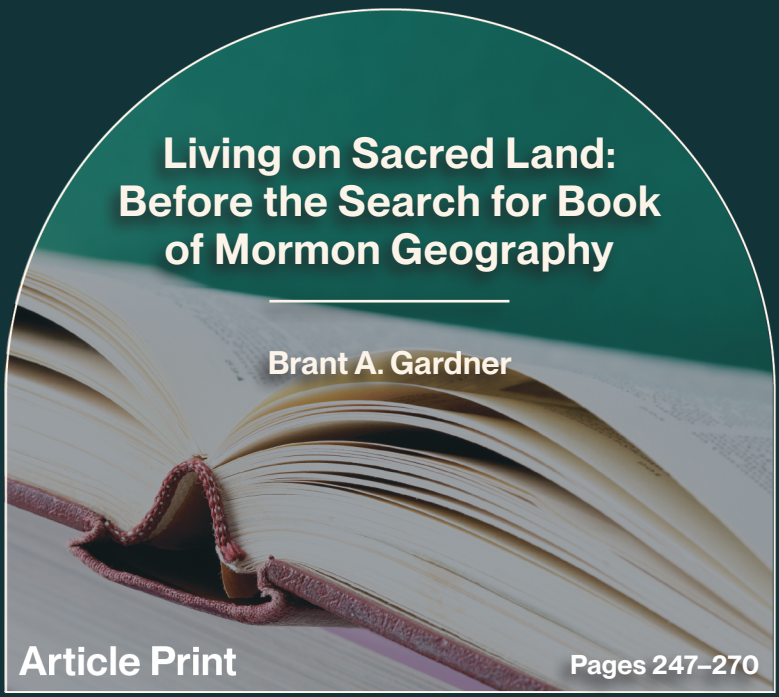
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Living on Sacred Land: Before the Search for Book of Mormon Geography

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Living on Sacred Land: Before the Search for Book of Mormon Geography

Brant A. Gardner

Abstract: *The current debate about Book of Mormon geographies is a relatively recent development among Latter-day Saints, appearing long after they had finally established themselves in the Salt Lake Valley. Prior to that time there was a general idea of a hemispheric location for Book of Mormon events, but early descriptions are much less about finding a geography for the Book of Mormon than finding themselves in a sacred Book of Mormon geography.*

Three decades ago, Massimo Introvigne published an article that echoes in the current Latter-day Saint intellectual environment. The short title was "The Book of Mormon Wars." He made two points that are relevant to current discussions surrounding the Book of Mormon. The first: "What in other denominations is a battle for the Bible is in contemporary Mormonism a battle for the Book of Mormon. This battle is fought not around interpretation, but around the very nature of the Book of Mormon."[1]

Introvigne's article discussed the concept of truth as might be applied to scripture. In his article, it was a war between insiders and outsiders, non-believers and believers. Those wars persist in the current intellectual climate, but another internal skirmish has become equally important over the last decade. In these internal wars, it is a question of where one might place the Book of Mormon on a map.

Introvigne's second point is also relevant to the modern Book of

1. Massimo Introvigne, "The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 4–5, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol5/iss2/1/.

Mormon map wars: "Historians are more crucial to the Latter-day Saint debate than to the Protestant, for the obvious reasons that the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830 and the circumstances of its translation are more open to historical research."[2]

This new religious movement began with an interesting imperative that "there shall be a record kept among you" (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1). It was a commandment declared on 6 April 1830. The formal beginning of the Church was also the formal understanding that it was to play a part in history. The place of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in history would partially depend upon the records kept. Those records have been kept, and the Joseph Smith Papers Project has proven an essential resource in understanding the early history of the Church.[3] Concomitantly, the importance of historians who are trained to understand documentary sources have become more important interpreters of the experiences of the early Saints.

Few, if any, of those trained historians have entered the Book of Mormon location wars, probably because locating a plausible setting for the Book of Mormon is not amenable to an answer through the study of early Church documents. However, it should be noted that there have been trained archaeologists, anthropologists, geologists, and botanists who have brought their expertise to bear on the question. Nevertheless, the work of trained historians and their sensibilities to the nature of the data are important. As Introvigne declared, "[H]istorians are . . . crucial." I am not one of those trained in modern history, but in this paper, I suggest that there is historical evidence that can establish the relationship that the early Saints had with the concept of place and the Book of Mormon.

Fundamental to understanding the perspective of the early Saints and their experiences with the Book of Mormon as an actual physical location is understanding that they were a faithful, but largely unlettered, people. A study of one hundred early converts found that

> The majority of early Mormon converts had received at least a "common school" education prior to conversion. This general term usually was interpreted to mean that an individual had received schooling through two or three years, sometimes not consecutive, with terms lasting somewhere between five and nine months per year. Sixty-five percent of

2. Introvigne, "Book of Mormon Wars," 5.
3. "The Joseph Smith Papers," josephsmithpapers.org/.

> the converts received the education described above, while another 13 percent received more advanced schooling. Twenty-one percent received little or no formal education."[4]

John L. Sorenson notes that during the early years of the Church, "'Oregon' and 'California' were barely conceived of as real places, let alone Peru, 'Darien' (Panama) or 'Guatimala.'"[5] The Saints likely understood the general shape of the western hemisphere, but lacked perspective on distances or the nature of the lands encompassed in that large geography.

What the early Saints did understand was that the Book of Mormon was miraculous. It was scripture announcing that God again spoke to a living prophet. They did use the word *evidence* in connection with the Book of Mormon, but with a different connotation than is typically seen in the modern Book of Mormon location debates. William E. McLellin was converted in 1831. He was on a mission in England in 1833. Two entries in his missionary diary from consecutive days demonstrate the way he used the Book of Mormon:

> Br. Parley spoke 30 minutes I then spoke 1½ hour's upon the evidences of the Bible & book of Mormon on the prophecies refering to the book of Mormon and on the two gatherings at Zion & Jerusalem and a little of the effects to be produced at each.[6]
>
> I arose (although it was a little cool) and addressed them one hour and a half on the evidences of Revelation and particularly the book of Mormon &C.[7]

McLellin did not expound on the nature of his evidences for the Book of Mormon. The context suggests that they were scriptural and not geographic or archaeological. The Saints developed those

4. Laurence Milton Yorgason, "Some Demographic Aspects of One Hundred Early Mormon Converts, 1830–1837," *Theses and Dissertations* 5230, Brigham Young University [BYU], 13–22 (pages include intervening charts, not cited), scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6229&context=etd.
5. John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1990), 10, archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/sorenson/2020-01-24/john_l._sorenson_the_geography_of_book_of_mormon_events_a_source_book_1990.pdf.
6. William E. McLellin, "Wednesday, 20 March 1833," *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–36,* ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies; Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 106.
7. McLellin, "Sunday March 24, 1833," 108.

latter interests slowly over time. Rather than finding a setting for the Book of Mormon, they found ways to set themselves inside a conceptual geography made sacred by their belief in the Book of Mormon. Wherever they found themselves, they sacralized that place as a Book of Mormon land.

Making Indians Sacred

One indication of the way the Book of Mormon informed the early Saints' perception of the land on which they lived is their shift in perspective about Native Americans. The title page of the Book of Mormon declares that it was "written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile." For the early Saints, this meant that the Native Americans were no longer *Indians*; they were now *Lamanites.* They were recast into a mostly new religious relationship with the European descendants in the young United States of America. It was not unusual logic. The idea that the Native Americans were Lamanites drank from the waters of a biblical logic that had long informed the way Europeans of the time conceived of the various populations around the world.

> Joseph Smith's contemporaries tended to use the Bible as a principal source of all information, both religious and scientific. According to the typical reading of Genesis, all populations were descendants of Noah's post-flood family (Gen. 10). Adam Clarke's Bible commentary, written between 1798 and 1825, underscores this belief:
>
> > Eusebius and others state (from what authority we know not) that Noah was commanded of God to make a will and bequeath the whole of the earth to his three sons and their descendants in the following manner:—To Shem, all the East; to Ham, all Africa; to Japheth, the Continent of Europe with its isles, and the northern parts of Asia.[8]
>
> Unfortunately, with the entire ancient world assigned to Shem, Ham, and Japheth, there was no son of Noah left to explain the native populations of the New World. Nevertheless, the European settlers in the New World could hardly ignore the

8. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments,* 6 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 1:84. Italics in original silently removed.

> people they were displacing. Into that theological and epistemological void came the remarkable idea that the Native Americans could be encompassed in the biblical definition of the world's races and resolve the issue of the lost tribes of Israel at the same time. [9]

Lamanites fit into a remnants-of-the-ten-tribes framework, but uncomfortably. Book of Mormon Lamanites didn't become Lamanites until about a century and a half after the ten tribes were scattered. They didn't descend from large tribes, but from a single small group comprised of Lehi's family, Ishmael's family, and Zoram.[10] The idea that Lamanites ultimately descended from Jerusalem made this new idea easier to accept. Nevertheless, *Lamanites* were sufficiently differentiated from *Indians* that they became sacred through their ties to the new scripture known as the Book of Mormon. It is therefore not surprising that as the young Church sent out missionaries throughout the world, it sent them first to the Lamanites:

> And now, behold, I say unto you that you shall go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them; and inasmuch as they receive thy teachings thou shalt cause my church to be established among them; and thou shalt have revelations, but write them not by way of commandment.
>
> And now, behold, I say unto you that it is not revealed, and no man knoweth where the city Zion shall be built, but it shall be given hereafter. Behold, I say unto you that it shall be on the borders by the Lamanites. (Doctrine and Covenants 28:8–9)

The description of the missions to the Lamanites informs us that the Native Americans living on the western borders of the young United States were envisioned as "the last descendants of the Nephites and Lamanites."[11] The early Saints did not discriminate among the

9. Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 3. Source summarizes much of this background history of the influence of the ten-tribes' hypothesis.
10. Although the beginning would have come from Lehi's people, Jacob notes that the term *Lamanite* became a generic term for non-Nephites (Jacob 1:14). This generic term would logically extend to all peoples, wherever the Lehites landed, who had not joined with Nephi.
11. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 31, archive.org/details/mormonpeoplemaki00bowm_0/page/30/mode/2up.

tribes or language groups. The missionaries briefly visited the tribes in the western parts of New York and Ohio before moving on to the Indian territory west of the Mississippi.[12] Any Native Americans they encountered were considered *Lamanites*. As the Saints moved yet farther west, all Native American tribes they encountered were also deemed Lamanites. Of course, both *Lamanite* and *Indian* were externally imposed descriptions that made sense to the European immigrants. No Native American of that time would have accepted either designation. *Indian* as a designation has reasonably fallen out of favor. *Lamanite* is viewed favorably only by Native Americans who have accepted the Book of Mormon.

Making a Desert Sacred

If all Native Americans they encountered were considered to be remnants of the Lamanites, it only made sense that the lands on which they were encountered were also considered remnants of the Book of Mormon lands. Thus, the Native Americans were not the only part of the New World that was sacralized through the Book of Mormon. Decades before the Latter-day Saints were concerned with physically mapping the Book of Mormon to the real world, they "mapped" themselves onto and into the Book of Mormon. Wherever the Saints were, they saw themselves within a sacred geography derived from their understanding of the Book of Mormon. The Lamanites were physical reminders of this sacred geography. The early Saints stretched their sacred geography to cover the expansive territory they eventually called *Deseret*.

In October 1832, W. W. Phelps indicated that the Jaredite Land of Desolation was the stretch of land from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains. Phelps's description is interesting in that it declares the reason this area of land should be seen as Desolation: "The world will never value the land of Desolation, as it is called in the book [sic] of Mormon, for any thing more than hunting ground, for want of timber and mill-seats." Phelps clearly tied the central plains with its lack of

12. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 53. Mauss also notes, "Missionary specialists in proselyting among Indians were periodically sent, starting as early as 1840, in both easterly and westerly directions" (p. 55). In this they followed the general European practice of lumping all individual tribes with different languages and customs under the label *Indian*."

trees to a Book of Mormon description of the land that was desolate (Helaman 3:6–7).

Phelps's feeling for the region is humorously expressed at the beginning of his article. Speaking of "the section of country from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains," he said, "Its principal river, running rapidly from the 48th to the 39th degree of north latitude, is always rily, always wearing away its banks and always making new channels: It is right named Missouri; for in plain English, it looks like the waters of misery."[13]

During the travels of Zion's Camp, Joseph and others discovered what they saw as evidence that they traversed sacred Book of Mormon lands. Joseph wrote to Emma in 1834:

> The whole of our journey, in the midst of so large a company of social honest men and sincere men, wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionaly 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 a proof of its divine authenticity, and gazing upon a country the fertility, the splendour and the goodness so indescribable, all serves to pass away time unnoticed, and in short were it not at every now and then our thoughts linger with inexpressible anxiety for our wives and our children our kindred according to the flesh who are entwined around our hearts; And also our brethren and friends; our whole journey would be as a dream, and this would be the happiest period of all our lives.[14]

This letter shows the process of sacralization in almost real time. Obviously, the skulls and bones were not subjected to scientific analysis. They were remnants of people who had died, and the Book of Mormon Nephites had been destroyed. Of course, the skulls and bones were considered evidence of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon provided the reason. Evidence came from wherever it might be found.

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13. W. W. Phelps, editor, "The Far West," *Evening and Morning Star* October 1832, 37, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/da0dd868-cc26-4ebe-b7c0-d086dd1efa65/0/4.
14. "Letter to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834," p. 56, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-4-june-1834/1. For more on this story, see Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 2, 31–56, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol29/iss2/3.

As the Saints encountered the new land in the Salt Lake Valley, they continued to use Book of Mormon references. After studying the stories the early Saints told, Christopher James Blythe declared, "The Book of Mormon also aided in inscribing meaning onto the Saints' new homeland. The Saints had fled from Gentile lands and took up residence near the descendants of Father Lehi. They came to believe they resided in Book of Mormon lands."[15] One evidence of that connection between the land and the Book of Mormon were the cities in Utah whose names were taken from the Book of Mormon: Bountiful, Lehi, Manti, Nephi, Moroni, and Alma.[16]

A fascinating example of how the belief in the Book of Mormon sacralized not only the land but the people themselves is the very large body of lore known as stories of the Three Nephites. In 3 Nephi, Jesus blesses three of the disciples present with immortality (3 Nephi 28:36). In the lore, these three apostles appear to assist the Saints in various ways. The stories bring the sacred Nephites up close and personal. While these stories had their seeds early, they were not fully developed until the Saints settled in the Great Basin.[17]

Another example of the sacralization of the landscape comes from a contemporary non-Mormon, J. W. Gunnison:

> Various coincidences have occurred, which strikingly keep alive in the mountain brethren their idea of being the chosen of the Lord — and confirm them in the belief of the inspiration of the Book of Mormon. Among other things are the marks and hieroglyphical characters found engraved on the precipitous cliffs of southern Utah, which are faintly imitated by the present Indians. Those who were associated with Joseph as amanuenses [or scribes] pretend to have acquired sufficient knowledge of similar things to be enabled to decipher their signification, and have translated enough to confirm, in the most wonderful manner, the Nephite records.[18]

15. Christopher James Blythe, *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 114.
16. Of course, the sacred naming also included biblical names, such as the River Jordan, and the towns Moab, Ephraim, Enoch, Eden, Goshen, and Jerusalem, as well as Zion National Park.
17. Julie Swallow, et al., *The Three Nephites: Saints, Service, and Supernatural Legend* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2025), 12–13.
18. John Williams Gunnison, *The Mormons, or, Latter-day Saints, in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), 62, archive.org/details/mormonsorlatterd00gunn/page/62/mode/2up. Blythe,

One such "confirmation" was a reading of petroglyphs from a cliff in Sanpete valley, near the city of Manti. W. W. Phelps, identified only as "one of the Regents," provided the following translation: "I Mahanti, the 2nd King of the Lamanites, in five valleys in the mountains, make this record in the 12 hundredth year since we came out of Jerusalem — And I have three sons gone to the South country to live by hunting antelope and deer."[19]

The "translation" is fanciful. Its importance is not as a translation but as an expectation that the land in which the Saints found themselves *should* be connected to Book of Mormon lands. The Saints manifest their connection to the land and the Book of Mormon in the stories they told. Some were stories of the three Nephites. Others related Moroni's travels after the close of the Book of Mormon, travels that included dedicating temple sites such as Manti and St. George.[20]

H. Donl Peterson discovered two maps in the Church archives that are perhaps one, a copy of the other. They purport to map Moroni's travels. One map provides a claimed provenance in the accompanying text:

> A chart, and description of Moroni's travels through this country. Got it from Br. Robert Dickson. He got it from Patriarch Wm. McBride at Richfield in the Sevier and also from Andrew M. Hamilton of same place. And they got it from Joseph Smith the Prophet.[21]

Peterson concludes his discussion of the two maps with the following summary:

> It is interesting to note that the brethren mentioned on these documents were contemporaries of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and they credited him with the notion that the travels of Moroni began in the land Bountiful, which was in Central America, and went through the western Great Basin area

Terrible Revolution, 117–18. Blythe cites portions of quotations I have included. He notes that the Regent mentioned was W. W. Phelps.

19. Gunnison, *The Mormons,* 63.
20. Blythe, *Terrible Revolution,* 118–19.
21. H. Donl Peterson, "Moroni, the Last of the Nephite Prophets," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1995), 244, rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-fourth-nephi-through-moroni-zion-destruction/moroni-last-nephite-prophets. Maps in the figures 1 and 2 herein are those reproduced in Peterson's article (pp. 245–46).

> prior to going east to Cumorah in western New York. Why Moroni took the route he did is still without answers. These men stated that the Prophet Joseph believed Bountiful is in Central America while the Hill Cumorah, the burial place of the plates, is in New York State.[22]

The texts on the two maps are almost identical. From the map in figure 1, the places listed on the left around the map, beginning at the top with Salt Lake:

> Salt Lake
> Sand hills in south part of Arizona
> Land Bountifull
> South America

Moving to the right:

> Adam on Diamon,
> Jackson Co. Mo.
>
> Nauvoo
> Hancock Co. Ill.
> Kinderhook
> Pike Co. Ill.
> 6 plates Bell shape
>
> Kirtland, ohio
> Commora
> NY

The summary of the journey:

> Moroni's Travils
> Starting from Sentral America
> to the sand hills Arizona
> then to Salt Lake U. T.
> then to Adam on Diammon, Mo.
> then to Nauvoo, Ill.
> then to Independence, Mo.
> then to Kirtland, Ohio
> then to Cummora, N.Y.

The map in figure 2 adds *Mississippy River*. (The ending letters before the *y* are indistinct.)

22. Peterson, "Moroni," 247.

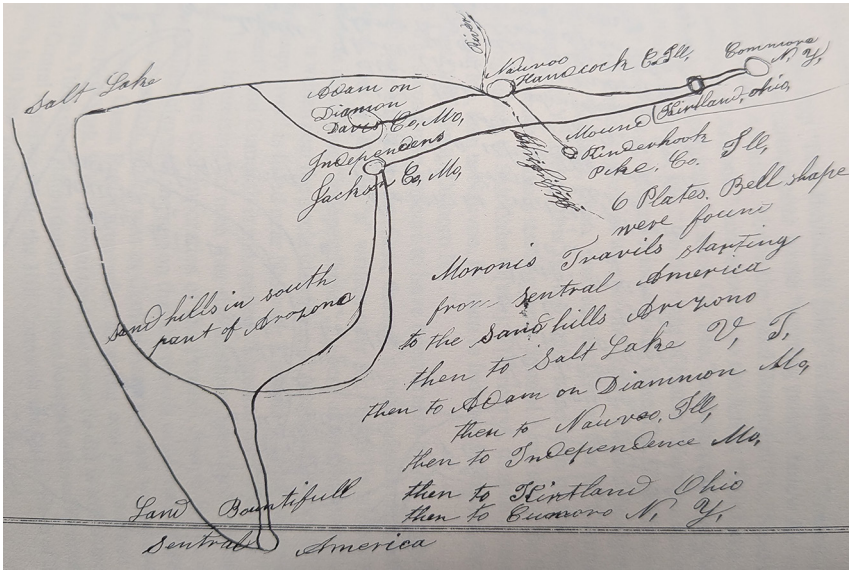


Figure 1. A hand-drawn map, version 1.

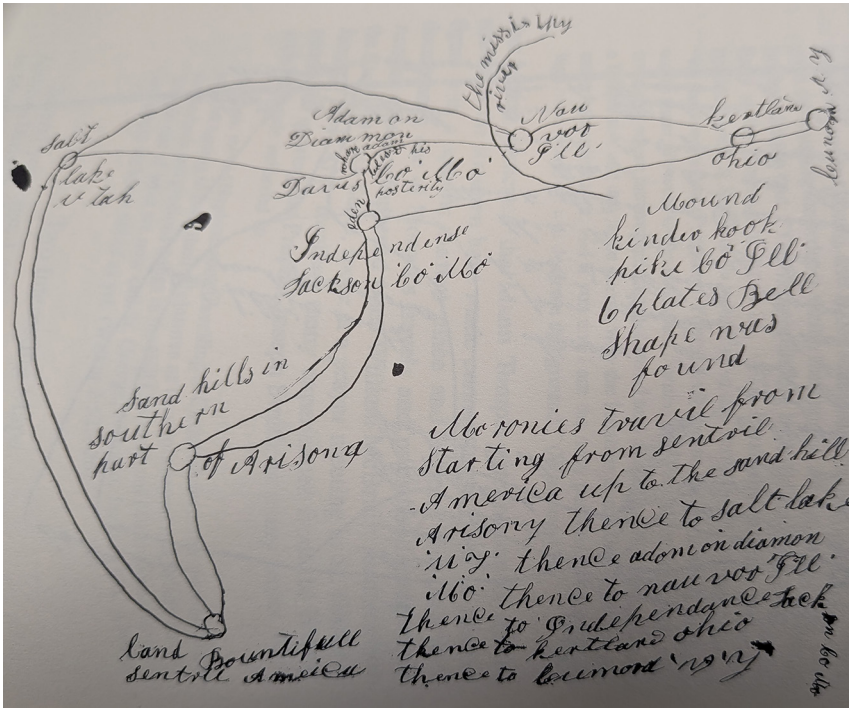


Figure 2. A hand-drawn map, version 2.

The idea that the narrow neck of land was the Isthmus of Darien (now Panama) was a very common assumption. It was probably the result of consulting maps of the Western Hemisphere where there is a very obvious narrow neck between the North and South American continents.

By the time these maps were drawn, the Saints had learned of the ruins in Central America. In 1841, an editorial in the *Times and Seasons* noted:

> We feel great pleasure in laying before our readers the following interesting account of the Antiquities of Central America, which have been discovered by two eminent travellers who have spent considerable labor, to bring to light the remains of ancient buildings, architecture &c., which prove beyond controversy that, on this vast continent, once flourished a mighty people, skilled in the arts and sciences, and whose splendor would not be eclipsed by any of the nations of Antiquity — a people once high and exalted in the scale of intelligence, but now like their ancient buildings, fallen into ruins.[23]

Thus, it is plausible that Joseph believed that Bountiful was in Central America, as the maps suggest. While that might allow Joseph to be the ultimate source of the maps, there are aspects of the maps that mark them as late interpretations. The clear marking of "Salt Lake, Utah" places the descriptions after the territory of Deseret had become the state of Utah in 1896.

They may be late. They may or may not reflect anything Joseph Smith said. They do, however, fit comfortably with the ways that the early Saints sacralized their lands. Of course, they concluded, Moroni walked the lands where they settled in the Salt Lake Valley. Of course, they reasoned, Moroni dedicated temple sites during his travels. The Saints lived on sacred Book of Mormon lands.

Making Cumorah Sacred

For many today who want to locate the real-world lands of the Book of Mormon, the Hill Cumorah in New York has become the hill to metaphorically die on. Phyllis Carol Olive declared, "Since the only

23. "American Antiquities—More Proofs of the Book of Mormon," *Times and Seasons* 2 (15 June 1841), 440, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/65f5eb34-ea99-41ef-9d2d-cde3261fc84b/0/1.

known landmark we have is in New York (the Hill Cumorah), this must be the place to begin our search for the elusive lands of the Book of Mormon."[24] The argument is simple: the plates were hidden in the Hill Cumorah and Joseph Smith retrieved them from the Hill Cumorah. It is an understanding that seemed logical and obvious; it began early and became almost an article of faith. Duane R. Aston provides the underlying logic for the declaration that the New York hill and the Book of Mormon Hill Cumorah must be the same: "If there had been another Hill Cumorah, surely the Prophet Joseph Smith would have said so. Why would the hill in New York become known as Hill Cumorah unless the Prophet believed that he had received plates from the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon?"[25]

Aston's logic was powerfully underscored by Joseph Fielding Smith:

> The Prophet Joseph Smith himself is on record, definitely declaring the present hill called Cumorah to be the exact hill spoken of in the Book of Mormon.
>
> Further, the fact that all of his associates from the beginning down have spoken of it as the identical hill where Mormon and Moroni hid the records, must carry some weight. It is difficult for a reasonable person to believe that such men as Oliver Cowdery, Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, David Whitmer, and many others, could speak frequently of the spot where the Prophet Joseph Smith obtained the plates as the Hill Cumorah, and not be corrected by the Prophet, if that were not the fact.[26]

The argument is so reasonable and carries with it such history that it might be surprising if the New York hill were not the Book of Mormon hill. This is where the historians bring their expertise to bear. However, before consulting the historians, the Book of Mormon must have its own say. The Book of Mormon speaks of burying plates in the Hill Cumorah exactly once:

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24. Phyllis Carol Olive, *The Lost Tribes of the Book of Mormon: The Rest of the Story* (Springville, UT: Bonneville Books, 2001), 101.
25. Duane R. Aston, *Return to Cumorah* (Sacramento, CA: American River Publications, 1998), 14.
26. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:234.

> Behold I, Mormon, began to be old; and knowing it to be the last struggle of my people, and having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites, (for the Lamanites would destroy them) therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni. (Mormon 6:6)

The Book of Mormon absolutely declares that Nephite records were buried in the Hill Cumorah. It also absolutely declares that those buried records did not include the plates that Mormon gave to Moroni. It is historically true that Joseph Smith retrieved Mormon's (and Moroni's) record from a hill in New York.[27] Yet, if we believe Mormon (and we should), those plates were never in the Book of Mormon's Hill Cumorah.

Was Duane Aston so wrong when he echoed Joseph Fielding Smith's suggestion that tradition must be given weight? The examination of the historical record indicates that this long tradition is not based on either revelation or Joseph Smith's statements.

Rex C. Reeve Jr. and Richard O. Cowan examined the early documents looking for the time when the New York hill was first called Cumorah:

> At what point in modern times this New York hill was first called Cumorah is difficult to determine. In his account in the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith refers to the hill where the plates were buried, but never calls it by any name. In the Doctrine and Covenants the name "Cumorah" only appears one time, in an 1842 epistle written by Joseph Smith: "And again, what do we hear? Glad tidings from Cumorah!" (D&C 128:20). No other uses of "Cumorah" have been found in any other of Joseph Smith's personal writings. When this name does appear it has been added by later editors or is being quoted from another individual.[28]

27. Understanding that this statement is only true for those who believe Joseph's story about the plates.

28. Rex C. Reeve Jr. and Richard O. Cowan, "The Hill Called Cumorah," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: New York,* ed. Larry C.

The earliest possible connection between the New York hill and the Book of Mormon Cumorah comes from a David Whitmer interview:

> When I was returning to Fayette with Joseph and Oliver, all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old fashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us, we were suddenly approached by a very pleasant, nice looking old man in a clear open place, who saluted us with "Good morning, it is very warm," at the same time instant wiping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation, and by a sign from Joseph I invited him to ride if he was going our way, but he said very pleasantly, "No, I am going to Cumorah." This was something new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant, and as I looked enquiringly of Joseph, the old man instantly disappeared, so that I did not see him again.[29]

This report would be much more conclusive had it not been recorded nearly fifty years later. The passage of time and the accepted designation of "Cumorah" as the name of the New York hill by the time of the recollection argues against this second-hand report from Whitmer as being a definitive statement.

If, as the historians affirm, Joseph himself did not use the name *Cumorah* for the New York hill until 1842, when did it first appear? It was certainly used in the community of Saints prior to the first time it was seen in print. The first print record comes in 1835, when Oliver Cowdery used that name in his Letter VII to W. W. Phelps, as printed in the *Messenger and Advocate*.[30] Thus, there is historical evidence that Oliver Cowdery (and quite certainly others) was identifying the New York hill as the Book of Mormon Hill Cumorah seven years before the first time it can be verified that Joseph Smith used that identifica-

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Porter, Milton V. Backman Jr., and Susan Easton Black (Provo UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, BYU, 1992), 73. Cameron J. Packer, "A Study of the Hill Cumorah: A Significant Latter-day Saint Landmark in Western New York" (master's thesis, BYU, 2002), scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6007&context=etd. Packer covers Mormon 6:4, 6 and Reeve and Cowan, and then lists multiple quotations claiming that the two hills were the same. Packer provides several examples of quotations that were printed much later than the event they described. See pp. 38–42.

29. David Whitmer, "Orson Pratt/Joseph F. Smith Interview (1) 7–8 September 1878, Richmond Missouri," in *The David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness,* ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 27.
30. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VII, to W. W. Phelps, Esq.," *Messenger and Advocate,* July 1835, 158, archive.org/details/LDSMessengerAndAdvocate18341837.

tion. This is the evidence. What does it mean? It means that the documentary history does not support Joseph Smith as the source of the identification of the New York hill as Cumorah.[31]

If Joseph wasn't the source of the identification of the Hill Cumorah with the New York hill, who was? The answer cannot be answered with any surety, but the earliest statements available come from Oliver Cowdery. Might Oliver have had the idea and promoted it? This would not be surprising. The early Saints were not passive recipients of what Joseph said. Others were actively involved in interpreting their theology and history. For example, the *Lectures on Faith* is a series of lessons on theology that was once included as the "Doctrine" in the Doctrine and Covenants (it was later removed). There was a committee of four men — Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, and Frederick G. Williams — who were assigned to "arrange the items of the doctrine of Jesus Christ for the government of the Church of Latter-day Saints."[32] Even though Joseph was the Prophet, explanations of doctrine did not always begin with him.

The assumption that all early Saints might participate in both theology and in the interpretation of history, has an interesting example in Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses. Joseph had received revelations through his seer stone. As was typical for the times, others also had stones; Hiram Page also possessed one. At one point, Page used it to receive revelations for the Church. Oliver Cowdery and some of the Whitmers believed him. Joseph did not. He prayed about it, which resulted in Doctrine and Covenants 28:2; "But, behold, verily, verily, I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses." The import of that revelation for this paper is not that it declares that revelation for the Church should come from the Prophet. Rather, prior to this revelation (given

31. Jed Woodworth and Matt Grow, "*Saints* and Book of Mormon Geography," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/history/saints/saints-and-book-of-mormon-geography. Woodworth and Grow discuss the reason that the name *Cumorah* does not appear in the first volume of *Saints,* emphasizing the lack of historical evidence that the name was used during the time covered by that volume. They specifically note that there is no evidence that the identification came from Moroni or Joseph Smith.

32. "Minutes, 24 September 1834," p. 76, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-24-september-1834/3.

September 1830), even receiving revelation was something that other members believed they might do.[33]

Therefore, if Oliver came to understand, and teach, that the New York hill was the very Cumorah, it was within the known information environment of the early Saints.[34] It is this same information environment that allowed W. W. Phelps to suggest ways to recast the seer stone. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat report,

> Joseph Smith and members of the Church generally stopped differentiating between the seer stones and the spectacles by simply calling all of them the Urim and Thummim. By 1833, for example, W. W. Phelps published an article in the Church newspaper in Missouri, *The Evening and the Morning Star*, that declared that Joseph translated the plates "by the gift and power of God . . . through the aid of a pair of Interpreters, or spectacles — (known, perhaps, in ancient days as Teraphim, or Urim and Thummim)." By the time Joseph Smith's later history was written in 1839, Joseph was using the term Urim and Thummim to reference *any* seer stone. Thus it is impossible to tell from his own later accounts precisely which device he was using to translate the Book of Mormon or to receive revelations.[35]

Although the early Church was growing, it was still very small in the early years — particularly in the first five to ten years. Thus, it was much more personally interactive due to the physical proximity of many of those who were important to the beginnings of the Church. Many of the leaders were readily available. The Saints knew where Joseph lived. It was a much less formal environment, and one where ideas might easily be passed along. Oliver's position in the early Church was sufficiently important that if Oliver said that the New York

33. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints,* 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 58.
34. Gordon C. Tomasson, "Daddy, what's a 'frontier'?: Thoughts on the 'Information Environment' that Supposedly Produced the Book of Mormon" (unpublished manuscript, 2000), scripturecentral.org/archive/books/unpublished/daddy-whats-frontier-thoughts-information-environment-supposedly-produced-book-mormon. I borrow the term "information environment" from this manuscript.
35. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 129.

hill was *Cumorah*, that understanding would rapidly be passed from person to person.[36]

From Cumorah to the Salt Lake Valley, the early Saints imbued their geography with connections to the Book of Mormon. The association between the New York hill and the Book of Mormon Cumorah was the result of an impulse to sacralize the surrounding land, an impulse that did not stop with Cumorah and did not stop at the Mississippi. The impulse remained vibrant as the Saints resettled outside what was then the United States.

Yes, We Have No Model

When John L. Sorenson surveyed the state of models for Book of Mormon geography, he noted that too many have "been inadequate by reason of incompleteness."[37] The reason for incompleteness is that there is so much data to work with that many researchers simply stopped when they found the answers they were looking for. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, two scholars writing on the methods of historical research, note that "in research as in life one is far more likely to find what one looks for than what one neglects."[38] Too often, historical statements are pulled from their context and used to support a desired hypothesis. Researchers too often fail to deal with the larger body of historical evidence that nuances, if not totally invalidates, their selected historical citations.

The early Saints were no different in their approach to evidence. They, too, often found what they were looking for. Remembering that few of the early Saints had much education at all, it is unsurprising that they found evidence that tended to reflect ideas of the times. Perhaps spurred by David Whitmer's assertion that the Lord would provide such evidence, that "people should discover the ruins of the lost cities and abundant evidence of the truth of what is written in the Book,"[39] the early Saints enthusiastically embraced Josiah Priest's 1833 pub-

36. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 109–34. Source discusses the development of communal lore in the early Saint community.
37. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 224.
38. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher,* 4th edition (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 198, archive.org/details/unset0004unse_g4d5/page/198/mode/2up.
39. David Whitmer, "James H. Hart Interview (2), 21 August 1883, Richmond, Missouri" in *The David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 96.

lication of *American Antiquities: Discoveries in the West.*[40] Terryl L. Givens notes,

> [Priest's book] prevailed among Joseph Smith's followers in particular. Priest's book was referenced or excerpted five times in the church's *Times and Seasons*, and eight years later it contributed to the first sustained attempt to connect the Book of Mormon to North American antiquities, Charles Thompson's 1841 *Evidences in Proof of the Book of Mormon.* The work borrowed extensively from Priest's accounts of ruins in Ohio and Tennessee and juxtaposed them with descriptions of Nephite fortifications and defenses. The parallels were, to Thompson's mind, "sufficient to show to the public that the people whose history is contained in the Book of Mormon, are the authors of these works."[41]

Modern archaeology does not support very many (if any) of Priest's conclusions. The importance of his book is much more in the way that it was embraced rather than in its accuracy. Priest's book long preceded the modern science of archaeology. Digging for artifacts was not a very carefully controlled exercise through the end of the 1800s. Priest's discussions of the mound builders helped the early Saints see the unfolding of the Book of Mormon in lands nearby, and to which they would soon move. This evidence supported the sacralization of the land. That sacralization followed them to Utah. However, it wasn't only Utah, but all the Americas that might be seen as Book of Mormon lands.

Prior to the time when Church members began to seriously study the Book of Mormon and attempt to find a model that would allow it to be placed on the real-world maps, there was a generalized idea that dominated early thought. It was assumed that the Book of Mormon covered the whole of the Western Hemisphere. A glance at a map easily located the narrow neck of land at the Isthmus of Darien (now called the Isthmus of Panama), with North America as the land Northward[42]

40. Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West,* 4th ed. (Albany, NY: Hoffman & White, 1834), archive.org/details/americanantiquit0000prie_ed04.
41. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 97, archive.org/details/byhandofmormonam0000give_g9i5/page/96/mode/2up.
42. Note the reference above to the Land of Desolation as the land from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains.

and South America as the land Southward. Notably, having all of North America as part of the Book of Mormon lands reinforced the common understanding that the Saints traversed and lived in sacred Book of Mormon lands.

Matthew Roper summarized this earliest understanding of the geography of Book of Mormon lands:

> When one reviews the numerous discourses and publications of Orson Pratt between 1840 and his death in 1881, one can detect a fairly consistent picture of his interpretation of Book of Mormon geography. Going from south to north, Pratt had Lehi landing on the western coast of South America, specifically Chile. The land of Nephi was in Ecuador at the headwaters of the Amazon. The land of Zarahemla was in Colombia, and the river Sidon was the Magdalena River in that country. The land Bountiful was in the northern part of South America just below the Isthmus of Darien. The Mulekites, on their arrival, had first landed north of Darien on the coast of North America and then settled Zarahemla in the northern part of South America.[43]

This hemispheric understanding influenced the footnotes Orson Pratt included in the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Fielding Smith included Orson Pratt as one of Joseph's acquaintances who would surely have been corrected if Pratt's understanding of the New York hill as Cumorah were incorrect.[44] By that same logic, if Pratt's understanding of the hemispheric location of the Book of Mormon did not conform with what Joseph understood, would not Joseph have corrected him? The same logic applies. The same analysis applies. The early Saints had no revelation on this specific question. When new information became available, the Saints saw new possibilities.

The year 1841 saw the publication of John L. Stephen's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan.*[45] John Bernhisel

43. Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations, *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 230–31, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1637&context=msr. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events,* 10. Sorenson notes that this hemispheric model is the earliest discernible model and one that he suggests was "obvious" to those consulting a hemispheric map.
44. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 3:234.
45. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and*

sent Joseph Smith a copy. Joseph wrote to thank him (through John Taylor as scribe):

> I received your kind present by the hand of Er. [Wilford] Woodruff & feel myself under many obligations for this mark of your esteem & friendship which to me is the more interesting as it unfolds & developes many things that are of great importance to this generation & corresponds with & supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon; I have read the volumnes with the greatest interest & pleasure & must say that of all histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country it is the most correct luminous & comprihensive.[46]

When Joseph declared that the contents of the book supported the testimony of the Book of Mormon, we need not see that as a declaration of a revealed location for the Book of Mormon any more than any other early statement. Andrew H. Hedges wrote an interesting paper on Book of Mormon geography where he focused on Joseph Smith's writings. They were "documents that were generated during Joseph Smith's lifetime, and that Joseph at least allowed, in one way or another, to be associated with his name in significant ways. They thus differ from the second-hand and reminiscent accounts."[47] After reviewing the extant sources, Hedges concludes,

> The documents reviewed in this paper suggest an understanding of Book of Mormon geography lying somewhere between a fully hemispheric model, on the one hand, and a limited model on the other. According to this view, which we might dub a "limited hemispheric" or "northern hemispheric" view, Book of Mormon peoples, during at least part of their histories, inhabited parts (although not necessarily all) of the eastern United States; the final battles of the Nephites and Jaredites took place in upstate New York; and the centers for both the Nephite and Jaredite civilizations were located

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Yucatan (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841).

46. "Letter to John M. Bernhisel, 16 November 1841," p. 1, Joseph Smith Papers,josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-johnm-bernhisel-16 november-1841/4?highlight=letter%20to%20john%20bernhisel.
47. Andrew H. Hedges, "Book of Mormon Geography in the World of Joseph Smith," *Mormon Historical Studies* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (2007): 77, ensignpeak foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/5-MHS_2007_Book-Of -Mormon-Geography.pdf.

> somewhere in Central America. South America appears only once—barely—in a reference to Lehi and his party landing "a little south" of Panama. While none of the documents, alone, contains all the elements of this view, none are at odds with it—that is, each is consistent with the larger view that emerges when all are considered together.[48]

This is hardly a "model" of Book of Mormon geography. This was an acceptance of anything that appeared to fit without any serious consideration of how those places might align with a textual geography. The Book of Mormon took place on the Western Hemisphere, and the evidences that the early Saints saw came only from North and Central America—hence Hedges's suggestion that it was a "limited hemispheric" or "northern hemispheric" view. It is not a far stretch to suggest that, had they seen more "evidences" from South America, South America would have been added to the discussion. Theirs was a view that can be reconstructed, but it was never the result of seriously studied correlations between geography and text.

It wasn't until the Saints had had time to recover from the hardships of scraping out a living in their new home in the Salt Lake Valley that actual "models" began to appear. Of the paucity of models during the early years in the Salt Lake Valley, Sorenson notes, "In the early pioneering period in Utah no attention seems to have been given to this subject, as shown by a complete absence of significant printed statements for more than fifteen years."[49] When I suggest that there were no models, I am referring to the creation of concepts of how the Book of Mormon events either fit into a real-world map or on an internal reconstruction. George Q. Cannon noted that there were multiple models by 1890, all disagreeing with each other.[50] That was not the case prior to that time. There was no "model" contemporary with Joseph Smith—only unstudied assumptions.

Sacralizing a People Upon a Land of Promise

For believers in the Book of Mormon, there is a virtual theological imperative to see oneself as living on sacred lands. The foundational

48. Hedges, "Book of Mormon Geography," 85.
49. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events,* 17.
50. George Q. Cannon, "Editorial Thoughts: The Book of Mormon Geography," *Juvenile Instructor* 25 (1 January 1890): 18, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/5ae41f8a-1b1b-4e03-af8f-fa0ca845558c/0/0.

promise for the Nephite people was the promise of the land. Father Lehi told his gathered family:

> Notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord. Wherefore, I, Lehi, prophesy according to the workings of the Spirit which is in me, that there shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord. (2 Nephi 1:5–6)

This was not just a land of promise to Lehi's descendants. All those led from other countries were part of the promise of the land. However, it was never a promise tied to a specific geography. The Nephites saw themselves in a land of promise when they were in the land of Nephi. When they were forced from the land of Nephi and fled to the land of Zarahemla, they never thought they had lost the promise when they lost the land. Similarly, when they were forced north of the narrow neck, they continued under the promise even though they had once again lost their land.

The early Saints mirrored that perspective as they left the "sacred" land near what they called *Cumorah* and were repeatedly pushed further west. There was never any expectation of returning to New York, Kirkland, or Nauvoo. Wherever they were continued to be sacred—and continued to benefit from Lehi's promise.



[**Author's Note:** *The ideas expressed in this paper are based on information I encountered from Christopher James Blythe. I do not remember where I saw something he said about the Saints sacralizing their environment, but that statement led to reading his comments about it in his book* Terrible Revolution*. I have no idea whether he would approve of the way I have borrowed his idea, but I do want to make sure that he is given credit for the concept of the sacralization of the land.*]

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