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

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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.
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.² 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.³

**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 (IQIs⁸), however,
contains the spelling כּוּרָה, indicating a long vowel, either δ or ū, after the first consonant. This Qumran spelling of Genôrrah would be consistent with the Greek rendering of the first vowel as o and would not exclude the Book of Mormon spelling of Cumôrrah with a u. Thus, the initial-vowel difference between Genôrrah and Cumôrrah is not significant.

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

The written letter ‘ayin in Hebrew represents two phonemes (sounds), ‘ayin and ‘ayin (voiced velar fricative), both of which were represented by the single sign z. 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 ġayin, which had long since been spelled with the single Hebrew letter that represents both ġayin and ‘ayin, are usually spelled with a g in the Greek transliterations of the Septuagint. With the place-name Genôrrah, 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 Genôrrah with an initial ġayin, 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 ġayin 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 ġayin. 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. Genôrrah 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. 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 Cumôrrah has only one r and Genôrrah has two is not a significant problem.

Additional Etymologies

In addition to the comparison to Genôrrah, the first etymology just discussed, other etymologies of Cumôrrah are possible. The second possibility appears quite attractive on the surface. The Hebrew verb qūm means “to rise.” The Hebrew noun ʾôr means “light, flame, fire” and is the root behind the Urîm of Urîm and Thummīm. It can also stand alone as a term for revelation, usually rendered as the plural word Urîm in the King James Bible. The feminine form is ṭōrah, meaning “light,” as in Psalm 139:12. Thus, by combining the words for “rise” and for “light,” the meaning of Cumôrrah 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.

Yet this etymology presents challenges more serious than those of equating Cumôrrah with Genôrrah. As noted, the -orah part of Cumôrrah corresponds with the feminine form for “light,” ṭôrah. The cum- part of Cumôrrah 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 qūmî. Because Cumôrrah clearly does not exhibit the feminine form (hypothetically Cumôrrah), it would be difficult to take this etymology seriously, no matter how tempting and appropriate the meaning might be.

The third possible etymology also appears at first to be promising. There is a fairly common root in widely dispersed Semitic languages, kmr. The verb can mean “to heap up,” “to heat up” or “to become excited,” “to make dates ripen in the ground,” and “to ferment.” The noun form from this root that most resembles Cumôrrah 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, kḥümāh, 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 *kʿmurrāh to Cumorah.22 But there is a better possibility. The segholate form mentioned above, melek, “king,” forms the abstract noun meʿlūkāh, meaning “kingship.” This Hebrew noun pattern would yield kʿmūrāh, 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.


12. Ehlers, Quaternary and Glacial Geology

Archaeology and Cumorah

Questions

John E. Clark


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).


[What's in a Word?]

Pairs and Merisms in 3 Nephi

Cynthia L. Hallen with Josh Sorenson


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 onomatopoeic 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 N. Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, and FARMS, 1990), 2136–35.

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 Springfield, 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 Hackett was the first to propose the etymology. A copy of her unpublished work is currently in my possession.


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 of Cumorah shows that [lower] C[owdery]’s s in [the original manuscript] looks like an a.” The two spellings of o might also indicate that the (so far) unidentifi ed scribe who wrote that section of the printer’s manuscript mistook Oliver’s 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 Cumorah (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 Ugarritic, 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 ‘ayin, see my discussion in “The Name Alma,” JBMS 7/1 (1998): 72.

9. In most cases we can determine whether the Hebrew ‘ayin derives from an original ‘ayin or ‘ayin because the cognate words in Ugarritic or Arabic both preserve the difference. In addition to Cumorah, the place-name Gaza falls into this category.

10. In the Hebrew 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 grammar, 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 I Samuel 28:6.

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


14. It might be said that both qum and arah are commands, yielding “Arise, Shine.” The biblical passage most like this suggestion for Cumorah is Isaiah 60:1, qim/m’rî, containing the feminine command forms, “arise” and “shine.” But arah lacks the long i vowel marker of the feminine imperative form and therefore cannot be feminine; and to read both cum and arah as masculine imperatives requires that arah be an energetic (a special form of the masculine imperat诸如 that ends in the long vowel á, represented in Hebrew orthography by riy) and qum not be an energetic, which is unlikely. For the energetic in Hebrew, see Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar, ed. E. Kautzsch, 2nd English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920), §48b. 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 cases to explain away the apparent masculine imperative as a different form. In addition to the example in Genesis 10:10, 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 followed the 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


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 kumāru means "sum, total, [and] the sorting of the date harvest" (CAD K, 535), while in Late Babylonian only kumāru 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 pe'ullāh but apply it to the meaning "priest"; see their "Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," 256. The masculine place-name kūmāru in northern Mesopotamia may be derived from the root kom. It is possible that this name is Amorite, a Northwest Semitic language like Hebrew. For this suggestion, see Jean-Marie Durand, "La Culture Matérille à Mari (I): Le Bijou *HÚB-TIL-LÁ/'GUR 7 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. Komest 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 *kumarātē, based on analogy with the feminine form malakātē. However, Hebrew feminine plurals do not look like this, but rather, as in the case at hand, *kēmarōtī. 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, ָ, 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 $ to ə. But with all of these changes, the final t would not have been lost; and Cumarah 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.