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Scripture Note: Doctrine and Covenants 125

Fred E. Woods

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On 19 January 1841, the Lord gave a revelation to Joseph Smith regarding the building of the Nauvoo Temple and issued a call for the faithful Saints to gather to assist in the building of this sacred edifice (see D&C 124:25–55). With the emphasis on the gathering to Nauvoo and the building of the temple, the Iowa Saints on the eastern banks of the Mississippi were wondering if they should move across the river to Nauvoo. Therefore, in March 1841, the Prophet Joseph Smith posed the question, “What is the will of the Lord concerning the saints in the Territory of Iowa?” (D&C 125:1). The Lord responded, “Let them build up a city unto my name upon the land opposite the city of Nauvoo, and let the name of Zarahemla be named upon it” (D&C 125:3). This response stirs the question of why the Lord specifically asked the Iowa Saints to build a city named Zarahemla.

The Lord, who knows all things as they are continually present before His eyes (see D&C 38:2), appears to have deliberately used the name *Zarahemla* and then left His covenant people to ponder over the meaning of the word. A linguistic and historical investigation suggests an interesting possibility. Hebrew lexicons reveal that the noun *zera* may be translated “seed, offspring, or descendant.” These sources explain that the root *h-m-l* in the Hebrew language may be translated as meaning to “have compassion on” or “to spare.” A noun form from the root *h-m-l* (*hemlah*) is used in the Hebrew Bible and may be translated as “sparing,” “compassion,” or “mercy.”¹ Thus, the combination of words may be translated as “seed of mercy” or perhaps “seed of the spared.”

The proposed meaning of *Zarahemla* as a city of the “seed of the spared” recalls the imagery of ancient covenant peoples. Even if the etymology of the word is hidden, the historical background of the place *Zarahemla* provides clues to the Lord’s usage of the word. For example, when Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar slew the sons of Zedekiah, he killed all except Mulek, a Jew, who escaped to America (see 2 Kings 25:7; Helaman 8:21). Mulek had a descendant named *Zarahemla* (see Mosiah 25:2). Mosiah was warned to flee the land of Nephi and go to the land of *Zarahemla* (see Omni 1:12–15), where the seed of Mulek and *Zarahemla* dwelt—or, in other words, the “seed of the spared.” Furthermore, there the Nephites met not only the Jewish Mulekites but also the last survivor of the Jaredities, Coriantumr, who had been spared for this meeting (see Omni 1:21).

Perhaps this divinely appointed name was given as a reminder to the Saints in Iowa that they had been spared from the hand of extermination in Missouri and also from the grip of death through priesthood miracles that were performed in Montrose, Iowa (*Zarahemla* region), in the 1839 summer of sickness.² ■

Notes

1. See usages of this root in Genesis 19:16 and Isaiah 63:9 in the Hebrew Bible. See also Francis D. Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 328; William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988), 108; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, CD-ROM Edition*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1994–2000).

2. For an overview of the miraculous display of healing in Montrose, Iowa, see *Church History in the Fulness of Times: The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 217–19.