



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 30 | Number 5

Article 2

January 2010

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Recommended Citation

Olavarria, Pedro and Bokovoy, David E. (2010) "Zarahemla: Revisiting the “Seed of Compassion”," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 30: No. 5, Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol30/iss5/2>

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Zarahemla: Revisiting the “Seed of Compassion”

More than ten years ago, Stephen Ricks and John Tvedtnes presented a case for interpreting the Book of Mormon proper noun *Zarahemla* as a Hebraic construct meaning “seed of compassion” or “child of grace, pity, or compassion.” The authors theorized:

It may be that the Mulekite leader was given that name because his ancestor had been rescued when the other sons of King Zedekiah were slain during the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. [See Mosiah 25:2.] To subsequent Nephite generations, it may have even suggested the deliverance of their own ancestors from Jerusalem prior to its destruction or the anticipation of Christ’s coming.¹

A literary analysis of this proposal provides further evidence supporting the legitimacy of this etymological claim. This confirmation derives from what could reflect original Hebrew wordplays in the Book of Mormon consistent with Tvedtnes and Ricks’s proposal concerning the prefix *zara-* and the terminal form *-hemla*. Reading the Book of Mormon through a Hebraic lens, the name *Zarahemla* appears linked with attestations of these Hebraic roots.

In their consideration of the name *Zarahemla*, Tvedtnes and Ricks divided the word into the Hebrew nouns *zeraʿ* meaning “seed,” and *hemlāh* denoting “compassion/mercy.”² As a verbal form, the root *hml* signifies “to have compassion,” or “to spare.”³ This nuance appears reflected in texts such as 1 Samuel 15:9 in the King James Version of the Bible: “But Saul and the people spared (*hml*) Agag, and the best of the sheep.” Significantly, the Book of Mormon features two occasions in which the place name *Zarahemla* appears in close proximity with individuals being “spared”:

And we returned, those of us that were spared, to the land of *Zarahemla*, to relate that tale to their wives and their children. (Mosiah 9:2)

And in one place they were heard to cry, saying: O that we had repented before this great and terrible day, and then would our brethren have been spared, and they would not have been burned in that great city *Zarahemla*. (3 Nephi 8:24)

In terms of analyzing the name *Zarahemla*, this biblical-like pun provides supporting evidence for the accuracy of interpreting the terminal ending *-hemla* as the Hebraic nominal form *hemlāh*.

If translated into biblical Hebrew, the Book of Mormon would feature a similar wordplay between

the Hebrew word *zeraʿ* and the proper noun *Zarahemla*. In addition to its specific nuance “seed” reflecting a vegetative connotation, the Hebrew noun *zeraʿ* denotes human “offspring, or descendants.”⁴ The term *descendant* occasionally appears in the Book of Mormon in close literary proximity to the proper noun *Zarahemla*:

Ammon, he being a strong and mighty man, and a descendant of *Zarahemla*. (Mosiah 7:3)

For I am Ammon, and am a descendant of *Zarahemla*, and have come up out of the land of *Zarahemla*. (Mosiah 7:13)

Though these literary proposals create an intriguing reading of the text, the legitimacy of these observations as intentional wordplays reflects the assumption that the reformed Egyptian in the Book of Mormon was a modified Egyptian script used to record an attestation of Hebrew. If correct, these Hebraic puns would provide evidence that Book of Mormon authors incorporated similar writing techniques to those witnessed throughout the Old Testament.

In their own literary efforts, ancient Hebrew authors made frequent use of wordplays on proper names of people and places in a way that parallels the Book of Mormon’s presumed Hebraic use of the nouns “spared,” “descendants,” and “*Zarahemla*.”⁵ For example, in Hosea 12:3–4, the biblical author creates a play upon the proper name Jacob *yaʿqob* and the verb *ʿaqob* meaning “to supplant”:

The Lord . . . punished Jacob for his conduct. . . . In the womb he tried to supplant his brother.⁶

Biblical scholars have identified a variety of these wordplays throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Studies have shown that in the process of producing the Book of Mormon, Nephite writers imitated and were influenced by biblical techniques. Assuming that the underlying text from which the Nephite record was translated derived from some form of Hebrew, the literary relationship between “spared,” “descendants,” and “*Zarahemla*” witnessed throughout the Book of Mormon supports the etymology offered by Ricks and Tvedtnes for the meaning of this important Nephite name. In addition, interpreting *Zarahemla* as the place name “seed of compassion” provides evidence that Book of Mormon authors possessed an impressive

familiarity with the literary styles and techniques witnessed throughout the Old Testament. ♦

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Notes

1. Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," *JBMS* 6/2 (1997): 259.

2. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906), Accordance Bible Software, DVD, 3.0.

3. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament; Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:328.

4. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 282.

5. See Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 244.

6. As translated in *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 1000.

METI Volume Highlights Education

Consider this picture: A sandy courtyard somewhere on the outskirts of a desert village. A group of boys—ages perhaps 8 to 16—are gathered outside



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the entrance to a simple, well-worn little building. They are seated or kneeling in the sand, huddled in the last vestiges of the late morning shade. Each holds a text or a tablet. Some are reading, some are looking out to where the pale sky meets a broken line of rooftops and trees, reciting, in a quiet murmur to themselves, the words of the book they are holding. Some gently rock back and forth as they read, letting the cadence of their movement compliment the rhythm of the words on the page. Others are writing on tablets of slate or wood. These writers are likewise engaged in the exercise of recitation, but with the pen, setting down line after line from memory. One boy uncrosses his legs, stands up, and steps toward a man who is seated on a little chair in front of the group. As the boy steps forward, his teacher rises and the boy presents his tablet to him. It is written front and back in neat lines of Arabic. Both the teacher and the boy are careful not to smudge the words on the slate. They are sacred words, revealed to a prophet named Muhammad long ago in Mecca, a town on the western edge of Arabia, toward which they have both been praying every day since they were very young.

This is an almost timeless scene, one that has been played out in countless places from Morocco to Syria virtually every day for nearly 14 centuries. It is an enduring picture of Islamic education at its most basic level—the beginning of literacy by learning Qur'an.

Education has always been an important pursuit in Islam. It was fostered for many reasons and at many levels. There were itinerant teachers who taught the fundamental tenets of the faith in exchange for lodging and other services, there were Qur'anic schools, often associated with the mosques, where masters of the Qur'an gathered a circle of pupils and tutored them, and there were centers of higher learning at Baghdad, Damascus, Alexandria, and elsewhere, where Islamic theology and jurisprudence were developed and taught.

Given the scope and intensity of Islamic educational efforts, it is not surprising that much was written on the subject from both theoretical and practical points of view. In a soon-to-be released volume from the Maxwell Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, Bradley J. Cook, with assistance from Fathi H. Malkawi, has drawn together and introduced selections from the writings of eminent Islamic thinkers, presenting them in a dual-language format for the first time. Each piece in *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* has been translated and annotated by a respected scholar of classical Arabic literature. Together, these texts are a trove of information about the way education has been approached in the classical Islamic tradition. There is much here of relevance to modern educators who are interested in carrying forward that tradition even as new technologies and social realities impact the learning environment. And there is much for all to appreciate about a faith tradition that enjoined its followers to "seek learning, even unto China."

For more information about this and other titles in the Islamic Translation Series, visit meti.byu.edu. ♦

By D. Morgan Davis

Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative