

# The River Sidon

## *A Key to Unlocking Book of Mormon Lands*

*Lynn and David Rosenvall, November 2010*

Alma baptized in its waters. Armies crossed it multiple times in a single battle. Hills and valleys flanked its banks. The cities of Zarahemla and Gideon were positioned on opposite sides of its course. Two groups—the people of Nephi and the people of Zarahemla (the Mulekites)—shared its basin. A third group—the Lamanites—often invaded its borders and attempted to move north for their own strategic reasons. The dead from the resulting wars were unceremoniously thrown into its waters. Nearby wilderness areas provided hiding places for the Gadianton robbers to swoop down and plunder in its lowlands. And the final battles leading to the demise of the Lamanite and Nephite civilizations began near its edge and ended at Cumorah. All this and more took place along the river Sidon—the river that is central to the Book of Mormon story and a key to the Book of Mormon geography.

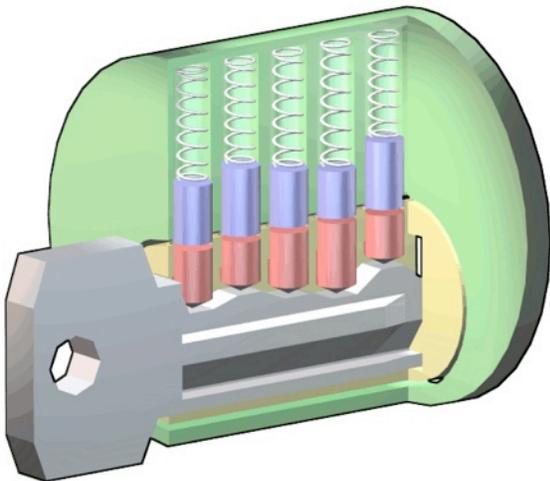
The river Sidon is the only named river in Mormon’s abridgment of the Nephite record. And there is only one watercourse within the heartlands of the peninsula of Baja California that could be considered the river Sidon—the Rio San Ignacio. Within minutes of our initial scrutiny of Baja California as a promising location for the Book of Mormon lands, we became cautiously aware we had only one candidate river. Impressively, this one river is located where the river Sidon needs to be situated—between the area on the peninsula identified as the narrow neck of land and the



The river Sidon (Rio San Ignacio) in the center of Baja California.

narrow strip of wilderness, precisely where Mormon places the river Sidon in his geographical narrative (Alma 22:27–34). Lehi’s family journeyed from a land that had only one major river—the river Jordan—and Egypt and several other countries have only one river of consequence.

Having only one candidate for the river Sidon allowed us to confidently move ahead and match other Book of Mormon locations to Baja California. We soon realized, however, that identifying the river Sidon was only the first step, and numerous geographical features associated with this important river course in the Nephite record would also need to match. Rivers do not exist in isolation—they are surrounded by other physical features, such as mountains, hills, valleys, banks and seas that influence the direction of their course. And rivers require a source for the water flowing along their passage to somewhere else—water that has a direction as well as a breadth and a depth. And then there are the human activities in nearby settlements and the traditional roles of rivers as defense barriers and political boundaries, along with being sources of water for people, flocks, herds and agricultural fields. There are numerous references scattered among the



The recorded details of the river Sidon are like tumblers in a lock—only when the tumblers line up with the right key, can the lock open.

chapters of the book of *Alma* describing activities along the river Sidon, its physical features and its crucial role in the ongoing Book of Mormon story. We soon discovered there are more details in the Book of Mormon describing the site and situation of the river Sidon than any other geographical feature.

It stands to reason that the human and physical setting of our single candidate for the river Sidon—the Rio San Ignacio—would need to fully match everything impinging on the river in the scripture text before affirming the watercourse as the actual river Sidon. This

comprehensive matching to the relevant scriptures would be required not only for our proposed river Sidon but also any river put forth by others as the river Sidon. We suggest being able to match only some of the numerous details, but not all, would place the candidacy of a river in question. We submit the Rio San Ignacio, and its surrounding riverine features, not only match the required location of the river Sidon in the Book of Mormon account, but also all the recorded geographical details. These numerous details

are like tumblers in a lock—if they all lineup correctly the key fits and turns, unlocking a portal to more geographic discoveries. But one or more wrongly positioned tumblers can prevent the opening of the lock. The following is a geographical analysis of our proposed river Sidon, based on every relevant reference within the Book of Mormon record—references containing the essential tumblers.

## **Mormon's Placement of the River Sidon**

Mormon in a detailed geographical account places the river Sidon along the northern extent of the narrow strip of wilderness, which served as the northern boundary of the Lamanite lands (Alma 22:27–34). This border region, in turn, also served as the southern limit of the Nephite lands. Mormon twice mentions a prominent feature of the river Sidon, “the head of the river Sidon,” when describing the contentious border that “divided” the Lamanites and Nephites and positions the river Sidon and its “head” relative to the land of Zarahemla and the other Book of Mormon lands, such as the land of Nephi (Alma 22:27, 29).

When Lamoni's father, the king of the Lamanites, converted to the gospel through the preaching of Aaron, one of the sons of Mosiah, he sent a proclamation to all his people declaring the four sons of Mosiah could preach the gospel in all parts of the land, without hinderance. Mormon, at this point in his abridgment, pauses his narrative and inserts a detailed description of the converted king's land, including a description of the land of Nephi, the land of the people of Zarahemla and the lands previously occupied by the Jaredites (Alma 22:27–34). No explanation for the inclusion of these geographical positioning scriptures (GPS) is given. However, these eight verses, providing some 20 geographical details, in sequence, are without equal for finding and matching a proposed location for the Book of Mormon story. In these non-abridged verses, Mormon in his own words defines the shape of the combined land area, the relative location of the lands within the larger area and the spatial location of wilderness regions, the small neck of land, the river Sidon and the west and east seas.

We suggest any proposed location for the Book of Mormon lands—including the positioning of the river Sidon—would be required to pass the test of fully matching these 20 geographical descriptions recorded by Mormon. In our main article, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon Geography*, under the subtopic, “Mormon's Description of Book of

Mormon Lands,” we illustrate with several maps the results of our correlating these 20 geographical points to the area and landforms of Baja California. We recommend the reader view these maps point by point, while studying the corresponding scripture text. We propose the configurations and alignments of the Baja California peninsula, including the location of the Rio San Ignacio (the river Sidon), fully match the geographical points in Mormon’s description of the Book of Mormon lands (see also, *Mormon’s Description of the Book of Mormon Lands*, a video presentation on our web site).

The land of Zarahemla is positioned by Mormon in the area north of the narrow strip of wilderness, with the river Sidon on its border (Alma 22:27). A “round about” Lamanite-held cape figures prominently in the demarcation of the

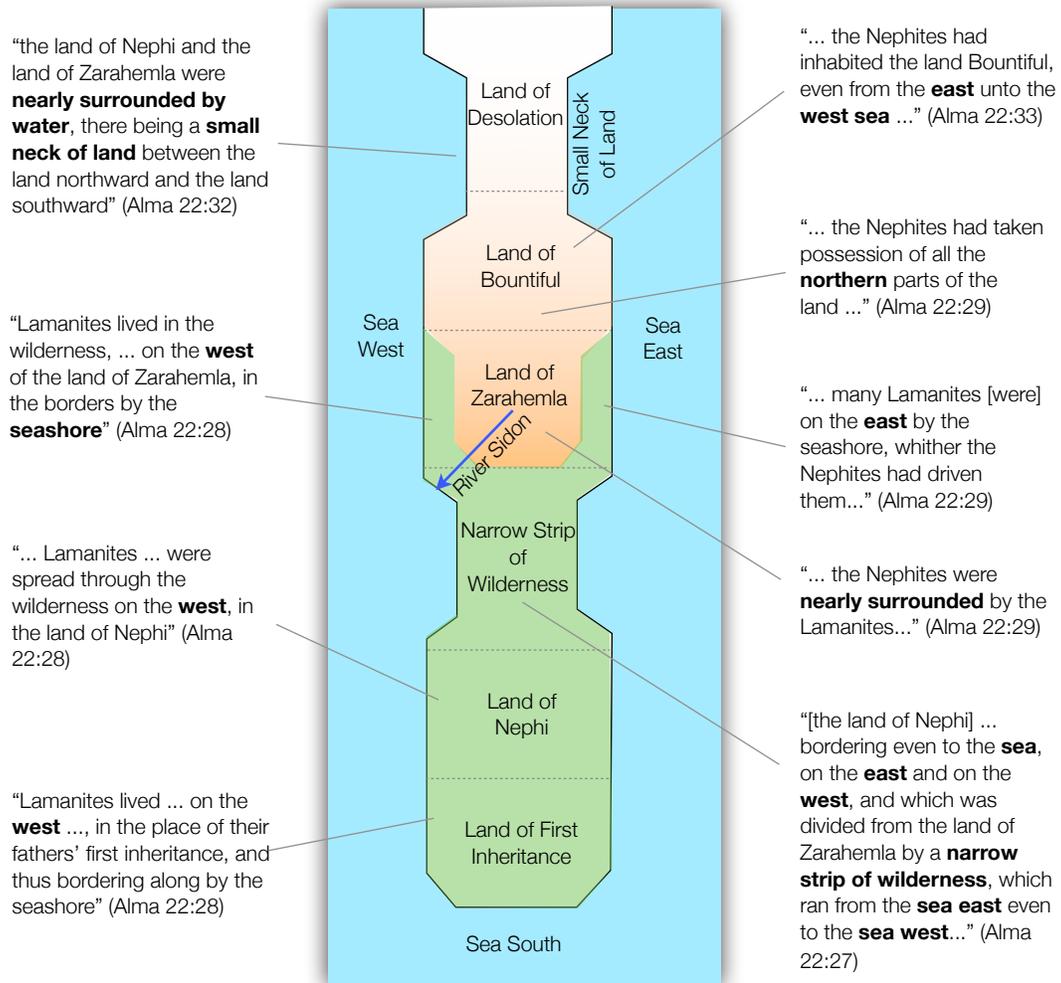
borders dividing the Lamanites and Nephites (Alma 22:27–28). Three Nephite-held lands—Zarahemla, Bountiful, and Desolation—extend in sequence towards the north (Alma 22:29–33). The Jaredites before their destruction possessed the land of Desolation (Alma 22:30). The people of Zarahemla (the people of Mulek) initially landed in this northern area and then moved south to a place they called the city and land of Zarahemla, located to the north of the narrow strip of wilderness (Alma 22:30–31). The land of Nephi is positioned to the south of the narrow strip of wilderness (Alma 22:28, 33–34). Mormon’s description leaves little question as to the river Sidon’s relative location within the center of the north-south trending Book of Mormon lands. And this pivotal location accurately matches the position of the only river of significance within central Baja California—the Rio San Ignacio.



The head of the river Sidon in central Baja California, with the town of La Joya in the distance.

Mormon wrote these 20 geographical descriptions as a supplement to his abridgment in about A.D. 385, some 460 years after the missionary event he was recording (between 90 and 77 B.C.). It is noteworthy that Mormon does not mention any changes to the configuration of the lands in the intervening 460 years, such as the wide-scale destruction which took place at the time of the Savior’s crucifixion, when “the whole face of the land was changed” (3 Ne. 8:12). It would appear these changes to the surface of the land did not adversely affect the shape and locations of the larger land configurations mentioned in

Mormon’s narrative, and the geographical descriptions, including the location of the river Sidon, were still accurate and identifiable in his day.



### Lamanite and Nephite lands

Mormon’s geographical narrative provides numerous descriptions of the relationships between the major Book of Mormon lands. All of these lands are flanked by a sea on the west and a sea on the east with the prominent “narrow strip of wilderness” extending between the land of Zarahemla on the north and the land of Nephi on the south. To the north of this wilderness is the river Sidon in the land of Zarahemla.

## Historic Setting of River Sidon Area

### **The righteous Nephites migrate north to river Sidon area**

The river Sidon appears late on the Book of Mormon scene. After living nearly 400 years in the land of Nephi, the Nephites “departed out of the land [of Nephi] into the wilderness, as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord,” and they were led northward “by the power of his arm, through the wilderness until they came down into the land which [was] called the land of Zarahemla,” which bordered on the river Sidon (Omni 1:13; Alma 2:15). The land of Nephi, their previous home, was south of the narrow strip of wilderness, and a journey of “many days” north of the “land of first inheritance,” the place of their landing following a long ocean voyage. After many “serious” wars in the land of Nephi, “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” (Omni 1:5), and the more righteous Nephites abandoned their troubled homeland under the direction of king Mosiah (the first), the father of king Benjamin, and departed northward into the wilderness seeking a refuge (Omni 1:12).



Rugged terrain of the “narrow strip of wilderness,” the Sierra de la Giganta, Baja California).

During this epic migration, Mosiah’s group traversed the difficult narrow strip of wilderness where subsequent travelers “suffered hunger, thirst, and fatigue” (Mosiah 7:16). This is the first recorded journey through the narrow strip of wilderness and apparently the first encounter of the Nephites with the people of Zarahemla (the Mulekites), for the record states, “they discovered a people, who were called the people of Zarahemla” (Omni 1:14).

The phrase, “they came down into the land,” of Zarahemla implies the land of Zarahemla and the river Sidon were in a lowland basin location, lower than the wilderness at the northern end of the narrow strip of wilderness.

The route of this northward migration of Mosiah and his followers is not explicitly recorded. The Lamanites later pursued the Nephites to the land of Zarahemla and eventually occupied the western coastal area near this same wilderness (Omni 1:24). This would suggest a western route followed the more-favorable lowlands near the sea on the west of the peninsula through the narrow strip of wilderness, the same western areas later occupied by the idle Lamanites (Alma 22:28).



**Shared River Basin**

Both the people of Zarahemla (the Mulekites) and the Nephite people led by Mosiah (the first) settled in the same area around the river Sidon.

When the Nephites, under king Mosiah (the first), arrived in the land of Zarahemla and the river Sidon area, the account states:

Now, there was great rejoicing among the people of Zarahemla; and also Zarahemla did rejoice exceedingly, because the Lord had sent the people of Mosiah with the plates of brass which contained the record of the Jews.

Behold, it came to pass that Mosiah discovered that the people of Zarahemla came out from Jerusalem at the time that Zedekiah, king of Judah, was carried away captive into Babylon.

And they journeyed in the wilderness, and were brought by the hand of the Lord across the great waters, into the land where Mosiah discovered them; and they had dwelt there from that time forth. ...

And it came to pass that the people of Zarahemla, and of Mosiah, did unite together; and Mosiah was appointed to be their king. (Omni 1:14–16, 19).



The head of Sidon at sunset, near San Ignacio, Baja California.

Why did the Nephites permanently converge into the same city and land with the people of Zarahemla (the Mulekites) and not seek an independent settlement site in another location for their capital and religious center? They had already escaped warfare in the land of Nephi with the Lamanites and internecine conflicts with their own people, so why move into a stranger’s land and city as a minority? As Mormon states, “there were not so many of the children of Nephi, or so many of those who were descendants of Nephi, as there were of the people of Zarahemla, who was a descendant of Mulek, and those who came with him into the wilderness” (Mosiah 25:2–3). Certainly the people of Zarahemla—who arrived before the Nephites—could have suggested other areas with suitable rivers for settlement. We propose this as an answer: There were no other nearby river basins. In the extended land of Zarahemla to the north of the narrow strip of wilderness, there was only one significant watercourse—the river Sidon. Even the people of Zarahemla had moved south from “the place of their first landing” into “the south wilderness” of this river Sidon area (Alma 22:30–31). There was no other choice for either group. And this situation underscores why there is only one named river in Mormon’s entire abridgment of the Nephite record.

## Some Lamanites also migrate north to the land of Zarahemla, and settle on the west near the river Sidon

What was the movement and subsequent location of the Lamanites after the Nephites migrated north to the land of Zarahemla and the river Sidon area? The record states in “the days of king Benjamin [the son of king Mosiah, the first], a serious war and much bloodshed between the Nephites and the Lamanites” occurred in the land of Zarahemla (Omni 1:24). This statement indicates some of the Lamanites were in the vicinity of the land of Zarahemla and the river Sidon just a generation later (20–40 years) during king Benjamin's reign. We propose the western coastal route became the main travel route for the Lamanites between the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla. From other travel accounts, the route appears to have been easier to traverse than the central and east coast environments and the shortest route to Nephite-occupied settlements near the river Sidon. The record states, “the Lamanites [at the time] lived in the wilderness, and dwelt in tents; and they were spread through the wilderness on the west, in the land of Nephi; yea, and also on the west of the land of Zarahemla, in the borders by the seashore, and on the west in the land of Nephi, in the place of their fathers’ first inheritance, and thus bordering along by the seashore” (Alma 22:28).



### Lamanite migration northward

Many Lamanites were located along areas of the western seashore, suggesting a western route from the land of Nephi to the land of Zarahemla.

## A “large number” of Nephites journey south, back to the land of Nephi

Mormon records that in the land of Zarahemla, king Benjamin, the son of king Mosiah (the first), “had somewhat of contentions among his own people.” And there were “many dissensions away unto the Lamanites” (W of M 1:12, 16). The Lord in a revelation recorded in the *Doctrine and Covenants* concerning the coming forth of his gospel by way of the

*Book of Mormon*, speaks of these specific Nephite dissenters at the time of king Benjamin, stating some “had become Lamanites because of their dissensions” (D&C 10:48).

It appears some Nephites were not content with the tenets of their religion nor with what they found in the land of Zarahemla—possibly a less-desirable environment or the challenge of new and more numerous neighbors—so they desired to return south to their previous home in the land of Nephi, even though they earlier abandoned that land because of conflicts and wars. Thus, “a certain number ... went up into the wilderness to return to the land of Nephi; for there was a large number who were desirous to possess the land of their inheritance” (Omni 1:27–30; Mosiah 9:1–19).

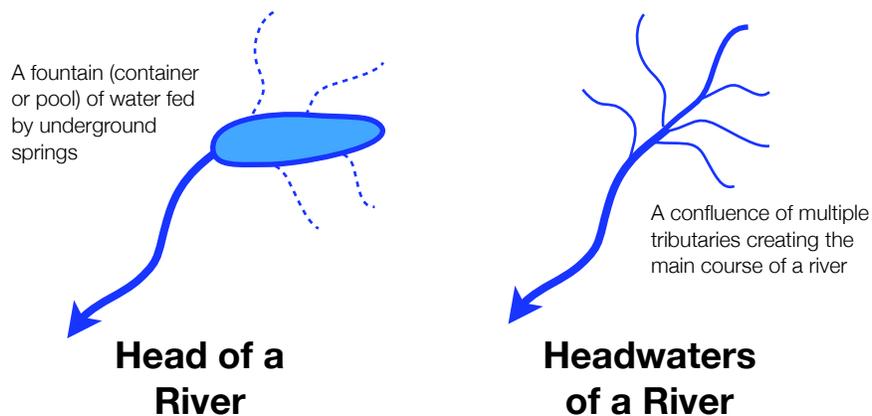
Why did the Nephite dissenters and many others not seek a nearby river basin in the land of Zarahemla for settlement rather than traveling all the way back through the challenging narrow strip of wilderness to their old homes in the Lamanite-controlled land of Nephi? Again we propose the same answer: There were no other river basins. To the north of the narrow strip of wilderness in the land of Zarahemla there was only one significant watercourse—the river Sidon.

## **The Head of the River Sidon**

The river Sidon has a distinct and unique source called “the head of the river Sidon.” This physical feature is noted five places in the Book of Mormon text, including twice in Mormon’s detailed geographical account (Alma 22:27, 29; 43:22; 50:11; 56:25). The “head” of a river is correct terminology for a single water source and is not the same as headwaters. Headwaters are multiple tributary streams flowing together to form the source of a river. A head, on the other hand, describes a single and distinct water source fed by underground streams or springs that surface at one location to form the head of a river. Thus the phrase, “the head of the river Sidon,” identifies a specific type of water source formed by multiple springs. In the Book of Mormon account the head of the river Sidon is consistently described as a geographical feature one could readily go around, unlike an extensive tributary system of headwaters (Alma 43:22; 56:25). A singular head is not an uncommon feature of rivers, especially in dryer regions such as the Mediterranean climates of the Biblical lands and Baja California. The Sidon River in Lebanon, which appears to be the namesake of the river Sidon in the Book of Mormon, has a spring-fed head at its source, and the Jordan River in Israel is fed by multiple springs at its head, one near

Caesarea Philippi at a historical fountain of water (Matt. 16:13; Mark 8:27; see also, *An Analog to Sidon in Lebanon*, below).

Small bodies of water are also called “fountains” in the Book of Mormon record. The waters of Mormon where Alma baptized in the land of Nephi are described as a “fountain of pure water” (Mosiah 18:5–30). The phrase, “pure water” appears elsewhere in the scriptures (Mosiah 23:4; Heb. 10:22; Rev. 22:1). Pure water describes water that comes from an uncontaminated source—like a spring—rather than water flowing in rivers and into lakes downstream. A fountain is a container or reservoir of water or other liquids, such as

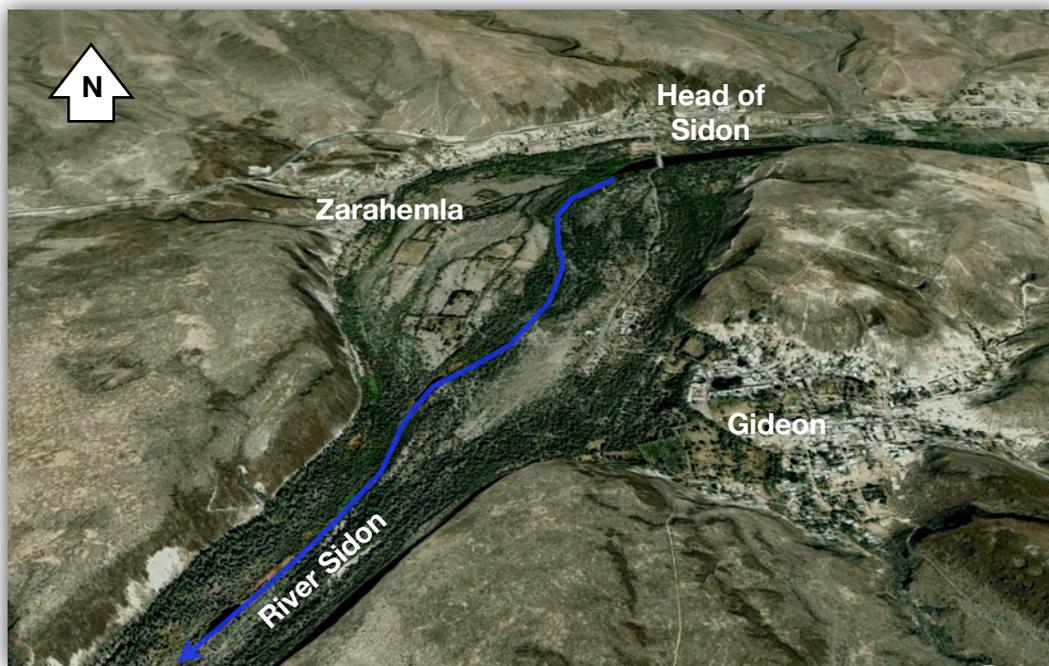


The Book of Mormon is consistent in the use of the singular term, “head” of the river Sidon, and not “headwaters” of the river Sidon.

the small reservoir in a fountain pen—the place where ink is held. A baptismal font is a fountain containing water. The word font is the same as a fountain in this context. The word font in relationship to fountain is the same as the word mount is to mountain. Font can also be spelled fount. The word font in Latin refers to a “spring, fountain.” In nature, a spring and a fountain (a natural reservoir) often occur together. All of this would render “fountain of pure water” as a natural water body or reservoir at the source of pure or spring water. We have provided a rather lengthy description and definition of the word fountain. This may help in understanding its connotation in the Book of Mormon account, not only in parsing the phrases, “head of Sidon” and “fountain of pure water,” describing the waters of Mormon, but possibly its meaning in the phrase, “fountain of the Red Sea,” mentioned by Nephi (1 Ne. 2:9), and also the phrases “fountain of living waters” and “fountain of filthy water” in the vision of the tree of life recorded by Lehi and Nephi (1 Ne. 8:20, 32; 11:25; 12:16; see also, Morm. 6:4; Ether 8:26; 12:28; Moro. 7:11).

We should note the Book of Mormon record does not equate the “head” of a river or a “fountain” of water with the phrase, “many waters,” which refers to seas (1 Ne. 17:5; see, *The Sea, Irreantum and “Many Waters,”* in our topic article, *From the Sea West to the Sea East*). We also note that in none of the descriptions of the Book of Mormon lands is the word lake used to describe a body of water.

In Baja California, and especially in the central area of the peninsula, the main source of water is springs, not the typical system of tributaries with rivers and lakes, found in more humid lands. These springs flow directly into natural fountains or heads. In common with Al Awali (the Sidon River) of Lebanon and the River Jordan of Israel, the Rio San Ignacio has a striking and beautiful, elongated lagoon or fountain at its head. Directly fed by several springs, the water in this narrow lagoon runs from east to west, the same direction mentioned in Mormon’s account, “by the head of the river Sidon, running from the east towards the west,” faithfully matching this directional description (Alma 22:27).



**The head of the river Sidon**

The distinct and imposing head of the river San Ignacio (the river Sidon) in Baja California. Note the valley (Gideon) across the river from the location of the city of Zarahemla.

## Directional Flow of the River Sidon

Knowing the flow direction of the river Sidon would be helpful in identifying and verifying its location on the earth's surface. Unfortunately, there are no direct statements on the general flow of the river Sidon in the Book of Mormon. Therefore, we are left with the alternative of using logic and the triangulation of information from several scriptural references to determine its orientation. We would prefer the directional flow of the river Sidon were clearly stated in the Book of Mormon, but thankfully the record contains numerous clues, and the results of logical procedures can provide plausible pointers to the river's course. Merely placing the desired directional flow of a river on a theoretical map, however, is not evidence the river could follow a downward path along its entire course on the actual surface of the earth. And simply selecting a river in an area where one wishes it to be is not evidence the river flows past the required checkpoints indicated by the Book of Mormon account, such as actual hills and valleys. Rivers flow where they have to, not where we wish them to. Some rivers flow in several directions before emptying into the sea.

Based on our analysis of the complete Book of Mormon record, we propose the general flow of the river Sidon was in a southwest direction, emptying into the sea west, and its source was in the center of the land of Zarahemla

between the sea west and sea east. As

a reader would expect, the course of the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California matches this drainage pattern, with a general flow in a southwest direction to the Pacific Ocean. To this point in our analysis, we have provided several sets of references from the Book of Mormon text implying the river Sidon flows in a general westward direction. We now consider evidence from five additional scripture reference sets.



A pool along the course of the river Sidon (Rio San Ignacio) in central Baja California.

### 1. Physical features determine direction of flow

The topography of the land directs and controls the course of rivers. Thus the relative positions of physical features such as wilderness and upland locations can help in identifying the direction of flow. The following are the geographical conditions and

accompanying scriptural references that support a logical procedure for determining a westward or, even more specifically, a southwest direction of flow for the river Sidon. The contribution of each step is essential, even if some steps appear rather basic.

*a) The river Sidon flows to the sea*

After two battles between the Nephites and Lamanites, the bodies of the slain were cast into the waters of Sidon and their bones were eventually carried “to depths of the sea” (Alma 3:3; 44:22). As we have noted, there are two dominate seas in the Book of Mormon geography where the river Sidon in the land of Zarahemla could have emptied: the sea west or the sea east. We would expect the river’s direction of flow to be somewhat perpendicular to either sea (Alma 22:27, 32; 50:11; see also, *Casting the dead into the waters of Sidon*, below).

*b) A watershed divide is required*

Somewhere in the area surrounding the river Sidon a watershed divide is required, because of the need for upland areas as water sources, coupled with the necessity that the river ultimately empties into only one sea. This divide would extend along the highest elevations of the uplands. A watershed divide is the same as a continental divide, forcing water to flow to one of the two major seas in the Book of Mormon account: the sea west or the sea east. All major Book of Mormon lands, including the land of Zarahemla, share the same sea on the west and the same sea on the east (see our topic article, *“From the Sea West to the Sea East”: The Orientation of the Book of Mormon Lands to the Sea*). With a sea to the west and a sea to the east, this watershed divide would trend north and south through the center of not only the land of Zarahemla but all the Book of Mormon lands. The river Sidon would flow to the west or east of this divide.

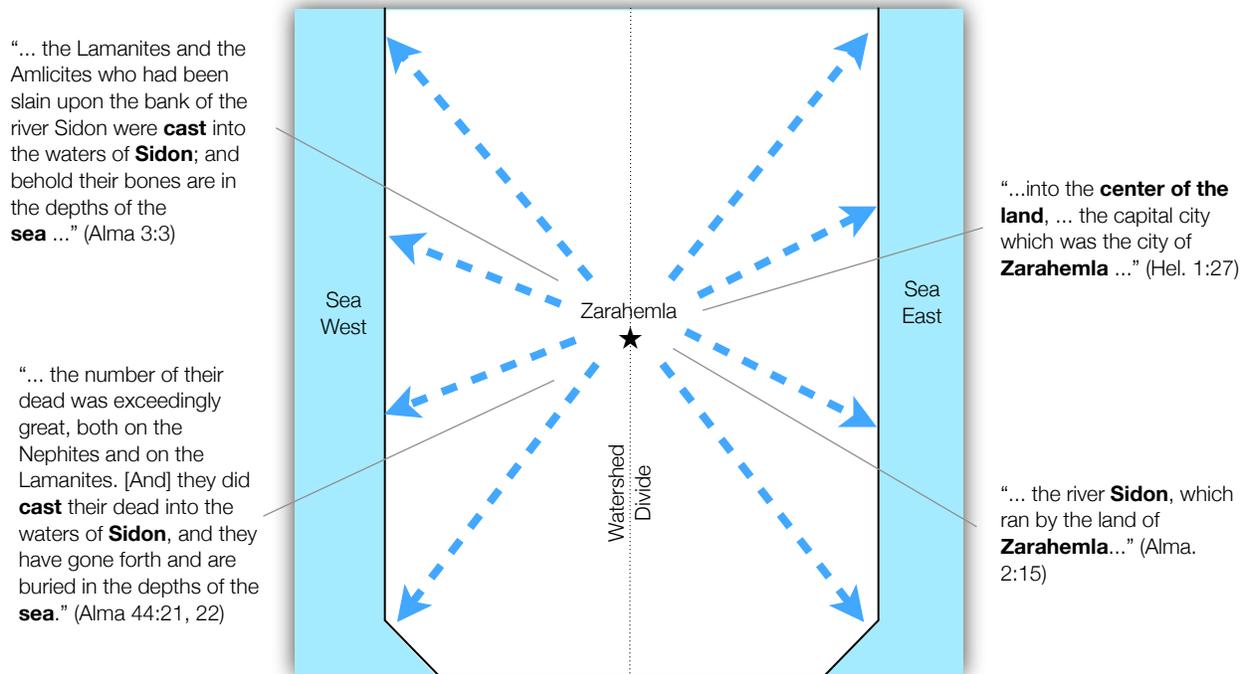
*c) The city of Zarahemla is in the center of the land*

The record states that the “capital city which was the city of Zarahemla” was in the “center of the land” (Hel. 1:27). This interior location would also place the city of Zarahemla within the center of the four wilderness areas (see below).

*d) The river Sidon flows by the land of Zarahemla*

The position of the river Sidon relative to the land of Zarahemla is mentioned by Mormon in his account of the battle on the top of hill Amnihu. He states the “the Amlicites came upon

the hill Amnihu, which was east of the river Sidon, which ran by the land of Zarahemla” (Alma 2:15). Because the river Sidon flows to the sea, at that segment of the river’s course, “by the land of Zarahemla,” the river Sidon would be above sea level.



**The river Sidon flows to the sea**

The Nephites cast the dead from battles into the waters of Sidon, allowing the remains to be carried to the sea, downstream from populated areas in the center of the land.

*e) The river Sidon flows on the east of the city of Zarahemla*

When Alma journeyed to Gideon from the city of Zarahemla, he “went over upon the east of the river Sidon, into the valley of Gideon, there having been a city built, which was called the city of Gideon, which was in the valley called Gideon” (Alma 6:7). This would indicate the river Sidon flows on the east of the city of Zarahemla, between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Gideon (see Alma 17:1).

*f) The land of Zarahemla is surrounded by wilderness areas on all four sides*

There are numerous references indicating the land of Zarahemla was surrounded on all sides by wilderness areas. The “wild” in “wilderness” refers to wild animals, and the Book of Mormon account says, “the wilderness was infested by wild and ravenous beasts” which inhabited the upland areas (Alma 2:37). These wilderness areas provided strongholds and secret hiding places for the Gadianton “robbers who infested the

mountains and the wilderness” (Hel. 11:31). From these wilderness strongholds the Gadianton robbers invaded the Nephite lands to plunder and destroy (see *Third Nephi*, chapters 1–6). The four wilderness regions are named for their compass directions: a “north wilderness” (Alma 2:36–37; 22:29); an “east wilderness” (Alma 25:5, 8; 50:7, 9, 11; 62:34); a “south wilderness” (Alma 16:6–7; 31:3; 62:34); and a “west wilderness” (Alma 2:36; 8:3; 22:28; 43:27; 52:22). These four compass directions are relative to the city and land of Zarahemla.

There are some 15 references indicating one journeys “down to the land of Zarahemla” when traveling along access routes from the surrounding wilderness areas (Omni 1:13; Alma 27:5; 51:11; 53:10, 12; 56:25; 57:15–16, 28, 30; 62:7; Hel. 1:15, 17; 4:5; 6:4). This “down” positioning supports the concept of the city of Zarahemla—in the center of the land—being located within the lowland drainage basin of the river Sidon, surrounded by higher wilderness areas. One or more of the four wilderness areas bordering the land of Zarahemla would be upland areas, and therefore, potential watersheds for the river Sidon.

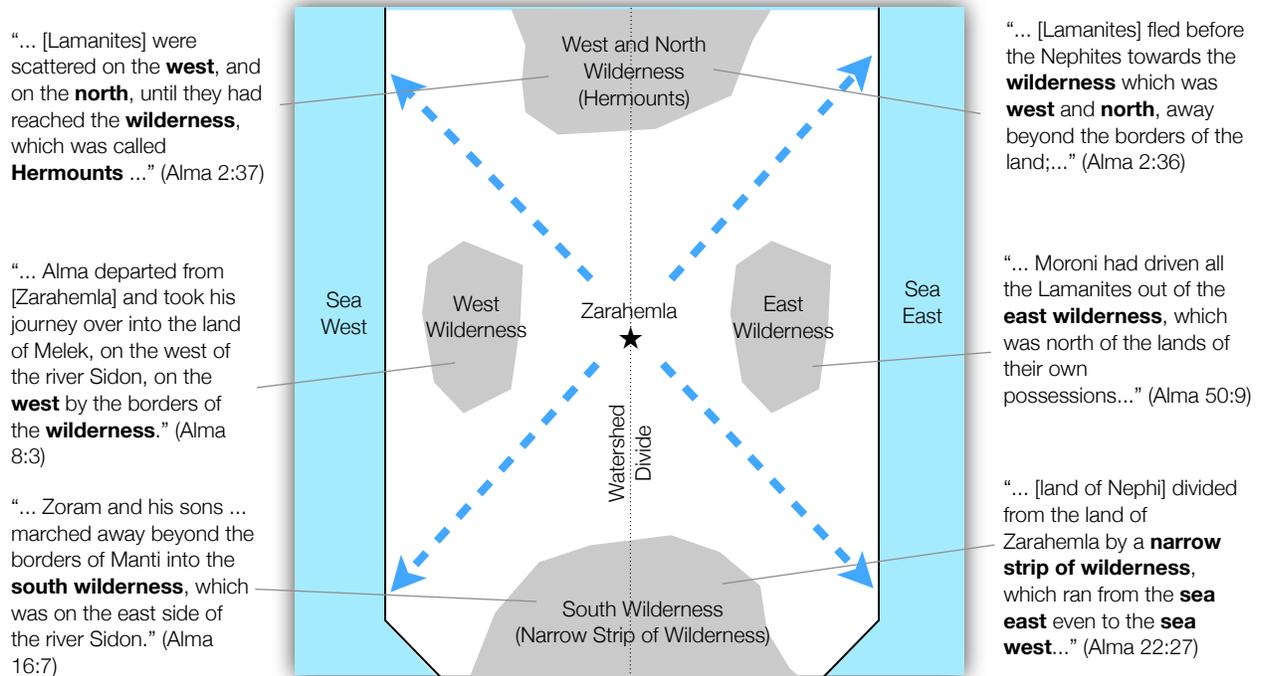
### **Up, down, over and out**

When analyzing geographical descriptions in the Book of Mormon text, we have found it helpful to consider the meaning of key prepositional words such as up, down, over, out, upon and round about. We have found the text accurately employs these positional words when describing the relationships between geographical features. In conformity with long-standing definitions, up means “from a lower to a higher point,” down means “from a higher to a lower point,” over means “extending directly upward from; at the other side of; beyond,” out means “through to the outside” and upon means the same as “up + on.” “Round about” is a common Book of Mormon preposition that means “so as to encircle by moving round; in a ring or circle about.” We are aware that in current usage, the meanings of these prepositional words often expand to broader and sometimes less precise definitions. The precise and consistent usage of these words in the Book of Mormon, however, would not be unexpected in a “most correct” book.

### *g) Natural water flow directions*

Combining the implications of the Book of Mormon references describing the physical setting of both the land of Zarahemla and the river Sidon yields the schematic map shown below. Note a north-south watershed divide would be required somewhere on the map. The four potential water courses are shown on the schematic map. The river Sidon, however, could flow downstream along the course of only one of the four general water routes or gaps to reach a sea, drawing its water source from one or more of the wilderness areas. The Book of Mormon record mentions only one river in the land of

Zarahemla, not multiple rivers, and it is the flow direction of this one river, the river Sidon, we are attempting to determine.



#### Four wilderness areas surround the land of Zarahemla

Wilderness areas, named for the four compass directions, surround the land of Zarahemla. These upland wilderness areas would cause the course of the river Sidon to flow along only one of four potential diagonal directions (dotted lines). There would need to be a watershed divide somewhere between the sea west and the sea east.

#### *h) Connecting the wilderness areas*

We now have a foundation for placing additional topographic details on our schematic map. These essential terrain refinements—connecting upland areas between the wilderness areas—will assist in defining a plausible location and flow direction for the river Sidon. This supportive geographical information is drawn from numerous scripture references describing military movements and travel routes and their relationship to these four prominent wilderness areas.

As we have noted, the river Sidon as a single waterway can only flow to the sea along one of the four gaps between these wilderness areas—northwest, northeast, southeast or southwest. But which one? The Book of Mormon account provides some helpful terrain descriptions, which narrow the four choices to only one direction:

**Northwest**—The north and west wilderness areas appear to be connected by a land-link of some elevation that creates a continuous wilderness which was “west and north,” with a single name, the “wilderness of Hermounts” (Alma 2:36–37). During a fierce conflict in this northwest area, “many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air; and their bones have been found, and have been heaped up on the earth” (Alma 2:38; 16:11). There is no mention of a river for depositing the bones, unlike earlier conflicts of this same war in the southwest, where the dead were cast into the “waters of Sidon” (Alma 2:34; 3:3; compare, Alma 44:21–22).

**Northeast**—The north and east wilderness areas appear to merge at an upland pass which served as the travel route from the central land of Zarahemla over to “the land of Jershon, which is on the east by the sea, which joins the land Bountiful, which is on the south of the land Bountiful” (Alma 27:22). The land of Jershon was northeast of Zarahemla and the seven references mentioning travel between these two lands all use the phrase, “over into the land of Jershon” (Alma 30:19; 35:1–2, 6, 8, 13; 43:25). A travel route that is “over into” another location would require, by definition, a higher elevation such as a pass.



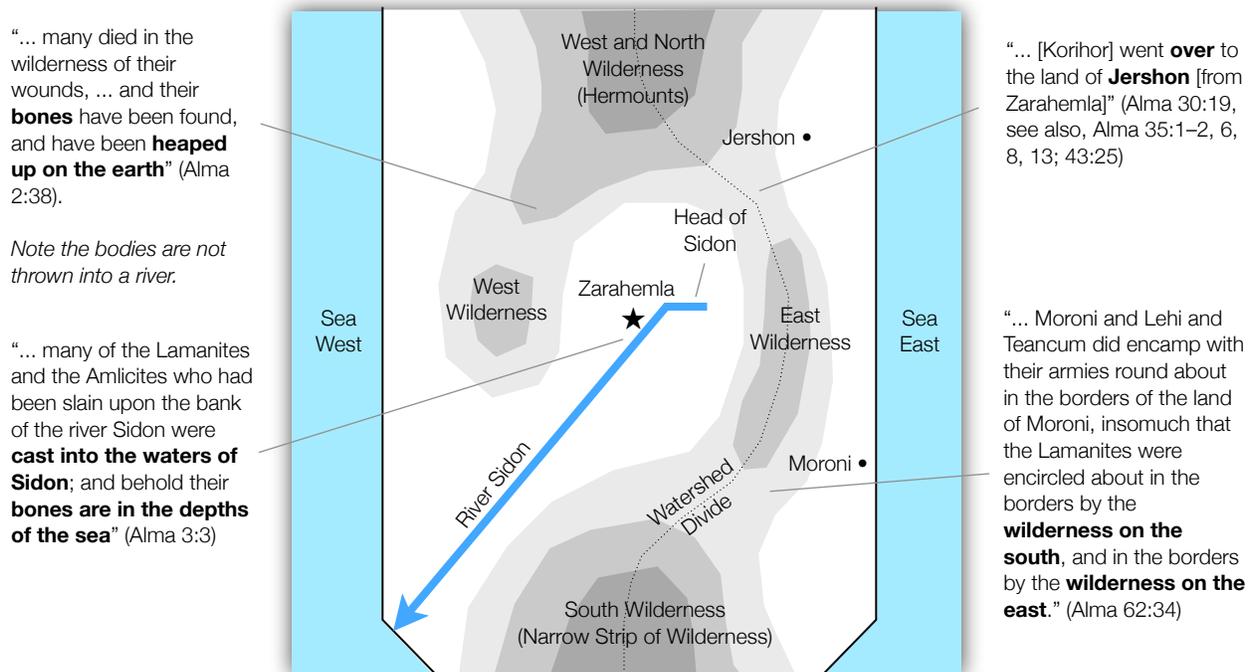
The rugged terrain between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Jershon, connecting the north and east wilderness.

**Southeast**—The east and south wilderness areas also appear to be connected. The record indicates the city of Moroni was situated on the seashore between these two wilderness areas. The account mentions in this same area, “the Lamanites were encircled about in the borders by the wilderness on the south, and in the borders by the wilderness on the east,” with no lowland escape route in between (Alma 62:34). All this implies an encircling upland area of some elevation between the east and south wilderness. We should note the south wilderness is the northern end of the “narrow

strip of wilderness, which ran from the sea east even to the sea west” (Alma 22:27; see also, Omni 1:13; Alma 22:31; 31:3; 50:7, 9).

**Southwest**—We are not aware of any references in the Book of Mormon indicating a higher elevation terrain connection between the south and west wilderness.

These three connecting links (northwest, northeast and southeast) would create a nearly continuous circle of upland wilderness—with varying elevations—starting on the west and extending clockwise on the north, east and south. The only terrain break in this upland wilderness ring would be on the southwest, and a southwest-flowing course through this lowland gap would allow the river Sidon to reach the sea. This southwest direction would position the river’s mouth, emptying into the sea west, on the western coastal route leading directly into the river Sidon basin and the land of Zarahemla that was followed by most groups traveling north from the land of Nephi through the narrow strip of wilderness (see our topic article, *The Narrow Strip of Wilderness: Spatial Features, Orientation and Recorded Journeys*).



**No upland connection in the southwest**

The only direction without an upland connection between wilderness areas is towards the southwest, suggesting a natural flow direction to the sea west.

## 2. The head (source) of the river Sidon is on the north of the land of Manti and east of the city of Zarahemla

There are several sets of scriptural references that help in triangulating the location of the head of the river Sidon relative to Book of Mormon cities and lands.

### *a) The head of the river Sidon is located near the land of Manti*

Mormon indicates the dividing line separating the Nephite lands from the Lamanite lands extended “through the borders of Manti, by the head of the river Sidon” (Alma 22:27). This description places the head of the river Sidon near the borders of Manti. It is not clear if the head of the river Sidon is within the borders of Manti, or simply the borders of Manti are “by the head of the river Sidon.” The land of Manti appears to be the most southern fortified region of the Nephites, because it was often attacked first when the Lamanites approached the Nephite lands from the south wilderness. There is clear evidence the Nephites — nearly surrounded by the Lamanites — set up defense cities as early warning positions near the borders of the land of Zarahemla (Alma 22:28–29). These cities included Manti to the south (Alma 16:6–7; 17:1), Minon to the east (Alma 2:24; 6:7) and possibly Melek to the west (Alma 8:3; 35:13).

### *b) The head of the river Sidon is on the north of the land of Manti, between the land of Jershon and the land of Manti*

In the commencement of “the eighteenth year the people of the Nephites saw that the Lamanites were coming upon them; therefore they made preparations for war; yea, they gathered together their armies in the land of Jershon.” The “Lamanites came with their thousands; and they came into the land of Antionum, which is the land of the Zoramites; and a man by the name of Zerahemnah

#### **Borders**

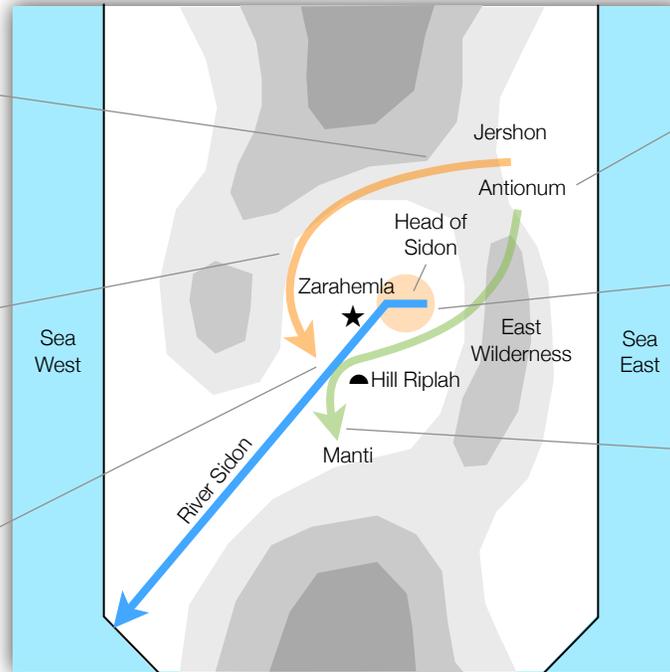
Phrases such as “borders of the wilderness,” “borders of the seashore,” “borders of Zarahemla” or “borders of Manti” are common in the Book of Mormon text, especially when describing lands adjoining the river Sidon (Alma 16:7; 22:27; Morm. 1:10). The word border is not found in the Book of Mormon record. The word always appears with an “s” as borders. Borders is not the plural of border, but has its own meaning. In older English, the term borders denotes a district, territory or frontier of some width between two land areas. These named tracts of land often indicate imprecise border regions and are sometimes called marches. The term borders can apply to a stretch of territory along a coastal area. This older definition of borders is helpful in understanding the geography of the Book of Mormon where phrases such as the “borders of Manti” do not refer to line borders, nor multiple line borders, but to land of some width. A border can be a line if a line is mentioned, such as when describing the defense “line which was between the land Bountiful and the land Desolation” (3 Ne. 3:23). This was the defense “line which they had fortified and stationed their armies to defend their north country” (Hel. 4:7; see also, Alma 22:32; 50:11, 13).

was their leader” (Alma 43:4–5). The Nephites “knew the extreme hatred of the Lamanites towards their [Lamanite] brethren, who were the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, who were called the people of Ammon—and they would not take up arms, yea, they had entered into a covenant and they would not break it—therefore, if they should fall into the hands of the Lamanites they would be destroyed. And the Nephites would not suffer they should be destroyed; therefore they gave them lands [the land of Jershon] for their inheritance” (Alma

“... Moroni, leaving a part of his army in the land of Jershon, ... took the remaining part of his army and marched **over** into the land of Manti...” (Alma 43:25)

“... [Moroni] caused that all the people in that **quarter** of the land should gather themselves together to battle against the Lamanites...” (Alma 43:26)

“... Moroni caused that his army should be secreted in the valley which was near the bank of the river Sidon, which was on the **west** of the river Sidon in the wilderness...” (Alma 43:27)



“... [Lamanites] departed out of the land of Antionum [near Jershon] into the wilderness, and took their journey **round about** in the wilderness...” (Alma 43:22)

“... **away by** the head of the river Sidon...” (Alma 43:22)

“... that [the Lamanites] might **come into** the land of Manti ... for they did not suppose that the armies of Moroni would know whether they had gone....” (Alma 43:22)

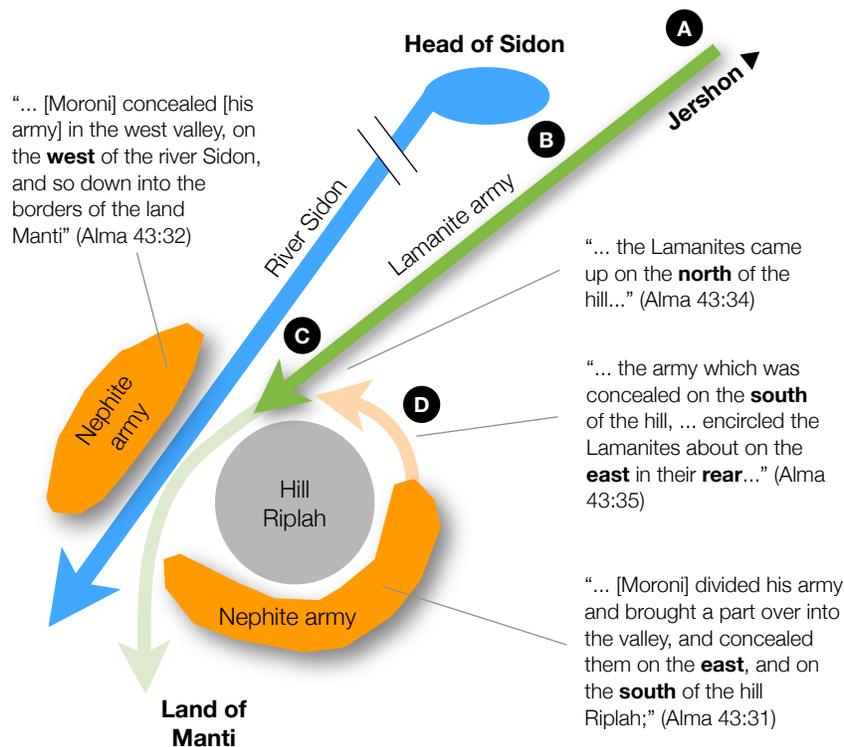
**The head of the river Sidon is north of Manti**

The Lamanite army, retreating from Antionum (near Jershon) to the northeast of the land of Zarahemla, passed by the head of Sidon en route to the land of Manti in the south. This route places the head of the river Sidon to the north of the land of Manti.

43:11–12). Moroni, the “man who had been appointed to be the chief captain over the Nephites, ... met the Lamanites in the borders of Jershon,” after he had “prepared his people with breastplates and with arm-shields, yea, and also shields to defend their heads, and also they were dressed with thick clothing.” The “army of Zarahemnah was not prepared with any such thing; they had only their swords and their cimeters, their bows and their arrows, their stones and their slings” (Alma 43:16, 18–20). The Lamanites “were not armed with breastplates, nor shields—therefore, they were exceedingly afraid of the armies of the Nephites because of their armor, notwithstanding their number being so much greater than the Nephites” (Alma 43:21). As a consequence, the Lamanite army retreated from the borders of Jershon towards the land of Manti:

Behold, now it came to pass that they [the Lamanites] durst [dare] not come against the Nephites in the borders of Jershon; therefore they departed out of the land of Antionum into the wilderness, and took their journey round about in the wilderness, away by the head of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti and take possession of the land; for they did not suppose that the armies of Moroni would know whither they had gone. (Alma 43:22)

In this military travel sequence, the Lamanites under the command of Zerahemnah retreated from the borders of Jershon and the land of Antionum to the northeast of the land of Zarahemla and continued “round about in the wilderness, away by the head of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti and take possession of the land”. Note the journey went “away by the head of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti” (Alma 43:22). After the Lamanites had gone around the head of the river Sidon, but before they were able to reach the land of Manti, they unexpectedly



**The head of Sidon is northeast of hill Riplah and north of the land of Manti**

The Lamanite military route from Antionum—near the borders of Jershon (A) in the northeast—passed the head of the river Sidon (B), to the north of hill Riplah (C) en route to the land of Manti. Lehi’s forces attacked the Lamanites from their rear on the east of hill Riplah (D). Captain Moroni had secured the west, south and east around hill Riplah, knowing the Lamanite army was approaching from the northeast heading to the southwest towards the river Sidon, on their way to the land of Manti.

encountered captain Moroni and his Nephite army at hill Riplah on the east of the river Sidon (Alma 43:34–40). The Lord through Alma the prophet had informed Moroni of the travel plans of the Lamanite army which included, “marching round about in the wilderness [after leaving the borders of Jershon and the land of Antionum], that they might come over into the land of Manti, that they might commence an attack upon the weaker part of the people” (Alma 43:24). In preparation, captain Moroni placed his army to the west, south and east of hill Riplah, knowing the Lamanite army would need to pass on the north of the hill Riplah when taking “their journey round about in the wilderness, away by the head of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti and take possession of the land; for [the Lamanites] did not suppose that the armies of Moroni would know whither they had gone” (Alma 43:22; see also, Alma 43:3–54). When the Lamanites passed on the north of “hill Riplah, and came into the valley, and began to cross the river Sidon, the army which was concealed on the south of the hill, which was led by a man whose name was Lehi, and he led his army forth and encircled the Lamanites about on the east in their rear” (Alma 43:35). This encirclement of the Lamanites “on the east in their rear,” by Lehi’s



Hill Riplah, in the distance, on the east of the Rio San Ignacio (river Sidon) in Baja California.

forces, “concealed on the south of the hill,” would only align if the Lamanites were approaching hill Riplah on the north from a northeast direction.

This travel route of the Lamanite army from the northeast, by way of the head of the river Sidon, and advancing to hill Riplah, positions the head of the river Sidon north of the land of Manti, between the borders of Jershon to the northeast of the city of Zarahemla, and the land of Manti to the south of the city

of Zarahemla (see also, *Northeast* in the section, *A Directional Flow of the River Sidon*, above, and *Hill Manti* in the section, *Hills, Valleys and Banks*, below).

*c) The head of Sidon is east of the city of Zarahemla, between the city of Zarahemla and the city of Nephihah*

Another military travel sequence helps triangulate the location of the head of the river Sidon. Captain Moroni received an epistle from Helaman, reporting “in the twenty and sixth

year” the Lamanites had “obtained possession by the shedding of the blood,” the “land of Manti, or the city of Manti, and the city of Zeezrom, and the city of Cumeni, and the city of Antiparah” (Alma 56:1, 9, 13–14). The Lamanites maintained possession of “those cities which they had taken” to the south of the city of Zarahemla (Alma 56:20). In the next year, the Nephites prepared themselves and their other cities for defense, so the Lamanites could not “make an attack upon them in their strongholds,” and “to make an attack upon [their] other cities which were on the northward” (Alma 56:21–22). As a result of these Nephite defense preparations in their cities to the north,

They [the Lamanites] durst [dare] not pass by us with their whole army, neither durst they with a part, lest they should not be sufficiently strong and they should fall.

Neither durst they march down against the city of Zarahemla; neither durst they cross the head of Sidon, over to the city of Nephiah.

And thus, with their forces, they were determined to maintain those cities which they had taken. (Alma 56:24–26).

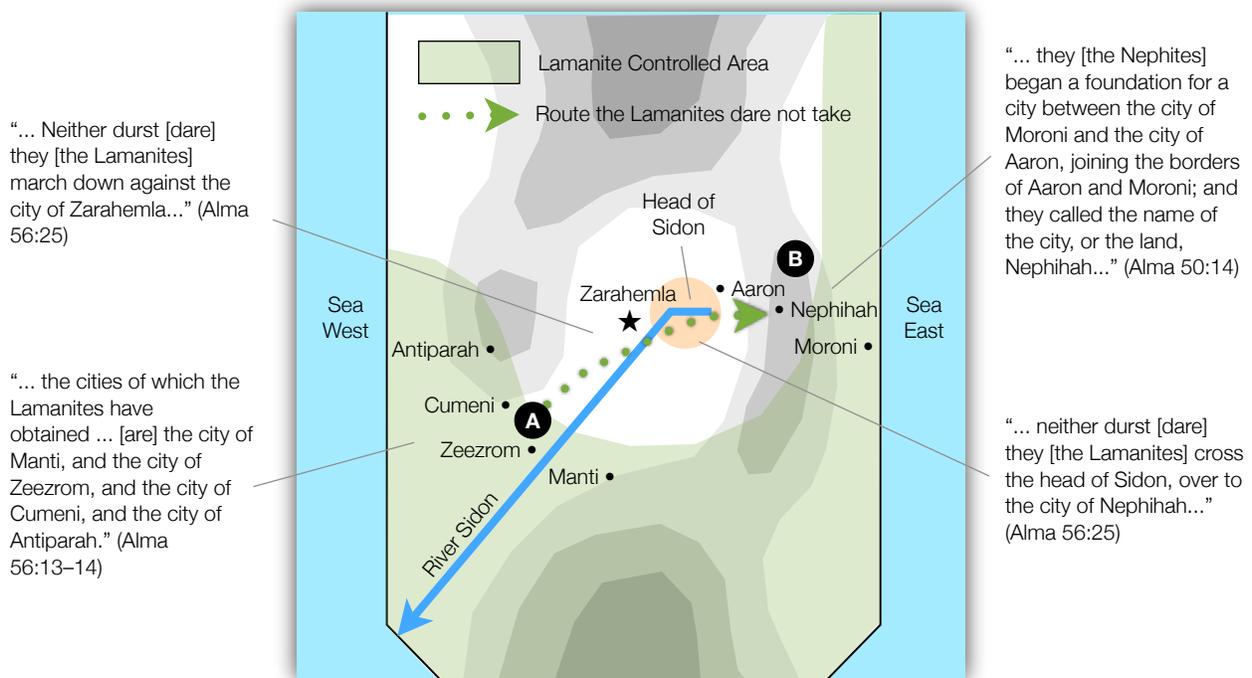
The places mentioned in these verses—the city of Zarahemla, the head of Sidon and the city of Nephiah—show a military travel sequence the Lamanite army would have taken when coming from the south to attack other Nephite “cities which were on the northward” (Alma 56:22). The record states that if the Lamanites had followed this route, they would have marched from their locations on the south and west of the city of Zarahemla—where they had already taken the land of Manti and the cities of Manti, Zeezrom, Cumeni and Antiparah—northward to the city of Zarahemla and then to a place where they would have crossed the head of Sidon as they continued their march over to the city of Nephiah on the east of the city of Zarahemla (Alma 56:13–26; see also, Alma 50:14; 51:24–26; 59:5; 62:30). This travel sequence places the head of the river Sidon to the east of the city of Zarahemla and northward of the land of Manti and the captured cities of Manti, Zeezrom, Cumeni and Antiparah. These last three cities were on the west of the city of Zarahemla, and the city



The area around the head of the river Sidon, with date palms and farms in the flood plains of the river.

and land of Manti were on the south. Thus the Lamanites, while occupying and holding these southern cities, dared not pursue a route that would have taken them north to attack the “sufficiently strong” city of Zarahemla, and then to cross the head of the river Sidon before continuing over to the city of Nephihah on the east (Alma 56:23).

Triangulating and combining these two sets of relative directions, based on military journeys, positions the head of the river Sidon between the land of Manti, and the land of Jershon, and also directly to the east of Zarahemla, between the city of Zarahemla and the city of Nephihah. The head of the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California, situated between these lands and cities, accurately matches the alignment of the geographical descriptions in the Book of Mormon account.



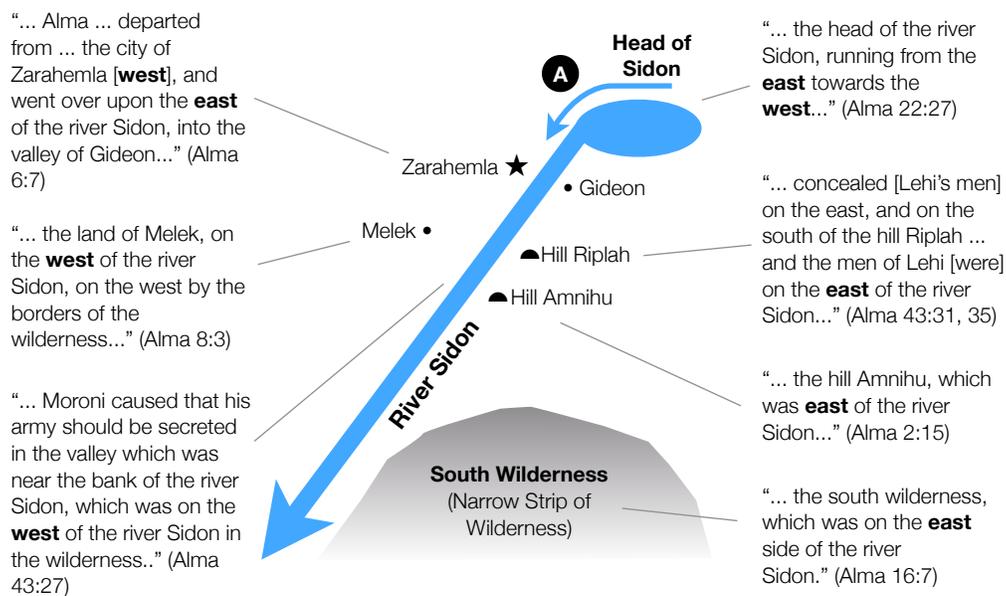
**The head of the river Sidon is north of the city of Manti**

After the Lamanites captured the cities of Manti, Zeezrom, Cumeni and Antiparah in the southwest quarter of the land of Zarahemla (A), they dared not attack the fortified city of Zarahemla to the north nor cross the head of Sidon to the city of Nephihah on the east, (B) placing the head of Sidon north of these four captured cities, including the city of Manti.

d) *The river Sidon requires a bend somewhere along its course to the sea*

Mormon states the water at the head of the river Sidon is “running from the east towards the west” (Alma 22:27). In a contrasting orientation, the text also consistently indicates the

main course of the river has lands and cities and physical features on its west and on its east (on the west, Alma 2:34; 8:3; 43:27, 32, 53; on the east, Alma 2:15, 17; 6:7; 16:6–7; 43:53; 49:16). This requires the river at these points to be flowing in a general south direction to meet this east and west orientation and to position the head (or source) of the river on the north of the land of Manti as outlined above. Then in still another change in course, the river at its mouth could only empty into the one available sea—the sea west—by flowing in a westerly direction from its watershed divide. These three required orientations and directions are at ninety degrees to each other. Somewhere there has to be a bend in the river Sidon, a change in direction, to match and at the same time smooth



#### A bend in the river Sidon

The head of Sidon flows from the east towards the west (Alma 22:27) and all other cities and land features are described as being on the west or east of the river. These west and east locations suggest there would be a bend (A) in the river between the head of Sidon and the main course of the river flowing southward to a sea on the west.

these three abrupt segments of its route: first east to west, then north to south and finally east to west. We suggest the only natural and moderate flow pattern that would match all of these conditions required by the Book of Mormon account is for the flow at the river’s head to start from east to west and then the main course, somewhere near its head, to bend slightly before flowing in a southwest direction to the west sea. This would allow the water at the head to flow correctly, the lands and cities and physical features along its course to still be positioned on the east and on the west—including the south wilderness—and for the river to ultimately reach a western sea. A bend and change of direction

occurs near the head of the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California, allowing the river to match all the required conditions and orientations.

### **3. The south wilderness forces the river Sidon to flow southwest**

The details of a military rescue by Zoram, chief captain of the Nephite armies, provide another means for triangulating the flow of the river Sidon in a southwest direction from the city of Zarahemla. “In the eleventh year of the reign of the judges ... the armies of the Lamanites had come in upon the wilderness side, into the borders of the land, even into the city of Ammonihah, and began to slay the people and destroy the city” (Alma 16:1–2). And “before the Nephites could raise a sufficient army to drive them out of the land, they had destroyed the people who were in the city of Ammonihah, and also some around the borders of Noah, and taken others captive into the wilderness” (Alma 16:3). Zoram, “chief captain over the armies of the Nephites,” and his two sons, “knowing that Alma was high priest over the church, and having heard that he had the spirit of prophecy, therefore they went unto him [in the city of Zarahemla] and desired of him to know whither [where] the Lord would that they should go into the wilderness in search of their brethren, who had been taken captive by the Lamanites” (Alma 16:5; see also, Alma 15:18–19; 16:1). Here is Alma’s description of the intended Lamanite crossing of the river Sidon, beyond the borders of the land of Manti, before continuing into the south wilderness with their Nephite captives:

And it came to pass that Alma inquired of the Lord concerning the matter. And Alma returned and said unto them: Behold, the Lamanites will cross the river Sidon in the south wilderness, away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti. And behold there shall ye meet them, on the east of the river Sidon, and there the Lord will deliver unto thee thy brethren who have been taken captive by the Lamanites. (Alma 16:6)

To reach the south wilderness “on the east of the river Sidon,” the Lamanites coming from the city of Ammonihah and the borders of Noah to the northwest of the land of Zarahemla (Alma 8:3, 6), understandably avoided the major Nephite lands of Zarahemla and Manti by crossing the river Sidon in the south wilderness which is “away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti.” While the Lamanites were traveling south along the west side of the land of Zarahemla with their Nephite captives, they crossed the river Sidon into the south wilderness at a location “away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti” (Alma 16:6; see also, *Textual Antecedence*, below). By implication these statements strongly suggest the

river Sidon at this crossing point is to the south and probably to the southwest of the land of Manti, which is the most southern land controlled by the Nephites.

It is important to note there is only one wilderness—the “narrow strip of wilderness”—between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi to the far south (Alma 22:27). This extensive wilderness was also known as the “south wilderness,” its relative direction from the land of Zarahemla. This narrow strip of wilderness (or south wilderness), “which ran from the sea east even to the sea west,” (Alma 22:27) would have forced the flow of any river towards one of these two seas.

Because the Lamanites crossed the river Sidon from the west side of the land it could be presumed the river which they passed over would continue on and empty into the closest sea, the sea west.

This presumption is verified in the next verse (Alma 16:7) which describes the route Zoram and his army followed to rescue their brethren in the south wilderness, after leaving Alma in the city of Zarahemla (Alma 15:18).

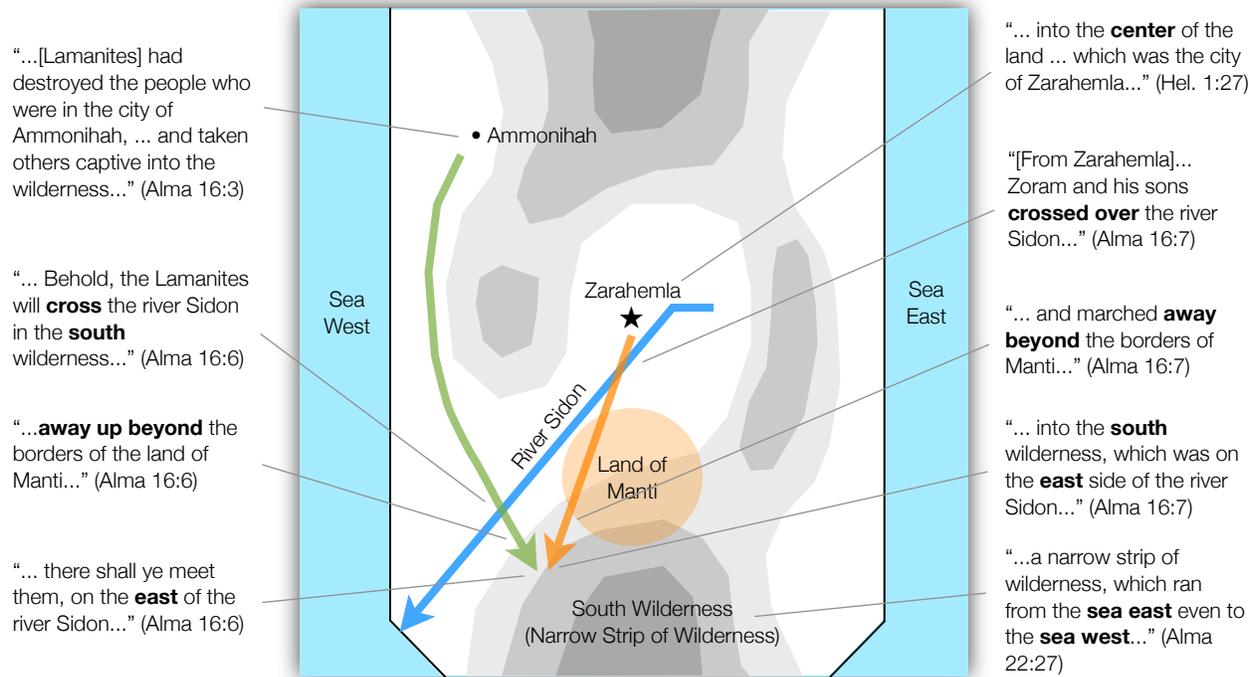


The imposing lagoon forming the head of the river Sidon in central Baja California.

“And it came to pass that Zoram and his sons crossed over the river Sidon, with their armies, and marched away beyond the borders of Manti into the south wilderness, which was on the east side of the river Sidon.” (Alma 16:7)

Note verses six and seven (Alma 16:6–7) describe two different routes into the south wilderness—the one taken by the Lamanites with their Nephite captives and the one traveled by Zoram with his rescuing army. In the south wilderness, on the east side of the river Sidon, Zoram’s army “came upon the armies of the Lamanites, and the Lamanites were scattered and driven into the wilderness; and they took their brethren who had been taken captive by the Lamanites, and there was not one soul of them had been lost that were taken captive” (Alma 16:8).

To accomplish this successful mission, Zoram, coming from the west of the river Sidon in the city of Zarahemla, first crossed “over the river Sidon, with [his] armies,” and then “marched away beyond the border of Manti into the south wilderness, which was on the east side of the river Sidon,” where they rescued their Nephite brethren (Alma 16:7).



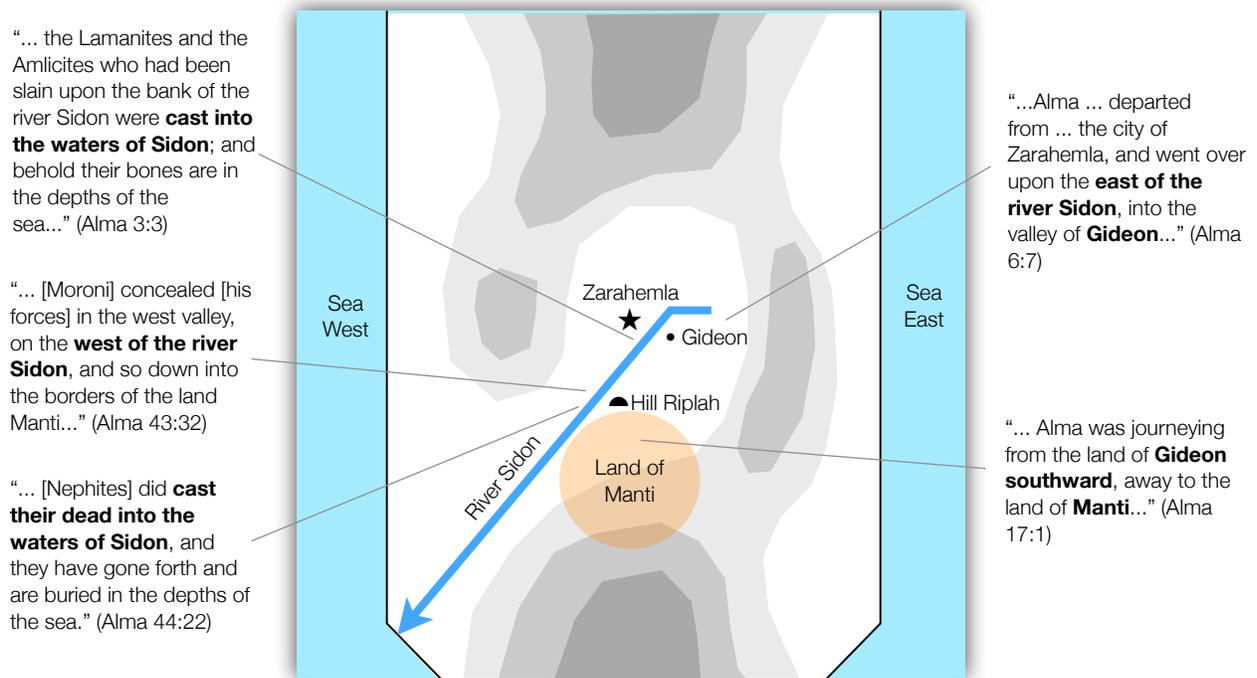
#### Southwest Flowing River of Sidon

With the river Sidon on the west of Zarahemla and on the west of south wilderness (Narrow Strip of Wilderness) the direction flow must be towards the southwest as it empties into the west sea.

In this account of Zoram’s military foray, Mormon describes the relationship of the river Sidon to the south wilderness by clearly stating the “south wilderness ... was on the east side of the river Sidon” (Alma 16:7; see also, *Textual Antecedence*, below). The reverse is also true: the river Sidon is on the west of the south wilderness. Knowing the river Sidon flows by the city of Zarahemla, which is the “center of the land” (Hel. 1:27), and the river Sidon is on the west of the south wilderness, which wilderness extends to the sea west, the river Sidon can only flow in a southwest direction away from the city of Zarahemla. This also implies the head (source) of the river Sidon was north of the city of Zarahemla and north of the land of Manti, which was south of the city of Zarahemla.

#### 4. Casting the dead (downstream) into the waters of Sidon

Surprisingly, one of the most compelling evidences supporting the flow of the river Sidon in a general southwest direction comes from the consequences of throwing dead bodies into its waters. During two Book of Mormon battles, the bodies of the slain were cast by the Nephites into the “waters of Sidon.” And “their bones are in the depths of the sea, and they are many” (Alma 3:3). The record implies the bones, not the bodies, are in the sea and this movement of bones to the sea could have happened later, not immediately (Alma 2:34; 3:3; 44:21–22). It only stands to reason, these dead bodies would be cast into the waters of the river Sidon at a location downstream from Zarahemla and Gideon to prevent the blood and gore flowing past these prominent Nephite cities. Given the number of dead, the survivors of these battles would not want to contaminate the water supplied by the river Sidon which would have been used for drinking, bathing and agriculture.



#### Casting the dead (downstream) into the waters of Sidon

The Nephites would not have thrown dead and decaying bodies into the river Sidon if these bodies would float northward past the city of Zarahemla and the city of Gideon, suggesting the river flowed away from these cities in a southerly direction.

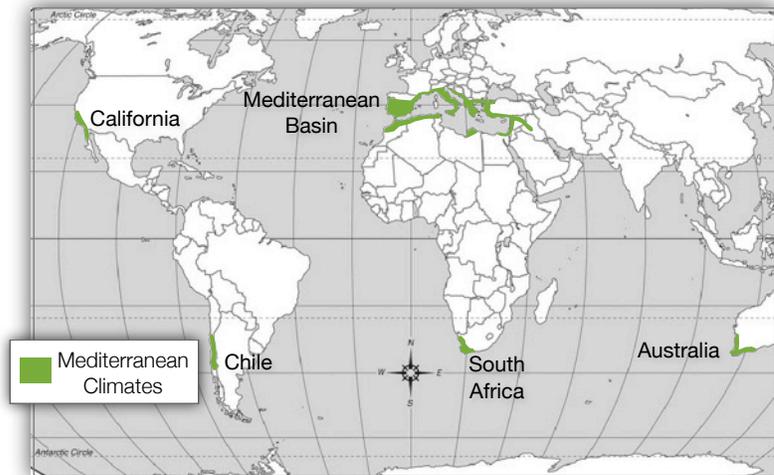
One of the battles was around hill Riplah, on the east bank of the river Sidon (Alma 6:7; 43:27, 31; 49:16), near the borders of Manti to the south (Alma 17:1; 43:32). Hill Riplah, therefore, was located south of Zarahemla, and a southwest flowing river Sidon would allow the foul smelling, visually disgusting and contaminating refuse to continue flowing to the sea west, completely avoiding the populated areas of Zarahemla and Gideon to the

north. On the other hand, a northward flowing river Sidon would carry the unpleasant gore and remains of these dead bodies downstream right by these populated areas, located on opposite sides of the river, where the families of some of the dead would be living. The logical prevention of visual and biological contamination of the river at these key points argues strongly for a southwest flowing river Sidon and against a north flowing river. A river flowing north does not pass this “smell test.”

## 5. Rivers in Mediterranean climate areas flow westward

As we have proposed, the Book of Mormon lands would have been in a Mediterranean climate area similar to the land of Jerusalem, such as Baja California (see our main article, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon Geography: A Land Choice Above All Other Lands*). Thus the seeds brought by Lehi’s family from the land of Jerusalem would have been planted in an analogous environment where they could “grow exceedingly” (1 Ne. 18:24). If grapes, figs and barley grew well in the land of Jerusalem, they potentially would grow just as abundantly and successfully in the Nephite’s new homeland of Baja California. Both the Bible lands and the area of Baja

California are in areas of Mediterranean or similar climates. Areas of Mediterranean climate occur in only a few spots of the earth’s surface. All are located in the mid-latitudes and only on the west side of continents because of the earth’s atmospheric circulation of high pressure cells that control the temperature and precipitation patterns of these climates. The largest area of Mediterranean climate is located around its namesake the Mediterranean Sea, the ancestral home of the Book of Mormon peoples, and an area they knew firsthand. The state of California and the peninsula of Baja California in Mexico are the only areas with Mediterranean and similar climates in the northern hemisphere.



Mediterranean climates throughout the world are found on the west coast of the continents.

Mediterranean climates throughout the world are located on the west coasts of continents. Thus the rivers within these climate regions are located on the west side of continental watershed divides and flow in a general westerly direction towards the sea. This is true of Al Awali (the River Sidon) in Lebanon and the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California—both associated with Mediterranean climates. Therefore, the reasoning that the seeds brought from the land of Jerusalem by Lehi’s family required a climate similar to the Biblical lands to “grow exceeding,” could also lend support to an assertion the Book of Mormon river Sidon would be expected to flow in a general westward direction, the same as other rivers in Mediterranean climates.

**Summary**—These five reasoned explanations from the Book of Mormon text strongly support a general westward, and specifically a southwest flow direction for the river Sidon. We know of no evidence in the Book of Mormon that sustains another flow direction.

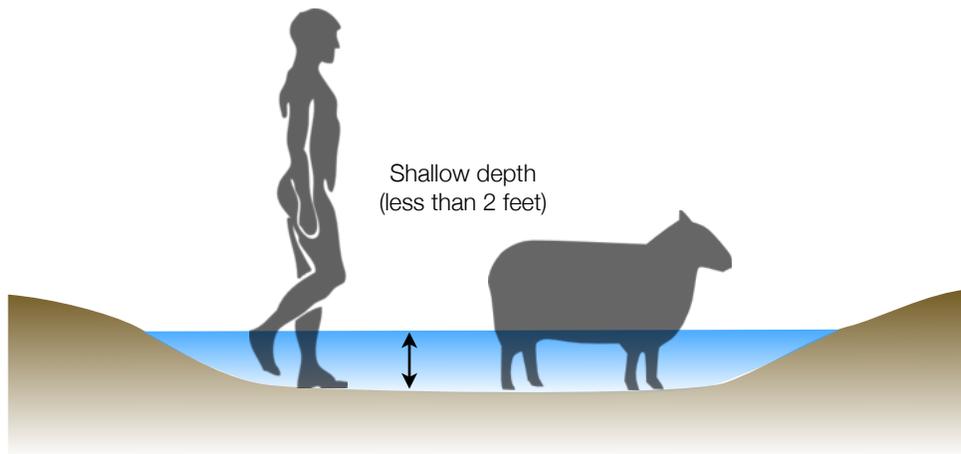


**Upland areas in central Baja California**

There are four distinct wilderness areas around the city of Zarahemla with drainage systems that surface at a lagoon (head of the river Sidon) in the center of the land. The water in the lagoon flows into the Rio San Ignacio (river Sidon) then continues towards the southwest to the Pacific Ocean.

## Flow Rate, Width and Depth of River Sidon

What was the normal volume of water flowing in the river Sidon—its flow rate, width and depth? In the Book of Mormon record, Lamanite and Nephite armies and other sizable groups cross the river Sidon multiple times with apparent ease. During a single battle at hill Riplah, half the Nephite army passed over the river Sidon, and then the approaching Lamanite army crossed some four separate times in quick succession and seemingly without hesitation, all within part of a day (Alma 43:23–54; see section on *Hill Riplah*, below). If the water of the river Sidon were wide, deep or swift, the soldiers, while crossing, would have been placed in a vulnerable position, a situation they would not have kept repeating. There is no mention of bridges or boats.



The river Sidon was shallow enough for armies to cross multiple times in a single battle, and for flocks and people to cross with apparent ease.

In another conflict, a significant number of fleeing Nephites, “cross[ed] the river Sidon,” and “the Lamanites and the Amlicites, being as numerous almost, as it were, as the sands of the sea, came upon them to destroy them” (Alma 2:27). And “when they had all crossed the river Sidon ... the Lamanites and the Amlicites began to flee before them, notwithstanding they were so numerous that they could not be numbered” (Alma 2:35). Again no boats or bridges are mentioned, and people in great numbers, “as the sands of the sea,” seemingly crossed the river Sidon as if it were a common occurrence (Alma 2:27, 34–35).

Before this battle, the Nephites in the land of Minon were compelled by the Lamanites and Amlicites to flee “with their flocks, and their wives, and their children, towards” the city of Zarahemla (Alma 2:25, 35). The pressing goal of the “fleeing” Nephites was to escape across the river Sidon from the city of Gideon on the east to the city of Zarahemla on the west, quickly seeking safety for “their flocks, and their wives, and their children.” If their flocks included sheep and goats, a wide or deep or swift flowing river Sidon would have presented an insurmountable barrier. Sheep and goats as a matter of course do not swim rivers, although some will swim a short distance when forced into water. When led, however, they will wade through shallow water.

These accounts of armies, people and flocks readily crossing the river Sidon suggest the river was not too wide nor too deep nor too swift, certainly with a depth that could be simply waded across without danger to life or the need for boats. Additional crossings of the river Sidon, often in significant numbers, are mentioned in the record (Alma 16:6–7; 61:6; see also, Alma 6:7; 8:3).



The course of the river Sidon, east of hill Riplah, looking north.

Downstream from the head of the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California, the watercourse noticeably narrows and can be easily crossed in shallow water. The river at most locations and at nearly all times can be waded with little effort in a slow moving stream, the same as the Jordan River in Israel and Al Awali (the Sidon River) in Lebanon. Much of the water originating at the head of the Rio San Ignacio reaches the sea through underground stream courses, thus diminishing its aboveground flow downstream. This is common in dryer climates, especially at certain seasons of the year. The depth of the water at its head and in several other locations is suitable for baptisms.

### **Bones in the “depths of the sea”**

During two Book of Mormon battles, as we have noted, the bodies of the slain were cast by the Nephites into the “waters of Sidon.” And “their bones are in the depths of the sea,

and they are many” (Alma 3:3). The record implies the bones, not the bodies, are in the sea and this movement of bones to the sea could have happened later, not immediately (Alma 2:34; 3:3; 44:21–22). These Book of Mormon references provide helpful information on the flow rate of the river Sidon. Forensic studies confirm that dead bodies in rivers, as a rule, do not travel far from the place of entry. Chemical changes and increasing gas levels in dead bodies cause them to float within a short time, often lodging along the banks. We



Flash flooding of rivers in semiarid environments can wash debris, animals and people some distance to the sea.

suggest only rivers with a powerful and naturally occurring flushing action could carry bodies or bones a distance to the sea, especially if the watercourse is normally shallow.

The Rio San Ignacio in Baja California periodically floods and overflows its banks, as is common with rivers in semiarid regions, and sweeps away the debris in its 30-mile-long river valley. In historic times these flash floods have carried even live cattle and

people out to the Pacific Ocean. The lofty banks flanking this river show the scars of high-level water erosion. In dryer climates, such as the region of the Rio San Ignacio, the volume of water in rivers during flash floods can rapidly increase a hundredfold or more. Rivers in more humid areas do not experience these extreme flow fluctuations. In dryer climates, the greatest loss of human life from natural disasters often results from drowning in suddenly rising water. Our past research has shown the number one environmental challenge of early Mormon settlements in the dryer areas of Arizona and southern Utah was not lack of water, but recurring flash floods that wiped out irrigation works, crops and homes.

## **Waters of Sidon**

In the Book of Mormon account, the water in the river Sidon is always referred to as the “waters” of Sidon and never as “water.” In older English, waters can refer to the water flowing from springs or to stretches of water that are noticeably wider than the normal width of the river (see also, the definition of “borders,” in the sidebar, *Borders*). The Rio San Ignacio has three areas of some expanse—the elongated lagoon forming its head, the

several pools of water along its course and the world-renown bay, Laguna San Ignacio, at its mouth on the Pacific side of the peninsula. This embayment, some four miles wide and extending nearly 20 miles inland, attracts whale watchers from around the world. Each winter, California gray whales migrate southward 5,000 miles along the western coastline of North America from their summer feeding grounds in Alaska and Canada to these warm, secluded waters. Whales give birth in the protected waters of this lagoon nursery, and the young calves benefit from the warmth, salinity and safety of the shallow ocean waters. The Laguna San Ignacio also serves as the mating waters of the whales.



The river Sidon flows into the extensive Laguna San Ignacio on the west of Baja California.

Whales are mentioned in Moroni's account of the Jaredite journey across "the great sea which divideth the lands" to their promised home (Ether 2:13). The Lord declared the Jaredite vessels "shall be as a whale in the midst of the sea; for the mountain waves shall dash upon [them]" (Ether 2:24). And the brother of Jared was commanded to "make a hole in the top [of their vessels], and also in the bottom; and when thou shalt suffer for air thou shalt unstop the hole and receive air. And if it be so that the water come in upon thee, behold, ye shall stop the hole, that ye may not perish in the flood" (Ether 2:20). This action of stopping and unstopping an air hole is the same as the breathing of whales by inhaling

and exhaling air through their blowholes while partially submerged. And the Jaredite vessels “were driven forth; and no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar [hinder] them” (Ether 6:10). Moroni, Ether or the other record keepers would have had firsthand knowledge of the habitats and characteristics of whales and recorded this literary imagery (see also, our topic article, *Jared, his Brother and their Friends: A Geographical Analysis of the Book of Ether*).



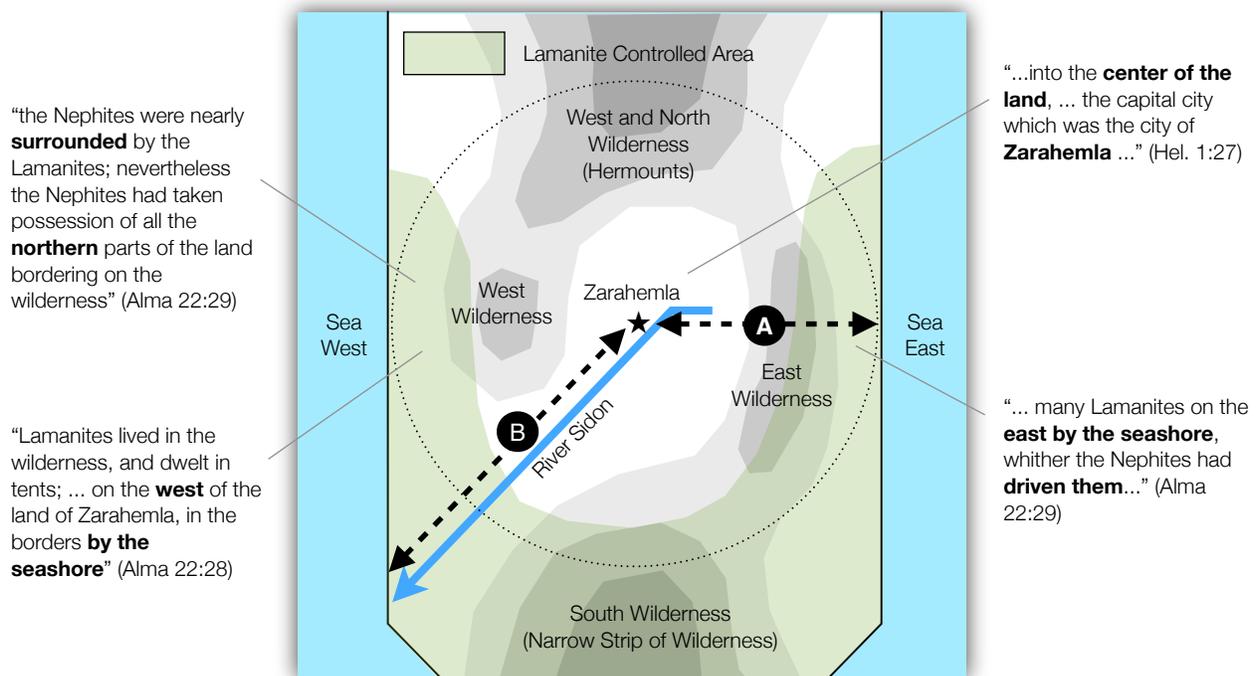
A playful baby whale. California gray whales return every year to the warm waters of Laguna San Ignacio in western Baja California for calving and mating.

## Length of River Sidon

How long was the river Sidon? Knowing its length would be helpful in determining the location of the river and the scale of the land. The Book of Mormon account, unfortunately, only provides indirect evidence to answer this question. As we have noted, the “capital city which was the city of Zarahemla” was in the “center of the land” (Hel. 1:27). This places the city of Zarahemla more precisely than merely being somewhere within the interior. The land of Zarahemla was situated between the sea on the west and the sea on the east (Alma 22:28–29). Knowing the distance from the city of Zarahemla in the center of the land to these two seas would give a fair approximation of the length of the river Sidon, because its source or head would be part of the watershed divide between the two seas, somewhere near the city of Zarahemla.

There is an indirect way to estimate this distance: After the Nephites under king Mosiah (the first) joined with the people of Zarahemla, the record states many Lamanites were “driven” by the Nephites to the sea east “by the seashore” (Alma 22:29). At that time, Lamanites were also living “on the west of the land of Zarahemla, in the borders by the seashore” (Alma 22:28). How long or how far would the Nephites have continued to “drive” numerous resisting Lamanites from the center of the land to another location such as the sea east? One day, one week, one month? What was the purpose in driving them out of

the Nephite lands other than placing some distance between them and the Lamanites? If the time or distance required to accomplish this task were too great, it would create a logistical supply problem for the Nephite pursuers and would vastly increase the chances the Lamanites at some point would simply disperse or outflank the Nephite forces and disrupt their mission. We suggest a pursuit distance measured by a two or three-day chase, certainly not many days or weeks. Assuming a travel distance of some 10 to 20 miles per day, this would place the center of the land of Zarahemla about 30 to 60 miles from each of the two seas. The length of the river Sidon, therefore, would be approximately this same extent.



#### Estimated length of the river Sidon

The Nephites would have driven the Lamanites from Zarahemla to the east seashore, a reasonable distance (A) of some 30 to 60 miles (2 to 3 days). Because the city of Zarahemla is in the center of the land, the approximate length of the river Sidon (B) would also be about 30 to 60 miles.

There is another indirect way to estimate this distance: To the east of their land, the Nephites established a string of three cities—Aaron, Nephihah and Moroni—stretching in sequence from the city of Zarahemla in the center of the land to Moroni situated on the coast of the sea east (Alma 50:14; see also, Alma 8:13; 50:14; 51:22, 24; 59:5, 8; 62:25–26, 32; 3 Ne. 9:4). Not unlike the early Mormon settlements in Utah and elsewhere, we have noted the cities within the land of Zarahemla were located about 10 to 20 miles apart

—about a day’s journey. Assuming the four cities of Zarahemla, Aaron, Nephihah and Moroni were aligned some 10 to 20 miles apart, this would yield a distance of about 30 to 60 miles from the city of Zarahemla in the center of the land to Moroni on the east coast. This somewhat uniform spacing of cities provides another way of estimating the length of the river Sidon—with its source at the center—at no more than 30 to 60 miles.

The Rio San Ignacio in Baja California has a direct length of some 30 miles from its head in the center of the peninsula to its mouth on the Pacific Ocean to the west, matching the relative scale of these implied distances. If we include the extension of the Laguna San Ignacio at the river’s mouth, the total length increases to more than 40 miles. And on the east, the head of the Rio San Ignacio is a distance of about 35 miles from the Sea of Cortez.

## **Hills, Valleys and Banks**

Hills, valleys and banks flanking the river Sidon sometimes served as battlegrounds for the Nephite wars. When describing conflicts, these highly visible landmarks were not ignored by the Book of Mormon record keepers. The recorded hills, valleys and banks, however, cannot be simply placed on a map where we wish them to be. They are where they are. Thus landmark features within any proposed location would be required to match the relative alignments and terrain configurations stated within the Book of Mormon text. If the record says a hill was on the east of the river Sidon, we should be able to match the account to a hill on the east and not in some other direction. Indeed the successful matching and aligning of these hills, valleys and banks to the area of the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California on *Google Earth*, and especially while viewing them on the ground, was an incredible moment for us.

### **Valley of Gideon**

The valley of Gideon, named for the man Gideon who was slain by Nehor, was located on the east of the river Sidon across from the city of Zarahemla (Alma 1:8; 2:20; 6:7). In this valley a city was “built, which was called the city of Gideon” (Alma 6:7). The people of Nephi were able to cross the river Sidon from the city of Zarahemla and go directly “into the valley of Gideon,” implying this notable valley was positioned where it would converge with the course of the river Sidon (Alma 2:20; 6:7). Coming from the opposite side of the river, the people of Nephi, when fleeing in “haste” from the Amlicites, “took their tents, and

departed out of the valley of Gideon towards their city, which was the city of Zarahemla,” and then proceeded to cross the river Sidon, again suggesting the valley of Gideon connected with the river Sidon (Alma 2:25–27). This implies the city of Zarahemla was located on the west of the river Sidon, and the city of Gideon, east of the river, within a valley of the same name, was near the city of Zarahemla. Any proposed location for the city of Zarahemla, we suggest, would require a valley for the city of Gideon on its east that directly converges with the course of the river Sidon flowing between them. This two-city alignment matches the towns of La Joya (Zarahemla) and San Ignacio (Gideon) in Baja California, which are located today on opposite sides of the Rio San Ignacio at its head (head of Sidon), with the town of San Ignacio positioned in a notable valley (Gideon).



The valley of Gideon (and the town of San Ignacio), looking towards the valley of the river Sidon, to the south.

## Hills

Three hills are placed near the river Sidon in the Book of Mormon record—the hill Manti, the hill Amnihu and the hill Riplah. By definition, a hill is a naturally raised area of land rising significantly above all the surrounding terrain.

### *Hill Manti*

In the first year of the reign of the judges—about 91 B.C.—a dissenting Nephite named Nehor introduced priestcraft among the people (Alma 1:12, 16). A man named Gideon confronted Nehor “with the words of God.” Nehor “drew his sword and began to smite him. Now Gideon being stricken with many years, therefore he was not able to withstand his blows, therefore he was slain by the sword” (Alma 1:9). Gideon in his younger years had been “an instrument in the hands of God in delivering the people of Limhi out of bondage [in the land of Nephi]” (Alma 1:8). Nehor was “condemned to die, according to the law which [had] been given” by king Mosiah (Alma 1:14). The people of Zarahemla took Nehor and “carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the

people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death” (Alma 1:1–15).

The “ignominious death” of Nehor took place “upon the top of the hill Manti.” In accordance with Nephite naming conventions, we suggest the hill Manti would have been within the land of the same name, the land of Manti. And “the borders of Manti” were “by the head of the river Sidon” (Alma 22:27). The land of Manti was located “southward” of the “land of Gideon,” and the land and valley of Gideon were located on the east of the



Hill Manti in the distance. The height of the hill is some 250 feet.

river Sidon (Alma 6:7; 17:1). This would place the land of Manti also on the east of the river Sidon, south of the valley of Gideon. In an attempt to properly place the hill Manti within the land of Manti, we need to pose a question: How far would the people escort Nehor to the location of his “ignominious death”? We suggest not more than a few miles, and certainly not a journey of several days. These scriptural triangulations place the hill Manti on the east of the

river Sidon south of the valley of Gideon, and within a relatively short distance—measured by not many hours of travel—from the city of Zarahemla which was on the west of the river. Our proposed hill Manti in Baja California is in a prominent location south of the valley of Gideon on the east of the river Sidon, some three miles from the site of the city of Zarahemla.

### *Hill Amnihu*

In 87 B.C., “the Amlicites came upon the hill Amnihu, which was east of the river Sidon, which ran by the land of Zarahemla, and there they began to make war with the Nephites” (Alma 2:15). Alma “went up with his people,” as head of his armies, “and they began to slay the Amlicites upon the hill [Amnihu] east of Sidon” (Alma 2:16–17). We suggest to carry out an effective fight “upon” the top of a hill, the crown would have been somewhat flat and not too high in elevation. The Nephites under the command of Alma persisted in pursuing “the Amlicites all that day, and did slay them with much slaughter, insomuch that there were slain of the Amlicites twelve thousand five hundred thirty and two

souls; and there were slain of the Nephites six thousand five hundred sixty and two souls” (Alma 2:19). When “Alma could pursue the Amlicites no longer he caused that his people should pitch their tents in the valley of Gideon, the valley being called after that Gideon who was slain by the hand of Nehor with the sword; and in this valley the Nephites did pitch their tents for the night” (Alma 2:20).



Hill Amnihu in the distance, on the east of the river Sidon (height about 250 feet).

This “all day” military pursuit and deadly combat suggests the hill Amnihu was within the maximal distance of a challenging day’s journey from the valley of Gideon—say, five to ten miles. All these scriptural

triangulations place the valley of Gideon and the hill Amnihu on the east of river Sidon, with the valley of Gideon on the opposite side of the river from the city of Zarahemla (Alma 2:15, 26–27; 6:7–8). Our proposed hill Amnihu in Baja California is located on the east of the river Sidon, some six miles south of the valley of Gideon. In alignment with the recorded combat setting, the hill is not too high in elevation, with a flat top that could serve as a battleground.

### *Hill Riplah*

A major battle between the Lamanites, under the command of Zerahemnah (a dissenting Zoramite), and the Nephites, under the command of captain Moroni, culminated along the river Sidon at hill Riplah. At this location, in about 74 B.C., the Lamanites anticipated “that they might commence an attack near hill Riplah upon the weaker part of the people” in the land of Manti, but the Lord forewarned Alma of their intent (Alma 43:22–26). The land of Manti was to the south of the valley of Gideon, thus placing the hill Riplah toward the south of this prominent valley (see *The Head of the River Sidon* and *Hill Manti*, above). And hill Riplah was “on the east of the river Sidon” (Alma 49:16). Chapters 43 and 44 of the book of *Alma* are devoted to a meticulous accounting of this military conflict, including numerous geographical details of the battleground positions around hill Riplah, the river Sidon and the surrounding valleys. We suggest readers view the video presentation, *Moroni’s Military Strategy around Hill Riplah*, on our web site.

There was a valley “on the east, and on the south of the hill Riplah” where Lehi, under the command of captain Moroni, “concealed” his half of the Nephite army to await the arrival of the Lamanite forces approaching from the east, on the north of the hill, where they intended to cross the river Sidon at that point (Alma 43:31, 35). This valley, extending “on the east, and on the south of the hill Riplah,” would have had a width, a depth and a length sufficient to sequester several thousand soldiers. And the valley would need to be positioned precisely as the record states, such that Lehi could spring his troops quickly from their hidden location and encircle “the Lamanites about on the east in their rear” (Alma 43:35; 49:16). This valley, stretching around two sides of the hill, would have



Hill Riplah on the east of the river Sidon, as viewed from the river (height about 250 feet).

been sufficiently large to conceal Lehi’s troops from the advancing Lamanites, yet close enough for the army to move out of the hidden valley in a surprise maneuver.

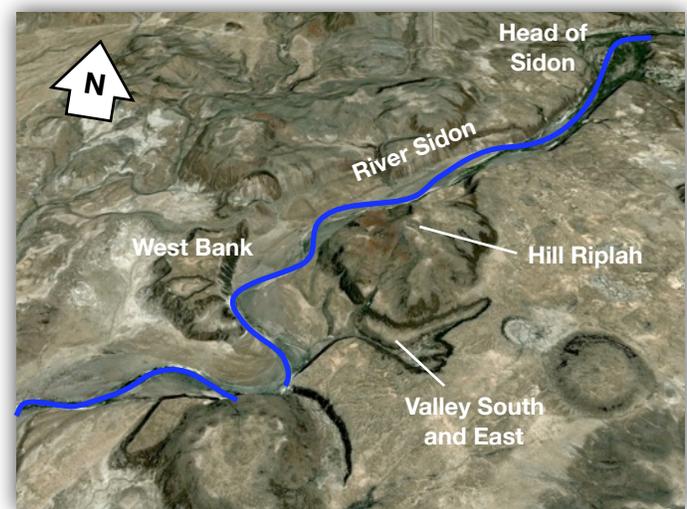
An unnamed valley was located to the west of hill Riplah on the other side of the river Sidon. Before encountering the approaching Lamanite army, captain Moroni “caused that his army should be secreted in [this] valley which was near the bank of the river Sidon,

which was on the west of the river Sidon in the wilderness” (Alma 43:27). From this hidden valley on the west, Moroni unleashed his troops to meet the Lamanite army crossing the river Sidon from the east. As noted, the Lamanite army was being pursued by Lehi’s half of the army on the east of hill Riplah after surprising the Lamanites from the rear when they unexpectedly emerged from the concealed valley “on the east, and on the south of the hill Riplah” (Alma 43:31).

The river Sidon was flanked by banks or ridges on the west of the river at this hill Riplah battlefield location (Alma 43:27, 40, 51). Captain Moroni’s forces tactically entrapped the Lamanite army between these banks on the west of the river Sidon and hill Riplah on the east, leading to a surrender of the Lamanite army (Alma 43:50–54; 44:1–23). These banks appear to be of a sufficient height and configuration that they would have been too difficult to scale by entrapped troops. We suggest these high banks could still be identified today

near a hill matching the geographical details of a hill Riplah and with a suitably matching river Sidon flowing between the two terrain features.

The terrain of any proposed hill Riplah and river Sidon should not only match these recorded valley, hill and bank configurations and locations, but also provide befitting battlegrounds that would accommodate the precise directions of troop movements and the numerous crossings of the river Sidon in quick succession by the opposing armies. The necessity of hiding troops in valleys implies the natural vegetation of the region could not provide sufficient cover for concealing the Nephite army. We suggest this area of the river Sidon was an open, but rugged landscape, with few trees, but with many hidden arroyos. Arroyos are steep-sided ravines and gullies cut by running water that could provide hiding places for large numbers of troops and could not be seen unless stumbled upon.

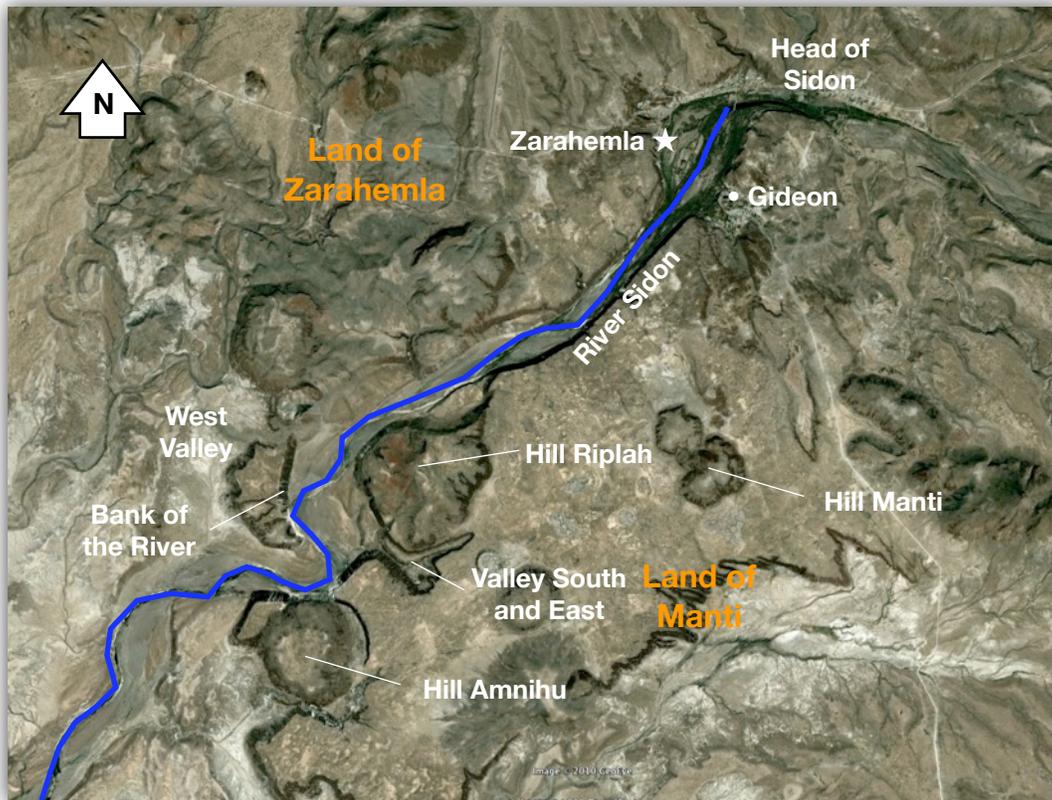


Hill Riplah, south of the head of river Sidon and east of the river, with a distinct valley on the south and east of the hill.

### *Hills, valleys and banks in Baja California*

Placing these landscape features on theoretical maps is not difficult, but positioning them correctly in terrain that is not the actual river Sidon setting of the Book of Mormon lands would be a challenge. All the recorded features of these hills, hidden valleys and banks align in a remarkable way with the terrain of our proposed hill Riplah along the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California and at the required relative locations. The banks of the river at this hill position are two to three hundred feet high and a sufficient distance from the river's edge to provide an enclosed area for entrapping the Lamanite army. There are also hidden valleys in the recorded locations. The early Jesuit fathers often mentioned the hidden valleys of Baja California that could not be seen until they were stumbled upon—valleys sometimes with isolated settlements (see our topic article, *The Narrow Strip of Wilderness: Spatial Features, Orientation and Recorded Journeys*). It is striking to us that not only do all the features and the relative locations of hill Manti, hill Amnihu and hill Riplah in Baja

California match the Book of Mormon record, but along this stretch of the east flank of the Rio San Ignacio, these three hills are the only hills. There are no other choices. Therefore, it is not possible to be selective when attempting to make the most desirable match among a number of alternates, nor do we need other choices.



**Hills, valleys and banks**

Geographic landforms near the head of the river Sidon in Baja California that match corresponding physical features described in the Book of Mormon account.

## An Analog to Sidon in Lebanon

While verifying the river Sidon in Baja California, we were struck by the likeness of our single candidate river, the Rio San Ignacio, to the physical features of a river of the same name—the Sidon River on the Mediterranean coast of Lebanon. At the mouth of the river in Lebanon is the historic port city of Sidon (*Saida* in Arabic). In light of our visits to the Holy Land and our work as geographers, we could quickly see the two rivers had more in common than just a name. The Sidon River in Lebanon—called *Al Awali* today—flows west from springs at its head, with no headwaters as surface tributaries. The main source

of the spring water is the mountains of Lebanon which include Mount Hermon on the east in northern Israel. The river Sidon, as described in the Book of Mormon account, and our proposed river Sidon in Baja California have these same basic features, and the scale of



#### **Sidon in Lebanon**

The port city of Sidon (*Saïda* in Arabic) was an important trade center at the time of king Zedekiah—the father of Mulek. The Sidon River (*Al Awali* today) flows in a southwest direction to the Mediterranean Sea.

the rivers is nearly identical. Both have a “head,” not headwaters, with springs as their sources, and flow towards the west. The spring-fed head of the Rio San Ignacio resembles the spring-fed head at the source of the Sidon River in Lebanon and is similar to the Jordan River in Israel which is fed by multiple springs, one near Caesarea Philippi. What also impressed us was the apparent similarity of the name “Mount Hermon” to “Hermounts”—the name of the wilderness north and west of the river Sidon in the Book of Mormon record (Alma 2:37). The writer of the book of Psalms calls the three summits of Mount Hermon in northern Israel, “Hermons,” which is rendered as “Hermonites” in the King James version (Ps. 42:6). The name “Hermon” comes from the Hebrew word *chermown*, pronounced ker-mone, meaning *abrupt*.

The source of the springs at the head of the Sidon River (Al Awali) in Lebanon is a series of lofty mountain ranges, including Mount Hermon, that rise to heights of over 9,000 feet and extend into the surrounding areas of Syria, Israel and Lebanon. We identify the Sierra de San Francisco, an extensive mountain range in Baja California rising to a height of over 5,000 feet, as the wilderness “called Hermounts” by the people of Zarahemla. The Rio San Ignacio begins its course at springs near the base of this mountain range. The wilderness of the Sierra de San Francisco and Mount Hermon in the Biblical lands have similar characteristics: both are imposing mountain ranges that can be seen from some distance, and their profiles are striking when covered with snow.

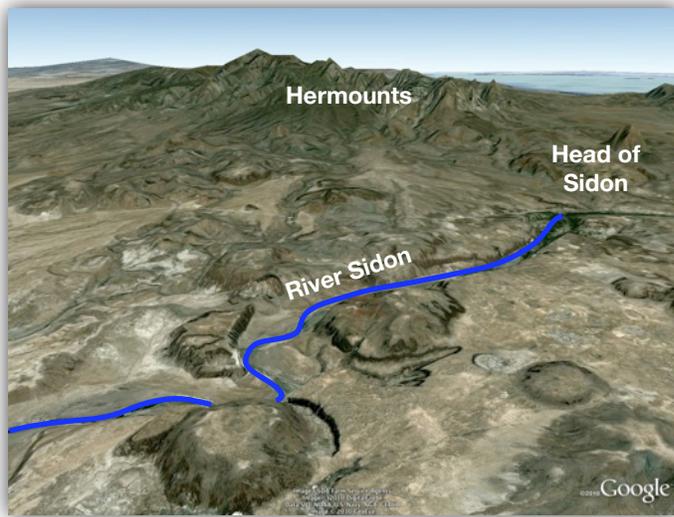


Mount Hermon viewed from the south, near the border of Israel and Lebanon.

Cooling breezes blow down from their heights, mitigating the summer heat, and extensive reservoirs of water within the depths of their mountains, fed by rain and melting snows, surface in life-giving springs. Dew from fog clouds often surrounds both mountain ranges, providing sustaining moisture for animal life and vegetation. Both mountainous regions are positioned in such a manner that their respective rivers, the Rio San Ignacio and Al Awali (the Sidon River), flow toward a sea on the west. Because their names and settings are similar, one could surmise Hermounts was named by the people of Zarahemla after its nearly identical counterpart, Mount Hermon, in their homeland.

The name Sidon means a fishing or hunting area. At the time Lehi’s family and the people of Zarahemla (the Mulekites) left the Jerusalem area, Sidon was near the peak of its power and the most significant port for Israelite trade with the western world. Mulek’s father, king Zedekiah, had dealings with the king of Sidon (Jer. 27:3). The port city of Sidon on the Mediterranean was the mother city of Tyre, 25 miles to the south, and the home of the Phoenicians and their extensive fishing, manufacturing and commercial shipping interests. According to the command of the Lord, Sidon was to have been part of the land of Israel (Josh. 13:6). The tribes of Asher and Zebulun possessed lands on its borders (Gen. 49:13; Josh. 19:28; 2 Sam. 24:6). The “cedars of Lebanon” from the area of Sidon provided wood for the temple of Solomon (1 Kgs. 5:6; 1 Chr. 22:4; Ezra 3:7). There are numerous

references to Sidon (or Zidon) in the Old Testament (Isa. 23:2, 4, 12; Jer. 25:22; 27:3; 47:4; Ezek. 27:8; 28:21–22; 32:30; Joel 3:4). Jesus visited the “coasts” of Tyre and Sidon during



Northwest from the river Sidon (Rio San Ignacio) is the wilderness of Hermounts (Sierra de San Francisco).

his ministry, and at other times many came from that area to hear his message (Matt. 15:21; Mark 7:24, 31; and Mark 3:8; Luke 6:17). And on his way to Rome, the apostle Paul visited with friends at Sidon (Acts 27:3–4).

Could it simply be that the Book of Mormon people, in this case the people of Zarahemla (the Mulekites), saw the physical similarities between the river basin in their new land and the historic Sidon area and memorialized the names of Sidon and Hermounts? It

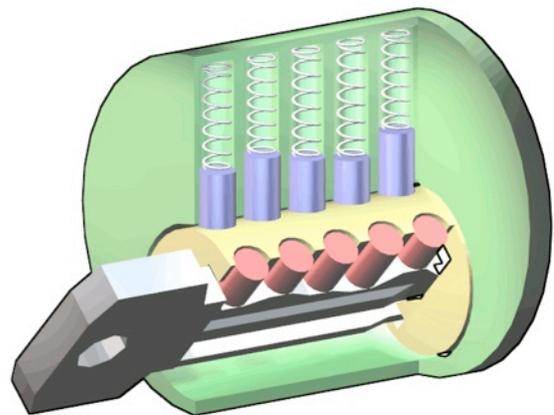
would appear the people of Zarahemla named other distinctive landscape features in their new home after Biblical locations: the hill Ephraim, the valley and city of Gilgal, the cities of Boaz and Judea and the lands of David, Jershon, Jordan and Joshua (see, “The Hill Ephraim,” in our topic article, *Jared, his Brother and their Friends: A Geographical Analysis of the Book of Ether*). Moreover, there is a River Jordan in Utah and a Mount Nebo, and numerous places with names replicated from other locations: Elsinore, Fayette, Goshen, Leeds, Mendon, Moab and Salem. Our own studies on toponymy (place names) have shown this type of parallel naming occurring repeatedly in newly settled areas of this continent and elsewhere.

We are aware that being an analog to a river in Lebanon, on its own, is not confirmation the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California is indeed the Book of Mormon river Sidon. But we are impressed, nonetheless, by the similarity in physical features and the apparent matching of names. We suggest these parallels are significant when attempting to identify Book of Mormon lands and can’t be ignored.

## A Key to Unlocking Book of Mormon Lands

We propose the Rio San Ignacio in Baja California as a candidate for this unique and central river in the geography of the Book of Mormon. The river's surrounding riverine features, not only match the required location of the river Sidon in the Book of Mormon account, but also all the recorded human and physical geographical details and settings. The Rio San Ignacio has a singular source—a large lagoon at its head fed by several springs. Although it meanders along its course, the general flow of the river is in a southwest direction. The river is encircled by four wilderness areas and eventually flows into a large embayment on the Pacific Ocean to the west. This shallow river can be readily crossed by people, armies and animals and is an analogue to the River Sidon in Lebanon and to the nearby area of Mount Hermon. The Rio San Ignacio is prone to flash flooding from time to time, carrying debris, animals and even people to the sea. There are prominent hills along its rather high banks matching the precise geographical descriptions of hill Manti, hill Riplah and hill Amnihu, and a valley matching the required location of the valley of Gideon.

As we have suggested, these details describing the river Sidon and the surrounding area in the Book of Mormon account are like tumblers in a lock—if they all lineup correctly the key fits and turns, unlocking a portal to more geographic discoveries. But one or more wrongly positioned tumblers can prevent the opening of the lock. This comprehensive matching to the entire Book of Mormon record would be required not only for our proposed river Sidon but also for any river put forth by others. We suggest being able to match only some of the details, but not all, would place the candidacy of a river in question.



When all the tumblers in a lock (details describing the river Sidon) line up with the right key, the lock opens.

We know the Book of Mormon to be a true and correct account of the Nephite, Lamanite and Jaredite cultures and civilizations. We also believe the most important contribution of the Book of Mormon is not its geography or its cultural details, but its clear and masterful contributions to our understanding of gospel doctrines of salvation, correct principles of behavior, and the consequences of unrighteous choices.

We conclude our geographical analysis of the river Sidon by noting the final war between the Lamanites and the Nephites “began to be among them in the borders of Zarahemla, by the waters of Sidon” (Morm. 1:10). And from the time of this conflict by the waters of Sidon, “wickedness did prevail upon the face of the whole land, insomuch that the Lord did take away his beloved disciples, and the work of miracles and of healing did cease because of the iniquity of the people. And there were no gifts from the Lord, and the Holy Ghost did not come upon any, because of their wickedness and unbelief” (Morm. 1:13–14). At the final battle of this lengthy 63-year war, some 230,000 Nephites gathered—pitching their vast sea of “tents around about the hill Cumorah” to ominously await the more numerous Lamanites marching towards them (Morm. 6:4–15). Among the Nephites who did not defect from their cause, only Moroni survived the carnage “to write the sad tale of the destruction of [his] people” (Morm. 8:3).



The imposing lagoon (head) of the river Sidon in central Baja California.

In marked contrast, some 470 years earlier, “many were baptized in the waters of Sidon and were joined to the church of God; yea, they were baptized by the hand of Alma, who had been consecrated the high priest over the people of the church” (Alma 4:4). And “in the seventh year of the reign of the judges there were about three thousand five hundred souls that united themselves to the church of God and were baptized” (Alma 4:5). Alma’s invitation to be baptized in the waters of Sidon, or any other waters, still applies today:

Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven; therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins, that ye may have faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness.

Yea, I say unto you come and fear not, and lay aside every sin, which easily doth beset you, which doth bind you down to destruction, yea, come and go forth, and show unto your God that ye are willing to repent of your sins and enter into a covenant with him to keep his commandments, and witness it unto him this day by going into the waters of baptism.

And whosoever doeth this, and keepeth the commandments of God from thenceforth, the same will remember that I say unto him, yea, he will remember that I have said unto him, he shall have eternal life, according to the testimony of the Holy Spirit, which testifieth in me. (Alma 7:14–16)

And thus it was.

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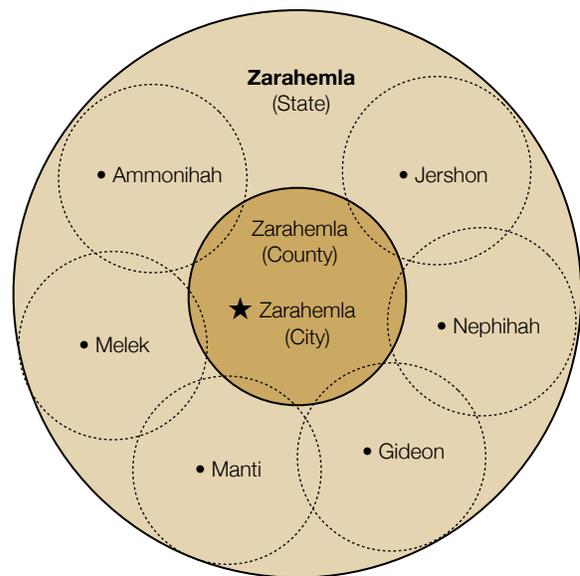
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## “Lands” of the Book of Mormon

The river Sidon area includes the land of Zarahemla and the land of Manti and the smaller lands of Gideon, Jershon, Noah and several other smaller lands. Within most of these lands there was a city with the same name, such as the city of Zarahemla within the land of Zarahemla. Then to add to the complexity, the record states that one of these lands, the land of Zarahemla, in its largest configuration, “was nearly surrounded by water” (Alma 22:32). These overlapping and nested places can be confusing to readers of the Book of Mormon. We find it helpful to compare these graduated lands and cities to the relationships between the city, county and state of New York or the city and county of Salt Lake and the larger state of Utah. Thus the city of Zarahemla was surrounded by a land of Zarahemla (like a county) and a still larger land of Zarahemla (like a state) which extended to the sea east and sea west. Within this larger land of Zarahemla there were numerous smaller lands (like counties), many with a city of the same name. These smaller lands were not too wide, about the distance of a day’s journey—some 10 to 15 miles—similar to the size and spacing of counties in the early settlement of North America, and for the same reason: to accommodate a civil spatial organization based on the limited range of slow modes of travel. At times, the Lamanites occupied sea coast locations on the west and east of the larger land of Zarahemla, leaving the smaller interior area centered on the city of Zarahemla to Nephite settlement (Alma 22:28–29). Most often, the Book of Mormon text is referring to this smaller interior area when it says, “the land of Zarahemla.” This scaled and nested naming of lands holds true for other major Book of Mormon lands. There are two lands of Bountiful mentioned in Alma 27:22, where it states, “the land of Jershon, which is on the east by the sea, which joins the land Bountiful, which is on the south of the land Bountiful.” The larger land of Bountiful—the last named—extended “even from the east unto the west sea,” with a smaller land of Bountiful within its borders (Alma 22:33). Between adjoining Book of Mormon lands there were stretches of territory of some width, called “borders” (see the sidebar, *Borders*).

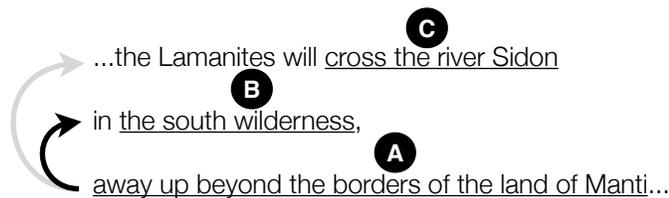


### Lands of the Book of Mormon

There are three levels of land sizes, often with similar names, not unlike the relationship between states, counties and cities today.

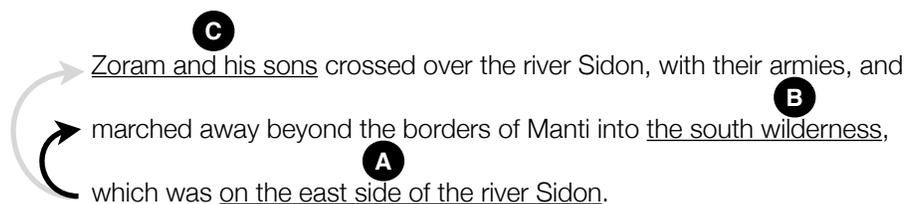
## Textual Antecedence

In grammar, an antecedent is “a word, phrase, clause, or sentence to which another word (especially a following relative pronoun) refers.” There are a number of references in the Book of Mormon—like in all writing—where knowing the antecedent of a word or phrase will help to clarify the description of a geographical location or feature, especially when there are two possible antecedents from which to choose. The choice that is made, however, can greatly affect the meaning of the sentence in a dramatic and often controversial way. Consider this statement in Alma 16:6.



We have two antecedent choices: The locational phrase (A), “away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti,” could refer to (B), “the south wilderness,” or to (C), the location where the Lamanites will “cross the river Sidon.” One could find it advantageous to select (C) to hopefully indicate the source or headwaters of the river Sidon was in the south wilderness and thereby justify a north flowing river (note, no head or headwaters is mentioned), or to select (B) which places only the south wilderness “away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti.” In our studies of the Book of Mormon text, we have recognized it is most fitting to choose the nearest and most immediate phrase—in this case (B)—as the correct antecedent relationship when the relationship is in doubt.

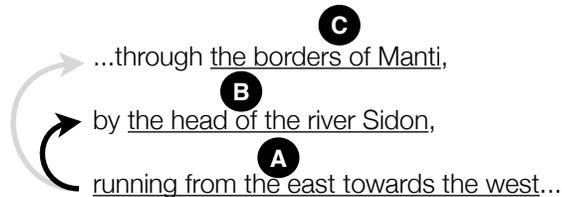
Here is a similar—but clarifying—statement in the next verse (Alma 16:7):



Again we have two antecedent choices: The locational phrase (A), “on the east side of the river Sidon,” could refer to (B), “the south wilderness,” or to (C), the location where “Zoram and his sons crossed over the river Sidon.” One could find it advantageous to select (C) to

hopefully indicate the source or headwaters of the river Sidon was in the south wilderness and thereby justify a north flowing river, or to select (B) which places only the south wilderness (note again, no head or headwaters is mentioned) on the “east side of the river Sidon.” As in the previous verse, we would choose the nearest and most immediate phrase—in this case (B)—as the correct antecedent relationship.

Here are two antecedent choices in the phrases of another verse (Alma 22:27):



The descriptive phrase (A), “running from the east towards the west,” could refer to (B), “the head of the river Sidon,” or (C), “the borders of Manti.” But what is “running”—the water in the river or the borders? Again, based on our experience, we would select the nearest and most immediate phrase, in this case (B), “the head of the river Sidon,” as the correct antecedent relationship. Moreover, both the words “running” and “towards” in the phrase, “running from the east towards the west,” have definitions that are one-directional and therefore describe motion such as the fluidic flow of rivers that by their very nature are *running* in one direction *towards* somewhere, unlike a fixed location, “the borders of Manti.”

It would be unfortunate if the flow direction of the river Sidon—or the nature of any geographical feature—hinged solely on the choice of an antecedent in a single verse. We attempt to resolve the problem by analyzing all relevant sets of geographical references within the entire Book of Mormon record.