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## The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names

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**Abstract** The place-names Cumorah, Jershon, and Zarahemla have possible Hebrew origins.

## NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

## The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names

Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes

A number of scholars have discussed the possible Hebrew meaning of some of the place-names in the Book of Mormon. Three that have drawn particular attention are the names Cumorah, Jershon, and Zarahemla.

### Cumorah

Cumorah is the name of the hill in which Mormon buried the Nephite records before turning his abridgment of it to his son Moroni (Mormon 6:6). Suggested etymologies range from a corruption of the biblical Gomorrah<sup>1</sup> to a comparison with Qumran, the name of the site near the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.<sup>2</sup> An early suggestion linked Cumorah to the Hebrew words found in Isaiah 60:1, *qûmî 'ûrî*, "arise, shine!"<sup>3</sup> Related to this is David A. Palmer's suggestion that Cumorah means "Arise-

<sup>1</sup> Joanne Hackett, unpublished paper.

<sup>2</sup> With the October 1964 issue of the *Improvement Era*, Hugh Nibley began publishing a monthly series of articles entitled "Since Cumorah: New Voices from the Dust." By the September 1966 issue, he had changed the title to "Since Cumorah (Since Qumran)"—a title that held through the last installment in the December 1966 issue. The identification was dropped when the series was published as a book.

<sup>3</sup> The suggestion was made by Robert F. Smith, personal communication.

O-Light," on a reconstructed form of *qûm 'ôrāh*.<sup>4</sup> But there are two problems with this. One is that the Hebrew word for light, though feminine in gender, does not usually take the feminine suffix *-āh* and is simply *'ôr*. This objection is lessened by the fact that the Bible uses the form *'ôrāh* twice, in Psalm 139:12 and Esther 8:16. But the second problem is more serious: because the Hebrew word for "light" is feminine, the word would take the feminine form *qûmî* for the imperative, not the masculine *qûm*. For a meaning of "arise, o light," one would expect the Hebrew form *qûmî 'ôr*, though *qûmî 'ôrāh* would not be impossible.<sup>5</sup> The suggested etymology *kûm 'ôrāh*, "mound of light/revelation,"<sup>6</sup> is a better explanation.

Both proposals seem to be based on the idea of truth coming to light or being revealed out of the hill in the form of the Book of Mormon and one must acknowledge that Hebrew *'ôr* is occasionally used in the sense of "revelation" (Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 28:6; Isaiah 2:5; 49:6; 51:4; Proverbs 6:23). But the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in the last days hardly explains why the place where Mormon hid the plates should have such a name in the late fourth century A.D.<sup>7</sup>

A more plausible etymology for Cumorah is Hebrew *kāmôrāh*, "priesthood," an abstract noun based on the word *kômer*, "priest." This form is based on the Hebrew noun pattern (*mišqal*) *pe'ullāh*,<sup>8</sup> with the vowel of the second consonant of the root, "m," lengthened "compensatorially" from "u" to "ō/ô" be-

<sup>4</sup> David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981), 21.

<sup>5</sup> See John A. Tvedtnes, review of *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico*, by David A. Palmer, *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 149 (June 1982): 9.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, personal communication.

<sup>7</sup> The Book of Mormon never tells us that Moroni hid the plates in the same hill in which his father hid the bulk of the Nephite records, and a number of scholars have argued that the hill in New York State from which Joseph Smith removed the abridged record is not the one mentioned in the Book of Mormon, which, from internal evidence, could not have been far from the "narrow neck of land."

<sup>8</sup> James L. Sagarin, *Hebrew Noun Patterns (Mishqalim): Morphology, Semantics, and Lexicon* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987), 33-34.

cause the third consonant of the root, "r," cannot be doubled.<sup>9</sup> *Kōmer/kōmer* and *kāmôrāh* may be compared in both form and meaning with the Hebrew nouns *kōhēn*, "priest," and *kāhunnāh*, "priesthood."<sup>10</sup>

Some have privately objected that this explanation is unlikely because the term *kōmer* is always used in the Old Testament in reference to false priests (2 Kings 23:5; Hosea 10:5; Zephaniah 1:4), while the word *kōhēn* is used to denote Israelite priests.<sup>11</sup> But this objection fails to note that both terms are used together in the Zephaniah passage. It seems more likely to us that the term *kōmer* was simply used to denote a priest who was not of the tribe of Levi, while *kōhēn* in all cases refers to a Levitical priest. Since Lehi's party did not include descendants of Levi, they probably used *kōmer* wherever the Book of Mormon speaks of priests.<sup>12</sup>

## Jershon

When the Lamanites converted by the sons of Mosiah fled their homeland to escape persecution, the Nephites allowed them to settle in the land of Jershon. The name, though not found in the Bible, has an authentic Hebrew origin, the root \*YRŠ,<sup>13</sup> meaning

<sup>9</sup> Paul Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome: Institut biblique pontifical, 1923), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 464; cf. also Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (Jerusalem: Carta, 1987), who defines the neologism *kāmôrāh* as "Christian clergy, priesthood," but also notes the Hebrew noun pattern *pe'ullāh* upon which it is based.

<sup>11</sup> One suggestion was that this would give a meaning of "priestcraft," rather than "priesthood" to the name Cumorah were it to derive from *kōmer*. But note that 2 Nephi 10:5 indicates that it would be "because of priestcrafts . . . at Jerusalem" that Christ would be rejected. The "chief priests" who opposed Christ were descendants of Levi and were designated by the term *kōhēn*. See the definition of "priestcraft" in 2 Nephi 26:29.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:18; Mosiah 6:3; 18:18, 24, 26, 28; 23:17; 25:19, 21; 26:7; 27:1, 5, 22; Alma 1:3, 26; 4:7; 6:1; 15:13; 16:18; 23:4, 16; 30:31; 45:22-23.

<sup>13</sup> English uses J to transliterate biblical names beginning with Y. In older forms of English, J and Y were the same.

"to inherit," with the suffix *-ôn* that denotes place-names.<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Borée, in his outstanding study, *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas* (*The Ancient Place Names of Palestine*), cites fully 84 ancient Canaanite place names with the ending *-ôn* in biblical and extrabiblical sources (Egyptian and Mesopotamian writings, the El-Amarna letters, ostraca), including Ayyalon (Elon) (Joshua 19:42, 43), Eltekon (Joshua 15:58), Ashkelon (Judges 1:18), Gibeon (Joshua 9:3), Gibbethon (Joshua 19:44), Dishon (Genesis 36:21), Ziphron (Numbers 34:9), Helbon (Ezekiel 27:18), Holon (Joshua 21:15), Hammon (Joshua 19:28), Hebron (Joshua 10:36), Hannathon (Joshua 19:14), Dibon (Numbers 21:30), and Heshbon (Numbers 21:30).<sup>15</sup>

It is in this light that we should understand the words in Alma 27:22 ("and this land Jerushon is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an inheritance"), Alma 27:24 ("that they may inherit the land Jerushon"), and Alma 35:14 ("they have lands for their inheritance in the land of Jerushon").

## Zarahemla

Zarahemla was the Nephite capital for longer than any other city, yet it was actually named from Zarahemla, a descendant of Mulek (Omni 1:12–15; Mosiah 25:2). Mulek, the son of Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, had come to the New World with other immigrants not long after Lehi's departure from Jerusalem (Helaman 6:10; 8:21).

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<sup>14</sup> See John A. Tvedtnes, "Since the Book of Mormon is largely the record of a Hebrew people, is the writing characteristic of the Hebrew language?" I Have a Question, *Ensign* (October 1986): 65; John A. Tvedtnes, "What's in a Name? A Look at the Book of Mormon Onomasticon," *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 41; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:129; and Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Book of Mormon Names," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:187.

<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm Borée, *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1930; reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 57–62; Anson F. Rainey, "Toponymics of Eretz-Israel," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 231 (1978): 5, calls *-ôn* an "appellative" suffix that describes "some feature or aspect of the site."

The name Zarahemla probably derives from the Hebrew *zeraḥemlāh*, which has been variously translated as “seed of compassion”<sup>16</sup> or “child of grace, pity, or compassion.”<sup>17</sup> 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. To subsequent Nephite generations, it may even have suggested the deliverance of their own ancestors from Jerusalem prior to its destruction or the anticipation of Christ’s coming.

<sup>16</sup> Tvedtnes, “Since the Book of Mormon is largely the record of a Hebrew people, is the writing characteristic of the Hebrew language?” 65; Tvedtnes, “What’s in a Name?” 41.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph R. and Norrene V. Salonimer, *I Know Thee by Name: Hebrew Roots of Lehi-ite Non-Biblical Names in the Book of Mormon* (Independence, Mo.: Salonimer, 1995).