What's in a Name?: The Name *Cumorah*

Paul Y. Hoskisson

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Author(s) Paul Y. Hoskisson

Abstract Unlike the case of some place-names in the Book of Mormon, the book does not explain how the land and the hill Cumorah received their designation in the Nephite record. The name *Cumorah* lends itself to several possible etymological explanations, which Hoskisson discusses in this article.

CUMORAH

The Name *Cumorah*

Paul Y. Hoskisson

The land and the hill called Cumorah are most famous for being both the scene of the last battle between the Nephites and the Lamanites (see Mormon 6:2–11; 8:2) and the place where Mormon buried all the sacred records except the abridgment he passed to his son Moroni (see Mormon 6:6; Ether 15:11). In Jaredite times this same hill was known by the name *Ramah* and was the site where the Jaredite armies fought to their mutual destruction (see Ether 15:11). This is the same land that Limhi's search party found and mistook for a destroyed Zarahemla (see Mosiah 8:8; 21:26) and that was later settled by Nephites (see Helaman 3:3–6). Additionally, the land of Cumorah was apparently the place where the Mulekites first landed in the Americas (see Alma 22:29–31).

The first use of the name *Cumorah* occurs late in Nephite history, just before the final destruction of the Nephites about AD 385 (see Mormon 6:2). Unlike the case of some place-names in the Book of Mormon, we are never told how the land and the hill Cumorah received this designation in the Nephite record.[1] It is possible that the Mulekites first gave the name to the land and the hill and that the name persisted through Nephite history to the end of the Nephite record. It is also possible that Cumorah received its name late in Nephite history by Nephites who began settling in the area about 50 years before the birth of Christ. In either case, the first place to look for the meaning of *Cumorah* would be in Hebrew and other related Semitic languages.[2]

Cumorah lends itself to several possible etymological explanations, some of which carry a more or less appropriate meaning for the hill.[3] The first possibility is that *Cumorah* is a late Nephite rendering of *Gomorrah,* the name of the twin city of Sodom.[4] As a place that God destroyed, *Gomorrah* would be an appropriate name for the scene of the Jaredite destruction that the Mulekites encountered, that Limhi's search party found, and that the Nephites called "desolate" (Helaman 3:6). The name was intended, perhaps, to prophetically anticipate the final battle scene between the Nephites and Lamanites. But since *Cumorah* is not exactly *Gomorrah,* either the differences between the two names must be reconciled or it must be explained why the differences do not matter.

Both the vowel and the consonant differences must be resolved. I will turn to the vowels first. The fact that *Gomorrah* is spelled with an *o* and *Cumorah* is spelled with a *u* is not consequential. The vowels *o* and *u* are very similar to each other and therefore often interchange. In fact, there is some confusion about the pronunciation of *Cumorah* in the earliest spellings, with *u* and *a* alternating (an unaccented *o* vowel is often pronounced in American English almost like an *a* vowel). The printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon has *Camorah* in Mormon 6:2, with a later correction to *Cumorah* by Oliver Cowdery, and subsequently *Cumorah* in six and *Comorah* in two of the remaining occurrences in the printer's manuscript.[5] The 1830 edition has *Camorah* in all nine occurrences.[6] In spite of that, it seems to me that the current spelling, *Cumorah,* is the correct spelling.[7]

Similar confusion exists regarding the quality (length) of the first vowel in the Hebrew word *Gomorrah*. The received Hebrew text of the Bible, called the Masoretic Text, indicates a short vowel of indeterminate quality for the *o* in *Gomorrah;* that is, it could come from *a, e, i, o,* or *u*. The Qumran Hebrew text of Isaiah 1:9 and 10 and 13:19 (1QIsᵃ), however,

contains the spelling עומרה, indicating a long vowel, either *ō* or *ū,* after the first consonant. This Qumran spelling of *Gomorrah* would be consistent with the Greek rendering of the first vowel as *o* and would not exclude the Book of Mormon spelling of *Cumorah* with a *u.* Thus, the initial-vowel difference between *Gomorrah* and *Cumorah* is not significant.

In the matter of consonants, a more technical difference between *Cumorah* and *Gomorrah* exists. As any first-year Hebrew student would object, *Gomorrah* in the Hebrew Bible begins not with the *g* of the King James Version but with an ʿ*ayin* (an unvoiced stop that does not occur in Western European languages but that is common in all West Semitic languages), rendered ʿ*mrh*. In addition, the *r* of the Masoretic Text is virtually doubled (as reflected in the KJV spelling) while the *r* in *Cumorah* is single. Indeed, it would appear to be difficult to explain how an ʿ*ayin* could become a *c.* However, both of these objections are not as serious as they might appear at first.

The written letter ʿ*ayin* in Hebrew represents two phonemes (sounds), ʿ*ayin* and *ǵayin* (voiced velar fricative), both of which were represented by the single sign ע.[8] The Hebrews must have preserved both phonemes (or the tradition of both phonemes) late into their history, despite having only one character to represent both. Thus, Hebrew names that originally contained the sound of a *ǵayin,* which had long since been spelled with the single Hebrew letter that represents both *ǵayin* and ʿ*ayin,* are usually spelled with a *g* in the Greek transliterations of the Septuagint.[9] With the place-name *Gomorrah,* the KJV follows the Greek Septuagint form of the name, spelling it with a *g.*

From a linguistic point of view, early Nephites might have pronounced *Gomorrah* with an initial *ǵayin,* and this pronunciation could easily have shifted during the approximate 1,000-year Nephite history to become a voiceless velar stop (hard *c*) by AD 380. But even if this plausible linguistic shift from *ǵayin* to *c* among Nephites did not take place, the change can be explained by the English environment of upstate New York. The Prophet Joseph did not have at his disposal a sign in the English alphabet, or even a sound, that represented a *ǵayin.* He would have been forced to use an approximation, and a hard *c* sound would not have been amiss.

The matter of the two *r*'s remains. *Gomorrah* in Hebrew is spelled with only one *r*. Nevertheless, it is correctly expressed in Greek (from which our KJV spelling derives) with two *r*'s because the *r* of the Hebrew Masoretic Text is, as it is expressed by Hebrew grammarians, virtually doubled.[10] Therefore, the plates may well have contained a single sign for *r* and left it to the reader to double it if necessary. Additionally, even after nearly 1,000 years of Nephite history, whether there are two *r*'s or one in the English transcription seems inconsequential, especially if Mormon wrote a single *r* that may or may not have been virtually doubled in its pronunciation. Therefore, the fact that *Cumorah* has only one *r* and *Gomorrah* has two is not a significant problem.

Additional Etymologies

In addition to the comparison to *Gomorrah,* the first etymology just discussed, other etymologies of *Cumorah* are possible. The second possibility appears quite attractive on the surface. The Hebrew verb *qūm* means "to rise." The Hebrew noun ʾ*ôr* means "light, flame, fire" and is the root behind the *Urim* of *Urim and Thummim.* It can also stand alone as a term for revelation, usually rendered as the plural word *Urim* in the King James Bible.[11] The feminine form is ʾ*ôrah,* meaning "light," as in Psalm 139:12. Thus, by combining the words for "rise" and for "light," the meaning of *Cumorah* could be "Rise, O Light," a most appropriate name for a place from which the beginnings of the restoration of the gospel would figuratively, and in some senses, literally, arise.[12]

Yet this etymology presents challenges more serious than those of equating *Cumorah* with *Gomorrah.*[13] As noted, the *-orah* part of *Cumorah* corresponds with the feminine form for "light," ʾ*ôrah.* The *cum-* part of *Cumorah* could be explained as an imperative from *qūm,* as I have translated it above. But *qūm* is the masculine imperative and would not be used in Hebrew with a feminine noun. The feminine imperative would be *qūmī.* Because *Cumorah* clearly does not exhibit the feminine form (hypothetically *Cumiorah*), it would be difficult to take this etymology seriously, no matter how tempting and appropriate the meaning might be.[14]

The third possible etymology also appears at first to be promising. There is a fairly common root in widely dispersed Semitic languages, *kmr.*[15] The verb can mean "to heap up,"[16] "to heat up" or "to become excited," to "make dates ripen in the ground," and to "ferment."[17] The noun form from this root that most resembles *Cumorah* is the later Akkadian form

kumāru (plural *kumārātu*), meaning "border(?), edge." Notice, however, that the singular does not appear in the hypothetical feminine form *kumārtu,* but that the plural form is grammatically feminine. In Akkadian the verb can mean "to heap up mounds," "to heap up corpses," or both.[18] *Cumorah* could then be a feminine form of a noun that means something like "a heap" or "mound," meanings not altogether amiss for the nature and role of the hill Cumorah in Nephite history. And even though the Hebrew vowel patterns for feminine nouns are difficult to match up with *Cumorah,* it is not impossible.[19]

Less tempting is a fourth derivation, also from a common Semitic root, *kmr,* which may or may not be related to the *kmr* just discussed. In the Hebrew Old Testament this root appears as *komer,* a term for an unacceptable priest (see 2 Kings 23:5; Hosea 10:5; and Zephaniah 1:4; the normal word for an acceptable priest in the Hebrew Old Testament is *kōhen*). *Cumorah* thus could represent a feminine noun from this root.

The difficulty with deriving *Cumorah* from a feminine form of *komer* lies with the second vowel of *Cumorah,* the *o*. All the cognates of *komer,* meaning "priest," in the various Semitic languages are from the noun *kumru*. When this type of noun form appears in Hebrew, such as in *komer,* it is called a *segholate* because it has a short *e* vowel (called *seghol* in Hebrew) between the second and third consonants. This means that Hebrew *komer* is a segholate form.[20] The feminine form would be *komrah*. Notice that this form cannot have a vowel between the second and third consonants. To illustrate in more detail how segholate forms work in Hebrew, I will use the Hebrew word for "king," which is an analogous segholate form. The masculine singular is *melek,* but the feminine singular form is *malkah*. Therefore, if *Cumorah* were derived from the feminine singular form of *komer,* as it would need to be if we are to explain the *-ah* ending, it could not have the middle *o* vowel. In fact, the feminine singular segholate form would have no vowel at all between the second and third consonants. In other words, any attempt to derive *Cumorah* from the feminine form of the segholate *komer* fails on the grounds that the middle *o* vowel cannot be explained as a singular without going through impossible linguistic gymnastics.[21]

In addition to floundering on grammatical grounds, the proposed etymology to derive *Cumorah* from a Hebrew word for "priest" or "priestess" seems inappropriate. A name whose proposed meaning does not make much sense in context is a sign that the derivation may be wrong. In this case, deriving *Cumorah* from a hypothetical Hebrew feminine form fraught with highly questionable grammatical problems and derived from a word that means "an (unacceptable) priest" is very problematic. Only with an expanded stretch of the imagination would it be possible to conjure up an explanation of why a prominent hill in the northern territories of Nephite lands would be called "[Unacceptable] Priestess Hill." It is not impossible, but it is very implausible.

Fifth, if *kmr* as the root is turned into an abstract noun using the vowel pattern *peʿullāh,* it would mean "priesthood." The other root for "priest" in Hebrew, *khn,* does form an abstract noun using this pattern, *keʰunnāh,* as in Exodus 40:15, Joshua 18:7, 1 Samuel 2:36, and Ezra 2:62. Linguistically, there are no difficulties in going from the analogous but hypothetical **keʰmurrāh* to *Cumorah*.[22] But there is a better possibility. The segholate form mentioned above, *melek,* "king," forms the abstract noun *melūkāh,* meaning "kingship." This Hebrew noun pattern would yield *keʰmūrāh,* a form that would pose no great linguistic problems in explaining *Cumorah*. The question still remains, though, why would a place known for destruction be called "Hill [of the unacceptable] Priesthood"? The fact that Mormon buried most of the plates in the hill does not explain "priesthood" either. Nevertheless, linguistically, "[Unacceptable] Priesthood Hill" is possible.

In summary, there are several possible explanations for *Cumorah*. Two, namely a derivation from *Gomorrah* and a feminine form of *kmr* meaning "mound," seem to work well, both from a linguistic standpoint and from etymological appropriateness. Two other proposals do not seem to work well, mainly for linguistic reasons. The last suggestion, "[Unacceptable] Priesthood Hill," could work linguistically and, with a stretch of the imagination, might be explained appropriately. ▩

7. R. J. Chorley, "The Shape of Drumlins," *Journal of Glaciology* 3/25 (1959): 339–44; I. J. Smalley and D. J. Unwin, "The Formation and Shape of Drumlins and Their Distribution and Orientation in Drumlin Fields," *Journal of Glaciology* 7 (1968): 377–90.

8. Martini, Brookfield, and Sadura, *Glacial Geomorphology and Geology,* 110, 130.

9. J. Shaw, "Drumlins, Subglacial Meltwater Floods, and Ocean Responses," *Geology* 17 (1989): 853–56; J. Shaw and R. Gilbert, "Evidence for Large-Scale Subglacial Meltwater Flood Events in Southern Ontario and Northern New York State," *Geology* 18 (1990): 1169–72.

10. G. R. Whittecar and D. M. Mickelson, "Sequence of Till Deposition and Erosion in Drumlins," *Boreas* 6 (1977): 213–17; G. R. Whittecar and D. M. Mickelson, "Composition, Internal Structures, and an Hypothesis of Formation for Drumlins, Waukesha County, Wisconsin, U.S.A.," *Journal of Glaciology* 22 (1979): 357–71; S. D. Stanford and D. M. Mickelson, "Till Fabric and Deformational Structures in Drumlins Near Waukesha, Wisconsin, U.S.A.," *Journal of Glaciology* 31 (1985): 220–28; G. S. Boulton, "A Theory of Drumlin Formation by Subglacial Sediment Deformation," *Proceedings of the Drumlin Symposium: First International Conference on Geomorphology,* ed. J. Menzies and J. Ross (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1987), 25–80; J. I. Boyce and N. Eyles, "Drumlins Carved by Deforming Till Streams below the Laurentide Ice Sheet," *Geology* 19 (1991): 787–90.

11. Donald Cadwell (of the New York Geological Survey), personal communication to author, 2004.

12. Ehlers, *Quaternary and Glacial Geology.*

Archaeology and Cumorah Questions
John E. Clark

1. E. G. Squier, *Antiquities of the State of New York* (Buffalo, NY: Derby, 1851).

2. William A. Ritchie, *The Archaeology of New York State,* rev. ed. (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 1994).

3. For Pennsylvania, see Jay F. Custer, *Prehistoric Cultures in Eastern Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1996).

4. Squier, *Antiquities of the State of New York,* 7.

5. It is important to note that other places in the Americas do fit these

requirements, and this is what most of the debate is about. See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book,* rev. ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992).

6. Barry C. Kent, Ira F. Smith III, and Catherine McCann, eds., *Foundations of Pennsylvania Prehistory* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1971).

7. Kent, Smith, and McCann, *Pennsylvania Prehistory,* 4.

8. Neal L. Trubowitz, *Highway Archeology and Settlement Study in the Genesee Valley* (George's Mills, NH: Occasional Publications in Northeast Anthropology, 1983).

9. Trubowitz, *Highway Archeology,* 144–45.

10. Gary W. Crawford, David G. Smith, and Vandy E. Bowyer, "Dating the Entry of Corn (*Zea Mays*) into the Lower Great Lakes Region," *American Antiquity* 62/1 (1997): 112–19.

11. Consult John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1–95; *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000); and *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events,* 209–315, 329–53; also David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981).

[What's in a Word?]
Pairs and Merisms in 3 Nephi
Cynthia L. Hallen with Josh Sorenson

1. James T. Duke, "Word Pairs and Distinctive Combinations in the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 12/2 (2003): 32–41.

2. James Strong, ed., *New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,* in *The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0.* A widely available printed version of Strong's classic work is *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

3. Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 41–46.

4. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon,* 45.

[What's in a Name?]
The Name *Cumorah*
Paul Y. Hoskisson

1. The name *Cumorah* appears only in Mormon 6:2, 4–6, 11 and 8:2.

2. For a discussion of which languages are relevant for producing Book of Mormon onomasticon etymologies, see 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* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:126–35.

3. All proper nouns in the ancient world (and even most modern proper nouns) have a meaning. The meaning may be randomly applied, such as "Kolob Canyon" near Springville, Utah, or it may reflect the actual nature of the feature being named, such as "Long Island." Or it may reflect a positive or negative view of the actual place, such as "Rattlesnake Ridge" near Provo, Utah, or "Pleasant Grove" just north of Provo.

4. As far as I know, Joanne Hacket was the first to propose this etymology. A copy of her unpublished work is currently in my possession.

5. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon,* pt. 2 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 892–93, 896.

6. From a photostatic copy in my possession of an original 1830 edition.

7. As per *The Printer's Manuscript,* 892, note to line 9, "the spelling *Camorah* shows that O[liver] C[owdery]'s *u* in [the original manuscript] looks like an *a*." The two spellings with *o* might also indicate that the (so far) unidentified scribe who wrote that section of the printer's manuscript mistook Oliver's *u*'s in the original manuscript for *o*'s. Oliver himself comments that the spelling of the 1830 edition is wrong and should have been spelled *Cumorah* and not *Camorah* (*Messenger and Advocate* 1/10 [July 1835]: 158a). The spelling of *Cumorah* was standardized in the 1837 edition, the next-to-last edition that Joseph Smith himself helped edit.

8. Both Ugaritic, another Northwest Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, and Arabic, a Southwest Semitic language, contain both phonemes and represent them with different characters. In Phoenician, like Hebrew, both phonemes are represented by the same character. English and other Indo-European languages that I am aware of do not possess either phoneme. For more on ʿayin, see my discussion in "The Name Alma," *JBMS* 7/1 (1998): 72.

9. In most cases we can determine whether the Hebrew ʿayin derives from an original ʿayin or ġayin because the cognate words in Ugaritic or Arabic or both preserve the difference. In addition to *Gomorrah,* the place-name *Gaza* falls into this category.

10. In Hebrew the doubling of consonants is phonemic, meaning that

if a letter is doubled, the meaning of the word changes. Normally, doubling is indicated by the insertion in the letter of a small dot, called a *dagesh,* the size of the period at the end of this sentence. According to Hebrew grammarians, an *r* cannot take a *dagesh.* Therefore, when the context requires that the *r* be doubled, the *r* is said to be "virtually doubled" and does not receive a *dagesh.*

11. For example, see Numbers 27:21 and 1 Samuel 28:6.

12. See David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981), 21, for an example of this interpretation.

13. Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, in "The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," *JBMS* 6/2 (1997): 255–57, point out many of these difficulties.

14. It might be said that both *qum* and *orah* are commands, yielding "Arise, Shine." The biblical passage most like this suggestion for *Cumorah* is Isaiah 60:1, *qūmīʾōrī,* containing the feminine command forms, "arise" and "shine." But *cum orah* lacks the long *i* vowel marker of the feminine imperative form and therefore cannot be feminine; and to read both *cum* and *orah* as masculine imperatives requires that *orah* be an energic (a special form of the masculine imperative that ends in the long vowel *ā,* represented in Hebrew orthography by ה) and *qum* not be an energic, which is unlikely. For the energic in Hebrew, see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar,* ed. E. Kautzsch, 2nd English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920), §48i. While it is also true that there are three instances in the Hebrew Old Testament of what look like masculine singular imperatives used with feminine singular nouns, it is possible in all three instances to explain the apparent masculine imperative as a different form. In addition to the example in *Gesenius* §110k, note that the feminine ending of the imperative is a long vowel and not a consonant. It was therefore represented in the script only when the use of a *mater lectionis* generally came into play. Thus, all three instances may have originally been feminine, but the long *i* vowel marker was never represented in the text. Suffice it to say, to see in *Cumorah* a combination of "rise" and "shine" is at best plausible, but unlikely.

15. Joanne Hackett and Robert F. Smith both have suggested this root in unpublished etymologies in my possession.

16. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University*

of Chicago (commonly referred to as *CAD*), vol. K, ed. Miguel Civil et al. (Chicago and Glückstadt, Germany: Oriental Institute and J. J. Augustin, 1971), 112–14 (hereafter *CAD* K); and Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1985), 1:478.

17. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and M. E. J. Richardson, trans., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* CD-ROM edition (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. כמר.

18. *Kamāru* in the D-stem verb signifies heaping up corpses and in the N-stem verb heaping up mounds and corpses (*CAD* K, 112–14). Additionally, the noun form *kumurrū* means "sum, total, [and] the sorting of the date harvest" (*CAD* K, 535), while in Late Babylonian only *kamāru* can mean "defeat, annihilation" (*CAD* K, 112). *Kimru* means a "layering" or "mound," as of dates for further ripening (von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch,* 478).

19. This view has been defended by Ricks and Tvedtnes, who point to the Hebrew noun pattern *peʿullāh* but apply it to the meaning "priest"; see their "Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," 256. The masculine place-name *kumāru* in northern Mesopotamia may be derived from the root *kmr*. It is possible that this name is Amorite, a Northwest Semitic language like Hebrew. For this suggestion, see Jean-Marie Durand, "La Culture Matérille a Mari (I): Le Bijou *HÚB-TIL-LÁ/ʿGUR₇-ME,'" *MARI* VI, pp. 146n78 and 149. (I owe this reference to my former student Ed Stratford.)

20. That *komer* is a segholate form can be demonstrated from Hebrew alone. The segholate noun forms in Hebrew are so named because they contain a *seghol* vowel between the second and third consonants in the masculine singular. These segholate noun forms derived originally from a *katl, kitl,* or *kutl* noun pattern. *Komer* would then have come from the latter of these related noun forms. The only other possible form from which *komer* might be derived is a masculine singular participle. But *komer* cannot be a Hebrew masculine participle. When *komer* becomes plural in Hebrew, it loses its first vowel. Participles never lose their first vowel in the masculine plural form. In addition, participles normally have the Hebrew vowel *sere* and not a *seghol* as the second vowel in the masculine singular form.

21. The only way to preserve both the first and the second vowels would be to posit the hypothetical original feminine plural form but without the final *t,* a very unlikely scenario. Thus, the hypothetical Hebrew form of the feminine plural, with nominative case ending, would be **kumarātu,* based on analogy with the feminine form *malakātu.* However, Hebrew feminine plurals do not look like this, but rather, as in the case at hand, **keˣmarōt.* This latter form is derived through the following changes: with the loss of the case marker, the first vowel has been reduced in biblical Hebrew to a *shewa,* ᵉ, possibly because of the shift of the stress; the second vowel has been lengthened because it appears in an open syllable; and, finally, the long, plural, feminine vowel marker, because of the so-called Canaanite shift, has changed from *ā* to *ō.* But with all of these changes, the final *t* would not have been lost; and *Cumorah* has no final *t*.

22. For the suggestions so far in this paragraph, see Ricks and Tvedtnes, "Hebrew Origin of Book of Mormon Place Names," 256–57.