The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names

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Notes and Communications: The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names

Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes


The place-names Cumorah, Jershon, and Zarahemla have possible Hebrew origins.
The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names

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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 to a comparison with Qumran, the name of the site near the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. An early suggestion linked Cumorah to the Hebrew words found in Isaiah 60:1, qūmî yārî, "arise, shine!" Related to this is David A. Palmer’s suggestion that Cumorah means “Arise-

1 Joanne Hackett, unpublished paper.
2 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.
3 The suggestion was made by Robert F. Smith, personal communication.
O-Light," on a reconstructed form of qûm ʾôrāh. 4 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 ʾôr. This objection is lessened by the fact that the Bible uses the form ʾôrāh 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 ʾôr, though qûmî ʾôrāh would not be impossible. 5 The suggested etymology kûm ʾôrāh, “mound of light/revelation,” 6 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 ʾôr 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. 7

A more plausible etymology for Cumorah is Hebrew kômôrāh, “priesthood,” an abstract noun based on the word kômer, “priest.” This form is based on the Hebrew noun pattern (mišqal) peʾullāh, 8 with the vowel of the second consonant of the root, “m,” lengthened “compensatorially” from “u” to “ô/ô” be-

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6 Smith, personal communication.
7 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.”
cause the third consonant of the root, “r,” cannot be doubled.9 Kōmer/kōmer and kāmōrāh may be compared in both form and meaning with the Hebrew nouns kōhēn, “priest,” and kōhunāh, “priesthood.”10 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.11 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.12

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 *YRS,13 meaning

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11 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.
13 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.14 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).15

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

**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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The name Zarahemla probably derives from the Hebrew zera-heimlāh, which has been variously translated as "seed of compas­sion" or "child of grace, pity, or compassion." 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.

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16 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.