

The Hebrew Origin of Three Book of Mormon Place-Names

“They came down into the land which is called the land of Zarahemla.” (Omni 1:13)

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 *Zarahemla*, *Jershon*, and *Cumorah*.

Zarahemla

Zarahemla was the Nephite capital for longer than any other city, yet it was actually named from Zarahemla, a descendant of Mulek (see 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 (see Helaman 6:10; 8:21).

The name *Zarahemla* probably derives from the Hebrew *zera* *ʿhemlāh*, which has been variously translated as “seed of compassion”¹ or “child of grace, pity, or compassion.”² 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.

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, meaning “to inherit,” with the suffix *-ōn* that denotes place-names. Wilhelm Borée, in his outstanding study, *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas (The Ancient Place Names of Palestine)*, cites fully eighty-four ancient Canaanite place names with the ending *-ōn* in biblical and extrabiblical sources (Egyptian and Mesopotamian writings, the El-Amarna letters, ostraca), including Ayyalon (Elon) (see Joshua 19:42, 43), Eltekon (see Joshua 15:59), Askalon (see Judges 1:18), Gibeon (see Joshua 9:3), Gibbethon (see Joshua 19:44), Dishon (see Genesis 36:21), Ziphron (see Numbers 34:9), Helbon (see Ezekiel 27:18), Holon (see Joshua 21:15), Hammon (see Joshua 19:28), Hebron (see Joshua 10:36), Hannathon (see Joshua 19:14), Dibon (see Numbers 21:30), and Heshbon (see Numbers 21:30).³

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”).

Cumorah

Cumorah is the name of the hill in which Mormon buried the Nephite records before turning his abridgment of it over to his son Moroni (see 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, *qūmī ʿūrī*, “arise, shine.” Related to this is David Palmer’s suggestion that Cumorah means “Arise, O Light,” on a reconstructed form of *qūm ʿōrāh*.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 *ʿōr*. This objection is lessened by the fact that the Bible uses the form *ʿōrāh* 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 *qūmī* for the imperative, not the masculine *qūm*. For a meaning of “arise, O light,” one would expect the Hebrew form *qūmī ʿōr*, though *qūmī ʿōrāh* would not be impossible. The suggested etymology *kūm ʿōrāh*, “mound of light/revelation,” 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 *ʿōr* is occasionally used in the sense of “revelation”

(see 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.⁵

A more plausible etymology for Cumorah is Hebrew *kəməôrāh*, “priesthood,” an abstract noun based on the word *kômer*, “priest.” This form is based on the Hebrew noun pattern (*mišqal*) *pe ‘ullāh*,⁶ with the vowel of the second consonant of the root, “m,” lengthened “compensatorially” from “u” to “ō/ô” because the third consonant of the root, “r,” cannot be doubled.⁷ *Kômer/kômer* and *kəməôrāh* may be compared in both form and meaning with the Hebrew nouns *kôhēn*, “priest,” and *kəhunnāh*, “priesthood.”⁸

Some have privately objected that this explanation is unlikely because the term *kômer* is always used in the Old Testament in reference to false priests (see 2 Kings 23:5; Hosea 10:5; Zephaniah 1:4), while the word *kôhēn* is used to denote Israelite priests.⁹ 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 *kômer* was simply used to denote a priest who was not of the tribe of Levi, while *kôhēn* in all cases refers to a Levitical priest. Since Lehi’s party did not include descendants of Levi, they probably used *kômer* wherever the Book of Mormon speaks of priests.

Research by Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 6/2 (1997): 255–59.

Notes

1. 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; Tvedtnes, “What’s in a Name? A Look at the Book of Mormon Onomasticon,” review of *I Know Thee By Name: Hebrew Roots of Lehi-ite Non-Biblical Names in the Book of Mormon*, by Joseph R. and Norrene V. Salonimer, *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 41.

2. 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).

3. See Wilhelm Borée, *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas*, 2nd ed. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), 57–62; Anson F. Rainey, “The 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.”

4. David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981), 21.

5. 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.”

6. See James L. Sagarin, *Hebrew Noun Patterns (Mišqalim): Morphology, Semantics, and Lexicon* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 33–34.

7. See P. Paul Joüon, *Grammaire de l’hébreu biblique* (Rome: Institut biblique pontifical, 1923), 54.

8. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), 464; compare also Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 279, who defines the neologism *kēmôrāh* as “Christian clergy, priesthood,” but also notes the Hebrew noun pattern *pe‘ullāh* upon which it is based.

9. 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.