

Is Zarahemla in Iowa? And Other Fatal Flaws with the Heartland Theory

By Tyler Livingston

Book of Mormon geography is a topic that is of little importance and has no bearing on our salvation. But recently, it has become a subject of debate as a group that believes The BOM took place in the “heartland” of America has begun to call into question ones faithfulness to the Gospel if you do not agree with their opinion on the location of Book of Mormon events.

Because of this, we have felt it necessary to review this theory to confirm whether their claims are accurate or not. We have found that this is not the case and those who support this theory pick and choose the evidence they want to use while ignoring the evidence which contradicts this theory. Below you will find several written reviews which expose this theory for mis-quoting, mis-using and taking information out of context.

This paper will explain the fallacies of their argument that Zarahemla was located across the river from Nauvoo.

This claim comes from the FIRM Foundations interpretation of D/C 125:3 which says "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." This revelation was received in March of 1841.

But...

When you know the rest of the story, things aren't so clear-cut. In fact, the Mormons were calling that area "Zarahemla" long before D&C 125, in March of 1841. But by this time, the saints had been calling the name of that area to be Zarahemla for several years¹.

This tells us that the name didn't come from the revelation; instead, the revelation used a name that had already been chosen by the Saints. This isn't a revelation of the name, any more than D&C 124's reference to Carthage, Illinois is meant to refer to the ancient enemy of Rome, the city of Carthage in North Africa Carthage is just what people called the town in Illinois, just like Zarahamla.

This becomes clear as we examine statements he made after this revelation was given. In just over a year later after D/C 125 was written, Joseph Smith in October of 1842 where he places Zarahemla in Mesoamerica. He said

“[W]e have found another important fact relating to the truth of the Book of Mormon. Central America, or Guatimala [Guatemala], is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south.-The city of Zarahemla, burnt at

the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon this land ...the ruins of Zarahemla have been found where the Nephites left them”²

Either Joseph Smith contradicted the Lord or D/C 125 was never meant to give the location of the ancient Zarahemla.

With that said, any statement on the location of Zarahemla and other BOM sites have only been the opinion of the giver and not revelation. The fact is, we do not know where Zarahemla is, and will not know until the Lord sees fit to reveal its location. A member of the First Presidency made this clear in General Conference. He said

“Where was the land of Zarahemla? Where was the City of Zarahemla? and other geographic matters. It does not make any difference to us. *There has never been anything yet set forth that definitely settles that question.* So the Church says we are just waiting until we discover the truth. . . . *We do not offer any definite solution.* As you study the Book of Mormon keep these things in mind and do not make definite statements concerning things that have not been proven in advance to be true.”³

The area that is mentioned in D/C 125 as the city of Zarahemla was not originally named by the Lord, but had already been called Zarahemla by the saints for several years before the revelation was given.

Brigham Young recorded that on 2 July 1839 "Brothers Joseph, Hyrum and others came over the river to Montrose, and went out on the prairie and looked out the sight for a city for the Saints, which was called Zarahemla."⁴

In Elias Smith’s journal for 16 August 1840, “he recorded the death of the Prophet's brother Don Carlos and noted that there was a "Conference at Zarahemla" on that day. These early references to the name of the Iowa settlement previous to March 1841 indicate that the Saints referred to it as Zarahemla long before the revelation in question. There is no indication in these early sources that this designation was based upon revelation or even that it was Joseph Smith's idea. This evidence suggests, rather, that the name did not originate with the March 1841 revelation and that the Lord was referencing a location already known among the Saints by that name. The purpose of the revelation was most likely to counsel the Saints to gather at the appointed place and not, as the authors suggest, to reveal the ancient location of a Book of Mormon city. The Saints did what they would often do—name places they lived after places mentioned in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. There is no compelling reason to associate the Iowa settlement with ancient Zarahemla.”⁵

In the Church Institute Manual that is published by the Church and used to teach Institute and other LDS courses explains D/C 125 this way

“The precise meaning of the word Zarahemla is not known. The term comes from the Book of Mormon account of the people who came to America from Jerusalem at the time Zedekiah was

carried captive into Babylon. They were called the people of Zarahemla after the name of their leader. They lived in a city named Zarahemla, in the land of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:12–19).

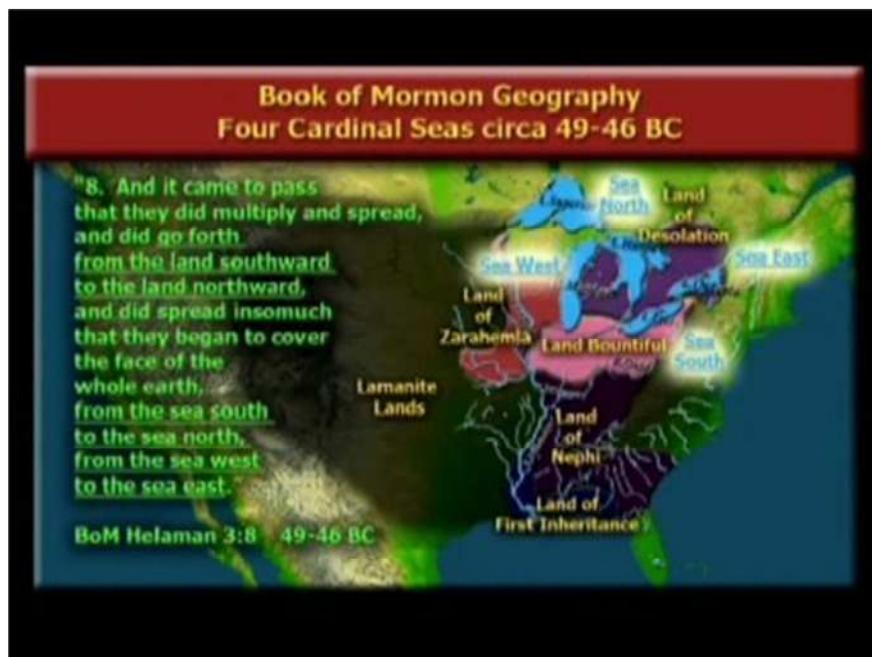
It was common in Book of Mormon times to name cities “after the name of him who first possessed them” (Alma 8:7). The Latter-day Saints gave many of their settlements Book of Mormon names. For example, in Utah are such cities as Nephi, Moroni, Manti, and Bountiful.

One of the first settlements named in this way by the Saints was Zarahemla, at Nashville, Lee County, Iowa. “This settlement was founded by the Saints in 1839, on the uplands about a mile west of the Mississippi River, near Montrose and opposite Nauvoo, Ill. The Church had bought an extensive tract of land here. At a conference held at Zarahemla, August 7th, 1841, seven hundred and fifty Church members were represented, of whom three hundred and twenty-six lived in Zarahemla. But when the Saints left for the Rocky Mountains, that city was lost sight of.”⁶

But, that's not the only problem with the FIRM Foundation's claims.....

According to the BOM, Lehi and his family travelled across the ocean and landed in the New World. After some time, Nephi and all those who would go with him fled into the wilderness and established the city Nephi. Later, the Nephites travelled northward and found the city of Zarahemla which was already occupied by the Mulekites, while the Lamanites took possession of the land of Nephi and the rest of the land southward.

The heartland model interprets this information this way:



With the Lehites landing near Florida, the land of Nephi being in the Tennessee/Mississippi area, Zarahemla being across from Nauvoo and the sea east being Lake Ontario, and the sea west being a combination of both lake Michigan and lake Huron and the narrow neck of land being between the Great Lakes.

On the surface there seems to be little wrong with this geography. However, when we compare it to the geography that is laid out in The Book of Mormon we see that such a geography is just not possible

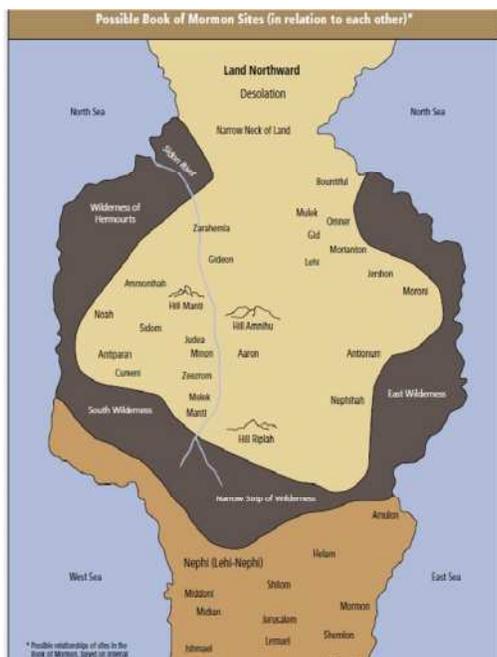


Figure 1 An internal Book of Mormon map taken from the LDS Church Institute manual

In The Book of Mormon, the entire Book of Mormon lands are located between the sea east and the sea west. From the land Nephi which is the southernmost point of Book of Mormon lands, to the land northward, the northernmost part of BOM lands, we have the east and west sea bordering on the left and right.

This means that, according the heartland model, the entire Book of Mormon had to have taken place between Lake Ontario and Lake Michigan and Huron, their sea east and sea west, making it impossible for the city of Zarahemla to be in Iowa. As a matter of fact, once we place The BOM in its correct place between the east and west sea, the heartland theory begins to disintegrate. Instead of having a land northward and a land southward divided by a narrow neck of land as described in the BOM, the only area available between the great lakes is what the heartlanders consider to be the narrow neck of land. This eliminates the land northward and southward



Figure 2 An aerial photograph of the Great Lakes. These same lakes are considered to be the Sea's spoken about in The Book of Mormon

What is also problematic are the claims made by heartlanders who put so much emphasis on the Book of Mormon taking place in the land of promise and that it only exists within the boundaries of what is now the United States. However, once The BOM is placed between the heartland theory east and west seas, this moves most of The BOM events into what is now Canada, not the United States.

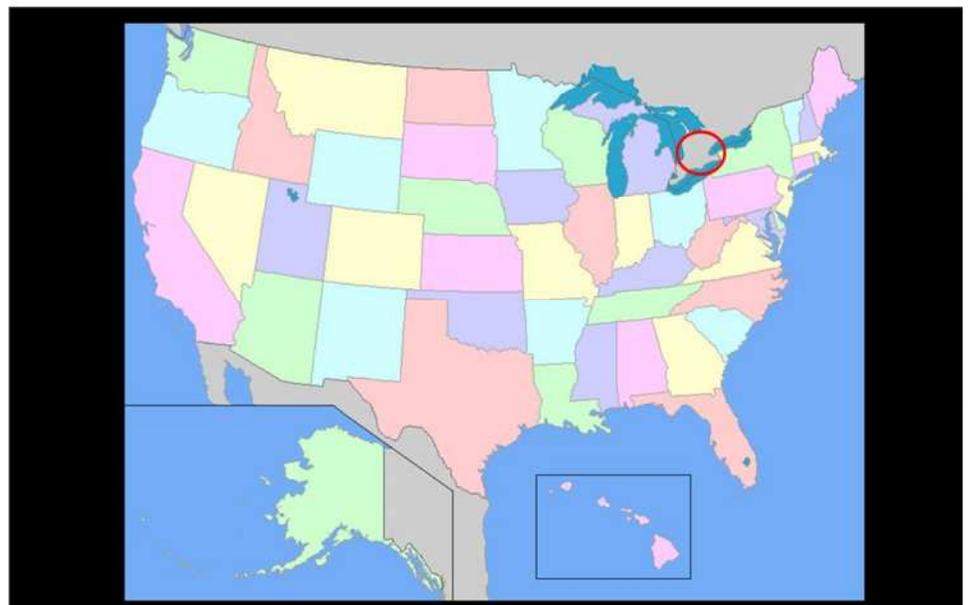


Figure 3 By following the geographical features outlined in The Book of Mormon, most of the Heartland model actually is outside of the borders of the United States

In conclusion, when one actually tries to make sense of the heartland theory by assigning real world locations to BOM cities, rivers, and seas according to this theory, we see that there are inconsistencies between The Book of Mormon and the heartland theory as well as contradictions within the theory itself. Also by doing this, several jingoistic claims made by them are invalidated.

While Book of Mormon geography is an interesting intellectual exercise, one should not question the faith of others if they believe in a different BOM geography. The location of BOM events are not important and have nothing to do with our salvation or level of faith. No one should be bullied into believing any theory within the Church.

¹ "Spent the forenoon of this day on the Iowa side of the river. Went, in company with Elders Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith, and Bishops Whitney and Knight, and others, to visit a purchase lately made by Bishop Knight as a location for a town, and advised that a town be built there, *and called Zarahemla.*" *History of the Church*, 3:382

"Brothers Joseph, Hyrum and others came over the river to Montrose, and went out on the prairie and looked out the sight for a city for the Saints, *which was called Zarahemla.*" *Manuscript History of Brigham Young: 1801-1844*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 2 July 1839

See Matthew Roper's article *Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography* for more information <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1467&index=3>

"How did a city in Iowa receive the Book of Mormon name of Zarahemla? Where is it located, and why did the Lord speak to the Saints living there? "Not all of the Saints who were driven from Missouri found refuge in Illinois. Some settled across the Mississippi River from Nauvoo, in Iowa. The revelation [[Doctrine and Covenants 125](#)] came in response to a question about whether they should remain in Iowa or gather to the Illinois side. One of the first to suggest that the Saints locate in Iowa was Dr. Isaac Galland, the man who had sold the land on which Nauvoo was built. Elder

Joseph Fielding Smith wrote that ‘Mr. Galland in a communication to David W. Rogers, suggested that the Saints locate in Iowa, which was a territory; for he thought they would be more likely to receive protection from mobs under the jurisdiction of the United States, than they would be in a state of the Union, “where murder, rapine and robbery are admirable (!) traits in the character of a demagogue; and where the greatest villains often reach the highest offices.” He also wrote to Governor Robert Lucas of Iowa, who had known the “Mormon” people in Ohio, and who spoke very highly of them as good citizens.” (*Essentials in Church History*, p. 220.)” (*Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, 311). <https://www.lds.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-and-church-history-student-study-guide/the-church-in-nauvoo-illinois/doctrine-and-covenants-125-zarahemla-iowa?lang=eng&query=M.+Russell+Ballard+Significant+de+zarahemla>

² Zarahemla," *Times and Seasons* 3/23 (1 October 1842): 927

³ Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, 15–16 April 1929, emphasis added.

⁴ *Manuscript History of Brigham Young: 1801–1844*, ed. Elden J. Watson (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1968), 2 July 1839

⁵ Matthew Roper, *Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography*, *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 57-58

⁶ The **Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual**: Religion 324-325, pg 311-312