we shall demonstrate below, this is quite consistent with both biblical and Near Eastern literary practice. Latter-day Saints are quite content to believe both Alma and the New Testament, and to see them in harmony. Happily, the evidence is overwhelmingly on our side.

General Considerations

Relativity of geographical designators. From across the ocean, the distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem would hardly have seemed significant to a Nephite.³ We routinely speak, in the United States, of people who live in "the Chicago area" or in "the vicinity of Boston." When in the Middle East or Europe (or often even in Utah), one of the authors routinely answers "Los Angeles" when asked where he is originally from, although that answer is literally untrue, and the more accurate reply would be "Pasadena" (birthplace), or "San Gabriel" (residence through high school), or even "Whittier" (residence of his parents since the mid-1970s).

³ Geographical precision seems to have been a secondary matter even for some biblical figures living in Palestine. Consider the case of Cleopas, who, with a friend, walked with the resurrected Christ along the road to Emmaus. "Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem," he asked his anonymous companion, "and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?" "What things?" the Savior asked. Cleopas and his friend replied that they were referring to the condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth (see Luke 24:13–20). But the place of crucifixion, Calvary or Golgotha, was not *in* the city of Jerusalem. Rather, it was outside the wall (John 19:20).

More to the point, the other author was temporarily assigned to duty at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. If, upon his return to the U.S., he were to state, "I lived for six months in Ramat Eshkol," how many people would know the place to which he referred? Very few. On the other hand, if he were to say, "I lived six months in Jerusalem," everyone would understand. But Ramat Eshkol is a suburb of Jerusalem, several miles to the north, and technically not part of the city itself. Thus, to those familiar with the microgeography of Jerusalem and Israel, Ramat Eshkol would be a meaningful geographical designator. To those only vaguely familiar with Israel, however, Jerusalem would be much more meaningful. Therefore, since those ignorant of Jerusalem's microgeography significantly outnumber those who know it (especially in North America), he usually says that he lived in Jerusalem. Does this somehow make him a liar? Or, more drastically, are we to assume—paralleling the methods of the critics—that, because he says he lived in Jerusalem instead of Ramat Eshkol, he never lived in Israel at all, and, indeed, that he doesn't even exist?

All this may help us understand why Alma did not give a more precise location for the birth of Jesus. It is probably because he was talking to people some five centuries removed from any direct knowledge of the geography of Judea. Bethlehem is never mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and its exact location would almost certainly have been unknown to the average nonscholarly Nephite. Furthermore, copies of the scriptures are unlikely to have been widely distributed among ordinary people since, without the printing press, they would simply have been too expensive. A prophetic reference to a small unfamiliar village near Jerusalem would, therefore,

likely have been meaningless to Alma's audience. Jerusalem, by contrast, was well known and frequently mentioned.

The "idiot-savant" paradox. Furthermore, to suggest that Joseph Smith knew the precise location of Jesus' baptism by John ("in Bethabara, beyond Jordan," 1 Nephi 10:9; cf. John 1:28), but hadn't a clue about the famous town of Christ's birth, is inconsistent.⁴ It is highly improbable that the Book of Mormon's author or authors missed one of the most obvious facts about the most popular story in the Bible—something known to every child and to every singer of Christmas carols?⁵ Do they intend to say that a clever fraud who could write a book displaying so wide an array of subtle and authentic Near Eastern and biblical cultural and literary traits as the Book of Mormon does was nonetheless so stupid as to claim, before a Bible-reading public, that Jesus was born in the city of Jerusalem? As one anti-Mormon author has pointed out, "every schoolboy and schoolgirl knows Christ was born in

⁴ It may be objected that, if Bethlehem was too obscure to be worth mentioning, the even more obscure Bethabara should likewise be absent from the Book of Mormon. We suspect that the reason for Bethabara's inclusion lies in the fact that the prophecy that mentions it is given through Lehi, a resident of the Jerusalem area throughout nearly all his life (1 Nephi 1:4), and recorded by Nephi, who was also a native of Judea, during a time when memories of Old World geography were still fresh in the minds of both the two men and their immediate audience.

⁵ See Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1990), for a recent assault on the Book of Mormon, the argument of which rests heavily upon the debatable assumption that Joseph Smith knew the Bible in extraordinary detail. It is difficult to reconcile such alleged mastery of biblical detail with the dumb mistake that the Prophet is supposed to have committed with respect to Christ's birthplace. For critiques of the Tanners' book, see reviews by L. Ara Norwood, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* [hereafter *RBBM*] 4 (1992): 158–69; Matthew Roper, *RBBM* 4:170–87; John A. Tvedtnes, *RBBM* 4 (1992):188–230; Tom Nibley, *RBBM* 5 (1993): 273–89.

Bethlehem.”⁶ Exactly! It is virtually certain, therefore, that Alma 7:10 was as foreign to Joseph Smith’s preconceptions as it is to those of anti-Mormon critics. He is hardly likely to have twisted the Christmas story in so obvious a way, to have raised so noticeable a red flag, if he were trying to perpetrate a deception.

However, the Book of Mormon’s prophecy that Christ would be born “at Jerusalem which is the land of our fathers” fits remarkably well with what we now know to have been ancient usage.⁷ Far from casting doubt upon the authenticity of the book, the statement in Alma 7:10 represents a striking bull’s-eye.

Geographical Terminology in the Book of Mormon

The most reliable way to determine what a given phrase means in the Book of Mormon is to look at the Book of Mormon. This hardly seems debatable: to understand a perplexing expression in Shakespeare, we first study his writing. Only if that fails would we look at other texts.

⁶ Weldon Langfield, *The Truth about Mormonism: A Former Adherent Analyzes the LDS Faith* (Bakersfield: Weldon Langfield Publications, 1991), 53. For a critique of Langfield’s book, see Matthew Roper, *RBBM* 4 (1992): 78–92.

⁷ For some earlier Latter-day Saint treatments of this issue, see B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 3:481–82; Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 131–36, 207–8; D. Kelly Ogden, “Why does the Book of Mormon say that Jesus would be born at Jerusalem?” *Ensign* 14 (August 1984): 51–52; Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 6–7; Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 100–102; John W. Welch, *Exploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 170–72.

It must not be forgotten, in the consideration of this issue, that Alma was writing some time in the first century B.C. In other words, more than five centuries separated him and his people and their habits of speech from their ancestral homeland and its characteristic expressions. This is plenty of time for linguistic change to accumulate, as anyone can testify who has tried to read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in the original Middle English. The Nephite language seems to have been unique:

And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are *called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech*. And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; *but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also*; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record. But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that *none other people knoweth our language*; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof. (Mormon 9:32–34)

The phrase “land of [city-name]” in the Book of Mormon. It emerges from an examination of the data that the Book of Mormon routinely refers to “lands” that both surround and bear the names of their chief cities. We read, for instance, of the lands and cities of Ammonihah, Gideon, Helam, Jashon, Lehi, Lehi-Nephi, Manti, Morianton, Moroni, Mulek, Nehor, Nephihah, Noah, Shem, and Shilom.⁸ The cities and lands of Bountiful and Desolation

⁸ For Ammonihah, see Alma 8:6–7, 18; 10:1; 14:23; 15:1, 15–16; 16:11; 25:2; 49:1. For Gideon, see Alma 6:7; 8:1; 17:1; 30:21, 30; 61:5; 62:3–4, 6; Helaman 13:15. For Helam, see Mosiah 23:20, 25,

play a central role in Nephite history.⁹ So, too, do the city and land of Nephi.¹⁰ Thus, Amalickiah “marched with his armies . . . to the land of Nephi, to the city of Nephi, which was the chief city” (Alma 47:20). Notice, incidentally, that Alma had to specify that his prophecy in Alma 7:10 referred to “Jerusalem *which is the land of our forefathers*,” since the Old World city and land were mirrored in a New World land and city of Jerusalem (Alma 21:1–2; 24:1) that were much more directly familiar to his audience.

Far and away the most important example of the situation under discussion here is Zarahemla. Indeed, it was probably the most important of all Nephite cities (Alma 60:1). But it is also the name of a land.¹¹ Thus, the

29, 35, 37–39; 27:16; Alma 24:1. Jashon is mentioned at Mormon 2:16–17. For Lehi, see Alma 50:15, 25–27; 51:26; 62:30; Helaman 6:10. The quite distinct place known as Lehi-Nephi shows up at Mosiah 7:1–2, 4, 21; 9:6. Manti receives mention at Alma 16:6; 17:1; 43:22, 24, 32, 42; 56:14; 58:26; 59:6. Morianton occurs at Alma 50:25–26, 36; 51:26; 55:33; 59:5. The land and city of Moroni are mentioned at Alma 50:13–14; 51:22–24; 59:5; 62:25, 32–34; 3 Nephi 8:9; 9:4. For Mulek, see Alma 51:25–26; 52:2; Helaman 6:10. Nehor is alluded to at Ether 7:4, 9. Nephihah appears at Alma 50:14; 62:14, 18, 30. For Noah, see Alma 49:12–13, 15. Shem is briefly mentioned at Mormon 2:20–21. Shilom occurs at Mosiah 7:5, 21; 9:6, 14; 11:12–13; 24:1; Alma 23:12.

⁹ On Bountiful, see Alma 22:29, 31; 27:22; 50:11, 32; 51:28, 30, 32; 52:15, 18, 39; 53:3; 63:5; Helaman 1:29; 4:5–6; 3 Nephi 3:23; 11:1. For Desolation, consult Alma 22:30–32; 46:17; 50:34; 63:5; 3 Nephi 3:23; Mormon 4:1–2; Ether 7:6.

¹⁰ Omni 1:12, 27; Words of Mormon 1:13; Mosiah 7:6–7; 9:1, 14; 19:15, 19, 22, 24; 20:7; 21:21, 26; 23:35–38; 27:16; 28:1, 5; 29:3; Alma 2:24; 17:8; 18:9; 20:1–2; 22:1, 28, 34; 24:20; 25:13; 26:23; 27:1, 14, 20; 27:23; 28:8; 29:14; 46:29; 47:1; 49:10, 25; 50:8, 11; 53:6; 54:6; 56:3, 12; 58:38; Helaman 4:12; 5:20.

¹¹ Omni 1:12–13, 24, 28; Mosiah 1:1, 18; 2:4; 7:9, 13–14; 8:1, 5, 7–8, 14; 9:2; 21:24–26; 22:11, 13; 24:25; 25:5–6, 19, 23; 29:44; Alma 2:24; 3:20; 5:1; 8:1; 15:18; 16:1; 17:1, 7; 22:27–28; 25:2; 26:1, 9, 23; 27:5, 14–15, 20; 28:1; 30:6, 29; 31:3; 35:14; 45:18; 46:33; 47:29; 48:6; 50:7, 11; 51:11; 52:12; 53:10, 12; 56:28, 57; 57:6, 11, 15–16, 28, 30; 58:3–4, 23–24; 59:4; 60:30; 62:6, 11, 14; 63:4; Helaman 1:17–18, 23, 29; 3:3, 31; 4:5; 5:16, 19; 6:4; 7:1; 13:2; 3 Nephi 1:2; 2:9; 3:23; 6:25; Mormon 1:6.

king of the rebels against Pahoran entered into an alliance with the Lamanites "to maintain the city of Zarahemla, which maintenance he supposeth will enable the Lamanites to conquer the remainder of the land" (Alma 61:8). And when Moroni and Pahoran counterattacked, they "went down with their armies into the land of Zarahemla, and went forth against the city" (Alma 62:7). Later, the Lamanites again came "into the center of the land" and took "the capital city which was the city of Zarahemla" (Helaman 1:27). Thus from the Book of Mormon perspective, every major city was surrounded by its land.

The phrase "land of Jerusalem" in the Book of Mormon. Several instances make it clear that Old World Jerusalem was regarded in precisely the same way by the Nephites as were their own cities and lands. Sometimes the phrase "land of Jerusalem" seems to have referred to the area immediately around the city, or perhaps to the region of Judea. Jesus told the Nephites, for example, of "other sheep, which are not of this land, neither of the land of Jerusalem, neither in any parts of that land round about whither I have been to minister" (3 Nephi 16:1). Lehi's party and the Mulekites are said to have departed from "the land of Jerusalem."¹² And Lehi dwelt "at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 1:4, 7), but evidently outside the city proper (1 Nephi 3:16, 23–24). On other occasions, by contrast, the phrase seems to denote Judea and Galilee and perhaps all of Palestine. Thus, the Nephites were informed that Christ would "show himself" in "the land of Jerusalem" (Helaman 16:19). Thus, too, the Book of Mormon says that Christ chose his disciples in

¹² See 1 Nephi heading; also 2:11; 3:9–10; 7:2, 7; 16:35; 17:14, 20, 22; 18:24; 2 Nephi 1:1, 3, 9, 30; Jacob 2:25, 31; Omni 1:6; Mosiah 1:11; 2:4; 7:20; 10:12; Alma 3:11; 9:22; 10:3; 22:9; 36:29; Helaman 5:6; 7:7; 8:21; 3 Nephi 5:20.

"the land of Jerusalem" (Mormon 3:18–19)—although the New Testament specifies that at least several of the apostles were called in Galilee. In Nephite usage, "the land of Jerusalem" is the land of the Jews' eschatological inheritance, or at least the area to which they would return following their Babylonian exile.¹³ Thus, the phrase clearly refers to an area considerably larger than the urban area of Jerusalem proper.

Other Near Eastern geographical designators in the Book of Mormon.

Words such as *Judah*, *Judea*, *Galilee*, *Palestine*, *Israel*, and *Samaria* are rarely, if ever, used in a geographical sense in those portions of the Book of Mormon that were written in the New World. *Judah*, it is true, occurs numerous times. But most of these occurrences are in quotations from Isaiah, with one case (3 Nephi 24:4) from Malachi 3:4. There are two references to the "loins of Judah" the patriarch (2 Nephi 3:12). The other three references are all to "Zedekiah, king of Judah." Two are statements by Nephi (1 Nephi 1:4; 5:12), who himself lived in Judea under the reign of Zedekiah. The third, Omni 5, is a reference to Zedekiah based on the traditions of the Mulekites, who would have had a special reason to maintain traditions about Zedekiah as king of Judah since Mulek was a son of Zedekiah and was therefore theoretical heir to the throne (Helaman 6:10; 8:21). Within the New World Nephite historiographical tradition itself, however, there are no references to Judah as a geographical unit. There are five allusions to *Judea*, all of them referring to a city by that name in the New World.¹⁴ *Galilee* is mentioned once, while *Palestine* is mentioned twice, all in quotations from Isaiah.¹⁵

¹³ See, for example, 2 Nephi 25:11; 3 Nephi 20:29, 33, 46; Mormon 5:14.

¹⁴ Alma 56:9, 15, 18, 57; 57:11.

¹⁵ Galilee: 2 Nephi 19:1, quoting Isaiah 9:1; Palestine: 2 Nephi 24, quoting Isaiah 14.

The word *Israel* occurs numerous times in the Book of Mormon, but always in the context of a discussion of Israel as a people, not as a geographical region. *Samaria* occurs seven times, all in 2 Nephi 17–20, which simply quotes Isaiah 7–10.

In other words, there are *no* references to the standard biblical geographical terms for the Holy Land in those passages in the Book of Mormon that are not quotations from the Bible. What does this mean? The fact that all of these terms are quoted in the Book of Mormon is clear evidence that Joseph Smith was aware of the existence of such geographical names. Yet they are *never* used as geographical designators within the Nephite tradition. Instead, the standard term used to refer to Judea is the nonbiblical phrase “land of Jerusalem.” Thus, within the literary and linguistic context of the Book of Mormon itself, the assertion that Christ will be born “at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers” is simply the Nephite way of saying that Christ is to be born in Judea—a perfectly accurate statement.

It is worth noting here that the geographical details in the Book of Mormon relating to Palestine and the Near East are vague and sparse, while those relating to the New World are complex, precise, consistent, and detailed.¹⁶ This poses a problem for both fundamentalist and secular environmentalist critics. If the Book of Mormon were in fact a nineteenth-century forgery, we would expect geographical precision to be reflected in terminology relating to Palestinian and biblical geography, which Joseph

¹⁶ For general background on Book of Mormon geography, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985); Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events* (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1990); John Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” *RBBM* 1 (1989): 20–70.

Smith could have plagiarized from the Bible. We would expect vagueness to be found in the geography of the New World, which Joseph Smith would have had to invent. In fact, however, just the opposite is true.

Geographical Terminology in the Bible and Ancient Near East

Prebiblical evidence of the phrase "land of [city-name]" in the Near East.

K. Kitchen reminds us that "city and state often have the same name in the Ancient Orient, although distinct entities."¹⁷ Thus, for instance, northern Syria's Carchemish was both city and land.¹⁸ Egyptian texts of the Twelfth Dynasty (nineteenth century B.C.) likewise seem to suggest that the ancient Palestinian city of Shechem was surrounded by a land of the same name.

The so-called "Amarna letters" (fourteenth century B.C.) likewise use the phrase.¹⁹ Indeed, the Amarna letters also allude to "a town of the land of Jerusalem, Bit-Lahmi by name," which W. F. Albright regarded as "an almost certain reference to the town of Bethlehem."²⁰ This is interesting evidence,

¹⁷ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1966), 68 n. 63.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Walter Harrelson, "Shechem in Extra-Biblical References," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 20 (1957): 4, 6–7.

²⁰ See James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:274; also Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, eds., *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1977), map 39. Hugh Nibley drew our attention to the Amarna letters years ago. See Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 100–102. Nibley's references are to the Amarna letters, tablets 287.25 = "the land of the city of Jerusalem ([a-]mur mat u-ru-sa-lim an-n[i-ta]"; 46, 61, 63 = "lands [matat] of Jerusalem"; 290:15–16, which discuss "a city of the land of Jerusalem, whose name is bit-ninib." Samuel A. B. Mercer, *The Tell el-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939), 722 n. L16, speculated that it might be possible to read this as "Bethlehem." Transliteration and translation can be found on pp. 710–11, 722 of

which goes some distance in establishing the plausibility of Alma's prophecy, since it gives us a glimpse of an ancient administrative arrangement in the vicinity of Jerusalem. It shows, from an ancient perspective, that it was possible to conceptualize the regions surrounding a major city, including its dependent villages, as "the land of" that city. And it demonstrates, furthermore, that Bethlehem itself was, at least at one point, anciently regarded as a part of Jerusalem's land, exactly as it is in the Book of Mormon.

However, at least one vocal critic of the Book of Mormon contends that the Amarna letters are far too old to be relevant to Lehi's Jerusalem in the early sixth century. "It would," he declares, "be like using a letter from King George III to prove the United States could still be rightly called the colonies."²¹ This overstates the case, but his demand that we look at the Bible and other contemporary evidence is certainly not without merit.²²

Mercer's book. The preferred translation is now William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

²¹ Bill McKeever, "Problems," *Mormonism Researched* (Winter 1992): 4. (A longer, unpublished article on the same subject, bearing the same title, was produced by McKeever in 1992, in conjunction with one Eric Johnson. When referred to, this unpublished version will be distinguished from the published article by Johnson's name and by the designation "Long Text.") McKeever's claim that Nibley left out "very pertinent information" concerning the origin and date of the Amarna letters (p. 3) is, by the way, manifestly false. Nibley accurately describes the nature of the Amarna letters on p. 469 n. 16 of *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, referencing material in his original discussion on p. 101: "The Amarna Letters are the actual documents of the official correspondence between the Egyptian Government and the rulers of the various principalities of Palestine and Syria about 1400 B.C., at the very time the Hebrews were entering Palestine. They were found on clay tablets at El-Amarna on the middle Nile in 1887." In this passage, Nibley refers to everything McKeever claims he "left out," including: the date, "1400 B.C."; that they were by "Palestinian chieftain[s]"; that they were "not of Hebrew ancestry"; and that they were written to "the Pharaoh of Egypt" (see McKeever, "Problems," 3). Perhaps McKeever should not have "invite[d] [his] readers to check [his]

McKeever claims that, "when the Amarna tablets were written, Jerusalem was a city-state. . . . It would make no sense for Alma to use this phrase 1300 years later when the political situation had changed so drastically from the time the Amarna Letters were written."²³ This is superficially plausible. But McKeever ignores several important pieces of evidence. First, as we have demonstrated above, the Book of Mormon's use of the phrase "the land of [a city]" is internally consistent and intelligible.²⁴ This conclusion is dependent for its validity on neither the Amarna tablets nor the Bible. Second, the

sources for context accuracy" (p. 3). Certainly he has not accurately presented the context of Nibley's argument.

²² His own examination of the biblical evidence, however, is largely without merit. First of all, in order to show that the term "land of Jerusalem" was not current in biblical times, he must examine every text and every utterance from that period. But most texts and virtually all human utterances vanish without a trace, even from the modern period. He must prove a negative, but since almost none of the relevant ancient evidence survives, he can never reach certainty. Moreover, when he tries to establish a "biblical" usage-pattern for the phrase "at Jerusalem," his statistically problematic five samples extend from the original Hebrew text of 1 Kings 12:27 to the original Greek text of John 10:22, as if there were some "scriptural" style of preposition use that transcends difference not only of languages but of language *families* and that necessarily remains unchanged over the course of many centuries. See McKeever and Johnson, "Problems in 'the Land of' Jerusalem" (Long Text), 3. On pp. 4–6, McKeever and Johnson show remarkable ability to read their assumptions into the evidence of the Book of Mormon, taking a number of texts as supporting their position which actually do nothing of the kind.

²³ McKeever, "Problems," 4.

²⁴ Hugh Nibley had already pointed this out (*An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 101), but McKeever chooses to ignore it. Incidentally, McKeever also has the irritating habit, prevalent among many anti-Mormons, of describing those authors with whom he agrees by their academic titles and positions, while disparaging those authors with whom he *disagrees* as "LDS apologists" (e.g., at "Problems," 3). One wonders why McKeever does not mention that Nibley has a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley and is Professor Emeritus of History and Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

grammatical construction “land of [city-name]” is a perfectly grammatical Hebrew idiom found in the Bible.

The phrase “land of [city-name]” in the Bible. What do we learn from the use of this phrase during the biblical period? Anti-Mormons claim, correctly, that the precise phrase “land of Jerusalem” never occurs in the Bible.²⁵ However, this is almost certainly not as important a fact as they believe it to be.²⁶ Jerusalem played a central administrative and political role from the reign of King David in the tenth century B.C. down to the period of the Babylonian exile—i.e., to roughly the time of Lehi and the departure of the Mulekites. David’s successor, King Solomon, divided his kingdom into twelve administrative districts, largely for purposes of taxation, with each one governed from an administrative center.²⁷ One of those districts included

²⁵ For example, McKeever, “Problems,” 3–4. However, using the Hebrew word *migrash*, meaning the open agricultural or pastoral land surrounding a city, rather than *eretz*, which refers to land or ground in general, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the area immediately surrounding Jerusalem (Ezekiel 48:15). See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, Ind.: Associated Publishers, 1981), 117. Although the actual phrase *migrash Yerushalayim* does not occur, the context of the passage shows that it refers to the *migrash* of Jerusalem.

²⁶ Anti-Mormons frequently claim that the Book of Mormon is plagiarizing the Bible whenever it uses biblical phraseology—this is one of the basic assumptions of the Tanners’ *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*—but then declare that, wherever the Book of Mormon uses phraseology without biblical parallel, it has clearly discredited itself as an ancient document. Using this flawed methodology, the authenticity of the Book of Mormon can never really be tested, since the questions are framed in such a manner as to ensure a negative conclusion.

²⁷ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 221–22; Yohanan Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 258–59.

both Bethlehem and Jerusalem, with the latter serving as district capital.²⁸ During the reign of Hezekiah, between 716 and 687 B.C., Solomon's twelve districts were consolidated into four, with Jerusalem doing "double duty as the royal and district capital."²⁹

Lehi's contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, describing the siege of Jerusalem, says that Nebuchadnezzar's armies fought "against Jerusalem and all its surrounding towns" (Jeremiah 34:1; New International Version)—by which he apparently means the other cities and towns of Judah (Jeremiah 34:7). In this, Jeremiah was entirely consistent with common biblical usage, according to which the name *Jerusalem* was often used to designate the entire southern kingdom.³⁰

Other cities, too, had their surrounding lands, named after them. Samaria, for instance, was often used as a designation for the entire northern kingdom of Israel, even though, strictly speaking, it was only the name of the royal city that had been founded by Omri in the early ninth century B.C. (1 Kings 16:24). The Bible speaks of "cities of Samaria."³¹ Thus, when we read of "Ahab king of Samaria," we are to understand him as the monarch of the northern kingdom as a whole, not merely as the glorified mayor of its largest urban center. Jeremiah 31:5 even refers to "the mountains of Samaria."

Similarly, Ephraim possessed the city of "Tappuah," but Manasseh owned the territory of the same name (Joshua 17:8)—which the *Interpreter's*

²⁸ See A. F. Rainey, "The Biblical Shephelah of Judah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 251 (Summer 1983): 8.

²⁹ Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of Israel*, 259.

³⁰ See, for example, 2 Kings 21:13; Isaiah 10:10–11; Ezekiel 23:4; Micah 1:1, 5.

³¹ See 1 Kings 13:32; 2 Kings 17:24, 26; 23:19; Ezra 4:16.

Dictionary of the Bible quite correctly terms "the land of Tappuah."³² The town of "Tob" was surrounded, biblically, by "the land of Tob" (Judges 11:3).³³ There was a city Mizpah (or Mizpeh) as well as the "land of Mizpah" (Joshua 11:3).³⁴

And such usage extended beyond the boundaries of Hebrew settlement. The great Syrian city of Damascus, for instance, seems to have possessed a "wilderness" (1 Kings 19:15). So, too, the Canaanite city of Hazor seems to have been surrounded by a land of the same name.³⁵ Tema, in Arabia, was both land and city (Isaiah 21:14), as, apparently, was "Ur of the Chaldees."³⁶ Lehi's great contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, knows "the land of Babylon" (Jeremiah 50:28; 51:29), as well as the famous city from which that land had taken its name. And when Abraham "sojourned in Gerar" (Genesis 20:1), one eminent scholar assures us, this was "obviously in the territory so named, not the walled city itself."³⁷ Sodom and Gomorra, the "cities of the plain" are known to every reader of the Bible. Yet the Savior himself can allude to "the land of Sodom and Gomorra" (Matthew 10:15; cf. 11:24). Hamath was an important town on the Orontes River in Syria. Riblah was also an ancient Syrian town. However, at several points in the Hebrew Bible

³² George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [hereafter *IDB*], 4 vols. and supplement (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962–1976), 4:517; cf. Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* [hereafter *HBD*] (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 1017.

³³ *IDB*, 4:657.

³⁴ *IDB*, 3:407.

³⁵ Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, 68.

³⁶ *IDB*, 4:533; on "Ur," see John A. Tvedtnes and Ross T. Christensen, *Ur of the Chaldeans: Increasing Evidence on the Birthplace of Abraham and the Original Homeland of the Hebrews* (Provo, Utah: Society for Early Historic Archaeology, 1985), 8–9.

³⁷ Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, 68 n. 63.

we read of "Riblah in the land of Hamath"—of, that is, one city that is in "the land of" another city.³⁸ This usage precisely parallels Latter-day Saint contentions that the city of Bethlehem could well be described in Hebrew terminology as being in "the land of" Jerusalem. Indeed, the phrase "land of their cities" (Heb. *eretz sha'aray-u*) occurs in 1 Kings 8:37, implying that it was seen in Hebrew as a generic grammatical form.

Thus, although the specific phrase "land of Jerusalem" is not itself found in the Bible, it is perfectly acceptable biblical usage for the region around a major city, including smaller towns, to be referred to as "the land of" that city.³⁹

The city-state Jerusalem and its "land" in the early sixth century B.C. At the time of the beginning of Book of Mormon history (597 B.C.), Jerusalem could best be considered as nothing more than a city-state. The former kingdom of Judah had been completely conquered by the Babylonians on 16 March 597 B.C., after which time Zedekiah (Mattaniah) was placed on the throne as a Babylonian puppet. Thus, the "first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah" (1 Nephi 1:4), when the story of Lehi opens, was precisely the year of the collapse of the kingdom of Judah, and its reduction to a vassal city-state under Babylonian domination. Although technically still called the

³⁸ 2 Kings 23:33; 25:21; Jeremiah 39:5; 52:9, 27; *IDB*, 2:516; 4:78; *HBD*, 369, 871.

³⁹ Clearly, Bill McKeever's claim that, "except for a few references to city-states, there is only one possible city [Babylon] cited in conjunction with the phrase 'land of' " ("Problems," 4) is, to say the least, mistaken. Likewise, his claim that "the expression 'land of the city of' is a Hittite expression" (p. 3, quoting William S. LaSor) is both disputed and irrelevant. The fact that a particular grammatical form in the Akkadian texts of the Amarna letters may ultimately have derived from Hittite is irrelevant, since the phrase occurs in the Bible independently and is thus also a legitimate Hebrew grammatical expression.

"kingdom of Judah," the area of Zedekiah's rule had in fact been reduced to the region directly surrounding Jerusalem, which could well be called the "land of Jerusalem." As John Bright describes it, "Certain of [Judah's] chief cities, such as Lachish and Debir, had been taken by storm and severely damaged. Her territory was probably restricted by the removal of the Negeb from her control, her economy crippled and her population drastically reduced."⁴⁰

Contemporary Babylonian texts describe Jerusalem as "the city" of Judah: "In the month of Kislimu, the King of Akkad called up his army, marched against the city of Judah [Jerusalem] and seized the town."⁴¹ Assyrian provincial terminology generally used the name of the capital of a province to designate that province as a whole,⁴² and such usage appears to have continued among the Babylonians.⁴³ This practice would have therefore been familiar to Lehi.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 326–31. The most obvious historical parallel to this situation is the fall of Constantinople in the fifteenth century A.D. Despite the fact that the effective power of the Byzantine emperors had been reduced to the city and region of Constantinople for decades, the imperial chronicles continue to describe the state as the "Roman Empire." See Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 15. Calling Judah a "kingdom" in 597 B.C. is a similar anachronism.

⁴¹ Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:203; cf. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 564. This occurred in year 7 of Nebuchadnezzar (= 598–597 B.C.). For the original text, see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975), 102, line 12.

⁴² Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, 2nd ed., translated by A. F. Rainey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 374–77, with additional references found in Aharoni's notes.

⁴³ Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 408–11.

⁴⁴ We do not know Lehi's age "in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah" (1 Nephi 14 = 597

Whatever its origins, however, the practice of naming an area after its leading city was obviously widespread in the ancient Near East. And if Jerusalem could be called "the city of Judah" by the Babylonians, would it have been unreasonable to regard the region of Judah as "the land of Jerusalem"? Here we see precisely the same ambiguity between land and capital city that is displayed in the Book of Mormon, in a Near Eastern record that dates from precisely the time of Nephi.

This is the political situation with which Nephi was familiar when he left Jerusalem: Judah had been reduced from a kingdom controlling all of Israel and much of Syria in the days of Solomon, to a much more humble status under Babylonian hegemony. In Nephi's personal experience—and, therefore, in subsequent Nephite tradition—Judah was not an independent kingdom, but a tributary city-state, tenuously ruling only the "land of Jerusalem."

"Land of Jerusalem" in the Dead Sea Scrolls. A very recently published fragment from the caves at Qumran, known as "Pseudo-Jeremiah" (4Q385)—which is attributed to Lehi's great prophet-contemporary Jeremiah—reflects precisely this situation. It speaks of the Jews as being "taken captive from the land of Jerusalem."⁴⁵ Commenting on the text, Professors Robert Eisenman

B.C.; see Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie/Zondervan, 1983], 190–91). However, since he had several adult sons at this time, we can probably conclude that he was at least in his late thirties. This would place his birth at the latest around 640 B.C., and probably much earlier. Assyrian power in Palestine and Syria collapsed about 616 B.C., meaning that Lehi, an adult of at least twenty-five years at the time of the fall of Assyria, would have been familiar with the usage of that period.

⁴⁵ Emphasis added. The original Hebrew text and an English translation of 4Q385 can be found at Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Rockport,

and Michael Wise note this “interesting reference to ‘the land of Jerusalem’ ” and remark that “this greatly enhances the sense of historicity of the whole, since Judah or ‘Yehud’ (the name of the area on coins from the Persian period) by this time consisted of little more than Jerusalem and its immediate environs.”⁴⁶

This newly discovered phrase from the Dead Sea Scrolls significantly transforms the issue. For a century and a half the critics have consistently argued that Alma 7:10 represents a significant blunder which clearly demonstrates that the Book of Mormon was Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century forgery. Now, the precise phrase that has been seen as uncharacteristic of the Bible itself has been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the ancient documents most closely connected to biblical Hebrew.

Conclusion

The prophecy of Alma 7:10 fits into antiquity very well. If, as Professors Eisenman and Wise observe, an allusion to “the land of Jerusalem” in Pseudo-Jeremiah fragment 4Q385 “greatly enhances [its] sense of historicity,” does similar language not “greatly enhance the sense of historicity” of the Book of Mormon? Alma 7:10 is not the sort of thing that Joseph Smith would likely have invented, precisely for the same reason that it bothers enemies of Mormonism. Far from being a serious liability for the Book of

Mass.: Element, 1992), 57–58. We would like to thank Gordon C. Thomasson for bringing this example to our attention.

⁴⁶ Eisenman and Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, 57. In the so-called “Damascus Rule” or “Zadokite Document,” part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, reference is made twice to “the land of Damascus.” Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 6:102–3.

Mormon, Alma's prophetic comment about the birth of the Messiah is plausible evidence that the Nephite record is exactly what it claims to be—an authentic ancient historical text with roots in the Near East.

