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Title Were There Two Cumorahs?

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Abstract No one doubts that the hill where Joseph Smith received the plates is known as Cumorah, but is the hill where the final battles between the Nephites and Lamanites took place another Cumorah? The book of Ether tells us that Omer traveled to this place of the last battles of the Nephites, and that the relatively short duration of this journey would not account for the three thousand miles from Middle America to New York. A similar journey was undertaken by Limhi's men, of equally short duration. The description of the geographical features around the final battle site is also at odds with the topography of present-day Cumorah.

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It is not our intention in this book¹ to embark on the sea of Book of Mormon geography, that is, to consider the numerous problems connected with it. Others have written on the subject.² But it is advisable, because of its interest and importance, to consider here the question of whether or not there were two hills known as Cumorah. It should be kept in mind that no Latter-day Saint students of the Book of Mormon doubt for a moment that the hill in New York from whence the Prophet Joseph Smith

This previously unpublished handout was used in a Religion 622 class on 31 March 1964.

¹ This handout was apparently planned initially as a section in Sperry's *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968); cf. 447-51.

² See, e.g., Fletcher B. Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1959; revised 1964), and Jesse A. and Jesse N. Washburn, *An Approach to the Study of the Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo: New Era, 1939).

received the plates of the Book of Mormon has been known as Cumorah from the earliest days of the Church. But a number of such students, for many years now, have held that the Cumorah of the Book of Mormon, the one in which Mormon originally hid the records of his people (Mormon 6:6), and the one around which the final battles between the Nephites and the Lamanites took place (Mormon 6:8–15), was located somewhere in the area of Mexico, not in New York.

In 1937 Jesse A. Washburn and Jesse N. Washburn hinted, in the final pages of their book *From Babel to Cumorah*,³ that the last great battles of the Nephites and the Lamanites took place near the lands of their early settlements. And in 1939 they more strongly affirmed that fact in their book *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography*. In other words, they were convinced that the Cumorah of which the Book of Mormon speaks was somewhere in Middle America. In 1947 Elder Thomas Stuart Ferguson, a lawyer, in his *Cumorah—Where?* rather objectively reviewed the case made by those who hold that the only Cumorah is in New York, and in the same objective vein reviewed the evidence supporting the contention that the Cumorah of the Book of Mormon is in Middle America.⁴ He himself was, and is, converted to the Middle-American view. Brother Fletcher B. Hammond, also a lawyer, vigorously contends in his *Geography of the Book of Mormon* that the evidence in the Book of Mormon upholds the view that the Cumorah of the last great battles is in Middle America.

The friendly controversy still goes on, the one camp holding that the only Cumorah in or out of the Book of Mormon is the traditional one in New York State, the other supporting the view that the Cumorah in New York has been named after the one in Middle America, but is not the one around which the last great battles of the Nephites and the Lamanites took place.

Now which of these two points of view is correct? It would be desirable, if possible, to come to a unity in the matter. Truth should never be on the defensive, but sometimes it is hard to

³ Jesse A. Washburn and Jesse N. Washburn, *From Babel to Cumorah* (Provo, UT: New Era Publishing, 1937).

⁴ Thomas S. Ferguson, *Cumorah—Where?* (Independence, MO: Zion's, 1947).

decide just where it is. Perhaps most people of the Church hold to the traditional view of Cumorah, and, indeed, I have defended that view in some of my writings.⁵ But in recent years we have again gone over the Book of Mormon evidence very carefully and are prepared to present what we feel are the elements of the strongest case that can be made for a Cumorah in Middle America. Let us present it fairly and objectively as a historical question, letting the chips, so to speak, fall where they may.

Omer, a Jaredite King

Most of the Book of Mormon evidence will be taken from the books of Ether, Mormon, Mosiah, and Omni. The first piece of evidence concerns Omer, a righteous Jaredite king, who was warned by the Lord to flee out of his land in order to save his life. In the words of Moroni:

And the Lord warned Omer in a dream that he should depart out of the land; wherefore Omer departed out of the land with his family, and *traveled many days, and came over and passed by the hill of Shim, and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed, and from thence eastward, and came to a place which was called Ablom, by the seashore.* (Ether 9:3)

We are concerned more especially with the words in italics. Notice that Omer and his party passed by the hill Shim, a place recognized by all Book of Mormon students as being the hill in the land Antum where Ammoron hid the sacred records of his people (Mormon 1:3; 4:23). No one would question the fact that this hill and Antum were in turn in the larger territory of Desolation (see Mormon 4:19; cf. 4:23), somewhere in or about Middle America.

Next we observe (notice the casual language employed) that Omer came "by the place where the Nephites were destroyed." Moroni must certainly mean the place of the last destruction of his

⁵ For example, Sidney B. Sperry, *The Book of Mormon Testifies* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 335–36.

people. If the Cumorah in New York was the place, then Omer and family traveled at least 3,000 miles away from the hill Shim to reach it. In view of the casual language employed, does such a long journey seem reasonable? If the party traveled an average of twenty miles per day by primitive means for "many days," let's say an improbable sixty, they would cover only 1,200 miles. How very improbable it is that Omer traversed the distance to Cumorah in New York is reinforced by Ether 9:9 in which a certain Nimrah "gathered together a small number of men, and fled out of the land *from which Omer had fled*, and came over and dwelt with Omer." Notice that Nimrah knew where to find Omer and "came over" to him. Not the slightest hint is given that would lead us to believe a three-thousand-mile journey was attempted. It may reasonably be assumed that "Ablom, by the seashore," where Omer temporarily dwelt, was on the Gulf of Mexico side, not too far from "the place where the Nephites were destroyed" (Ether 9:3).

Omer was restored eventually to his kingdom (Ether 9:13), but not the slightest hint is given that he had to retrace his steps a great distance to get to it. So if we are correct in presuming that in Ether 9:3 Moroni was referring to the place of his people's final destruction, the evidence thus far would seem to favor the view that it was somewhere in Middle America.

Jaredite Battles

No matter to what land Omer went in exile, the fact is clear that he returned to, and his successors dwelt in, the traditional southern home of the Jaredites. This is made very clear by such statements as "their flocks began to flee before the poisonous serpents, towards the land southward, which was called by the Nephites Zarahemla" (Ether 9:31), and "they built a great city by the narrow neck of land, by the place where the sea divides the land" (Ether 10:20).

Now let us examine the evidence presented by Moroni relative to the territory in which the last great Jaredite battles took place.⁶ In Ether 14:5-6 we are informed that a certain brother of Shared

⁶ We do this because the book of Ether makes clear that the very last battle of the Jaredites took place near the same hill where the "Nephites were destroyed" (Ether 9:3; 15:11).

came up against the army of King Coriantumr, "and he came forth to the land of Moron, and placed himself upon the throne of Coriantumr." Where was the land of Moron? Its location is clearly indicated in an earlier chapter of Ether.

Now the land of Moron, where the king dwelt, was near the land which is called Desolation by the Nephites. (Ether 7:6)

Thus we see that Moron, early seat of government of the Jaredites, was in the south land, near territory known by the Nephites as Desolation. Notice Coriantumr comes to "the seashore" of the land of Moron (Ether 14:13). This might possibly mean a Pacific Ocean border of Moron.

In the remainder of Ether 14, it is made clear that Lib was slain and his brother Shiz continued the sanguinary struggle with Coriantumr. In the course of events we are told that

Shiz did pursue Coriantumr eastward, even to the borders of the seashore, and there he gave battle unto Shiz for the space of three days. (Ether 14:26)

Where was the seashore mentioned here? The geography isn't altogether clear, but let us assume in all fairness that it was on the Gulf of Mexico side, in deference to the word "eastward."

Could it be in a spot on the seashore somewhere on the eastern border of New York? The difficulties involved in such an assumption are enormous. Keep in mind that the battles in Ether 14:6-13 are in Moron by the narrow neck of land (cf. Ether 7:6; Alma 63:5). Are we to assume a few battles later that the armies involved are on the eastern border of New York, some three thousand miles distant? Are we to admit that armies composed of men, women, and children (see Ether 14:22) on both sides had the physical strength (not to mention the logistical facilities) to cover three thousand miles in a relatively short time and engage in their final destruction? No army men of my acquaintance would believe it possible. Let us notice that the very last battles were fought near a hill called by the Jaredites Ramah.

And it came to pass that the army of Coriantumr did pitch their tents by the hill Ramah; and it was that

same hill [i.e., Cumorah] where my father Mormon did hide up the records unto the Lord, which were sacred. (Ether 15:11; cf. Mormon 6:4–6)

Notice that Moroni does not add that Ramah or Cumorah was the hill where he should yet hide up the plates that his father Mormon left to him (see Mormon 6:6). This omission seems strange if the Ramah mentioned was the Nephite hill Cumorah in New York.

Another important fact should be observed in connection with our problem: Notice that in coming to the hill Ramah, Coriantumr and his armies were pursuing the armies of Shiz southward, not northward as we should expect if they were coming up from southern Mexico or Central America.

And it came to pass that the armies of Coriantumr did press upon the armies of Shiz that they beat them, that they caused them to flee before them; and they did flee *southward*, and did pitch their tents in a place which was called Ogath. (Ether 15:10)

Final Evidence

Now let us gather up some final evidence having a bearing on the problem. It will be remembered that when King Limhi, whose people were living in the early lands of their fathers' first inheritance (Lehi-Nephi, Shilom; see Mosiah 7:21; 9:1, 6), wanted to get them back to the land of Zarahemla, he sent out forty-three men to search for it (Mosiah 8:7). What happened?

They were lost in the wilderness for the space of many days, yet they were diligent, and found not the land of Zarahemla but returned to this land, having traveled in a land among many waters, having discovered a land which was covered with bones of men, and of beasts, and was also covered with ruins of buildings of every kind, having discovered a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel.

And for a testimony that the things that they had said are true they have brought twenty-four plates which are filled with engravings, and they are of pure gold.

And behold, also, they have brought breastplates, which are large, and they are of brass and of copper, and are perfectly sound. And again, they have brought swords, the hilts thereof have perished, and the blades thereof were cankered with rust. (Mosiah 8:8–11)

Since the king was speaking of a people whose destruction was hitherto unknown to the Nephites and, furthermore, since his men had also found twenty-four plates written in an unknown language (Mosiah 8:11), we may presume that the people destroyed were the Jaredites. And indeed, we know that the twenty-four plates were Ether's record of the Jaredites and that he had hidden them in such a way that Limhi's people found them (Ether 16:33; see also Mosiah 28:11–17). Now the lands of Lehi-Nephi and Shilom, the territory where Limhi's people dwelt, were presumably in Central America. No Book of Mormon student would doubt that they were in "the land southward." But is it reasonable to believe that Limhi's men would travel over three thousand miles to find the site of the last great Jaredite battles and the Jaredite records, assuming they were at or near a hill Ramah in our state of New York? Is it reasonable to believe this in view of the fact that Limhi's men would unquestionably know that their fathers had traveled but a moderate distance from Zarahemla to Lehi-Nephi and Shilom? (cf. Mosiah 21:25–26 and note the implications). Would a party travel, for example, three thousand miles in order to find a place they knew could not be over three hundred miles away? Notice the story of the return of Limhi's people from Shilom to Zarahemla (Mosiah 22:11–13). Even though they traveled "many days," they ended up in Zarahemla, undoubtedly located in Middle America. Observe also the fact that the elder Alma's branch of Limhi's people arrived in Zarahemla after twelve days' journey (Mosiah 24:25) from the valley of Alma, a place we assume was some distance from Lehi-Nephi (it was eight days from the waters of Mormon to the land of Helam—Mosiah 23:3, and a one-day flight from there to the valley of Alma—

Mosiah 24:20). Zarahemla, in all probability, was not more than three hundred miles from Lehi-Nephi.

Those of the one-Cumorah (New York) persuasion may with some logic argue that Mosiah 8:8–11 does not specifically say that the forty-three men of Limhi found the last battlefields of the Jaredites, and that the passage does not disprove the possibility that the prophet Ether could have brought his records from the region of Ramah in New York to Central America, where they could be found. But such arguments seem somewhat forced, and especially so when it is pointed out that the people of Zarahemla, the Mulekites, found Coriantumr, the last ruler of the Jaredites (Omni 1:21). Moreover, he “dwelt with them for the space of nine moons.” Just how reasonable is it to believe that he departed from a Ramah in New York after his last great battle and wandered three thousand miles south into Middle America, where he was found? Isn’t it more likely that the finding of Coriantumr fits better into the overall pattern presented by the book of Mosiah and the chapters cited above in the book of Ether? Coriantumr apparently wandered a few hundred miles southward from Ramah (Cumorah) in Middle America to, or around, the land of Zarahemla, where he was found. Isn’t such a view the more reasonable one to believe? In fact, all the Book of Mormon evidence points to the same general conclusion, that Ramah-Cumorah was somewhere in or near Middle America.

One more piece of evidence needs to be presented which concerns that nature of the territory in which the hill Cumorah was located. Mormon says that the hill “was in a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains; and here we had hopes to gain advantage over the Lamanites” (Mormon 6:4). Assuming Limhi’s men, in their search for the land of Zarahemla, found the last great battlefields of the Jaredites, it will be observed that they are described as being “in a land among many waters” (Mosiah 8:8). These descriptions are in general accord with Moroni’s “waters of Ripliancum” (Ether 15:8), near which the last great battles of the Jaredites were fought. It is true that the site of Ramah-Cumorah in New York is in a region of great bodies of water, the Finger Lakes and the Great Lakes, into which pour many streams. But is one to assume with any logic that a Ramah-Cumorah in or around Central America could not be similarly endowed? As a matter of fact,

geographers and Latter-day Saint travelers know full well that there are great waters there.⁷ Moreover, certain geographical features in Middle America fit in rather fully with the overall physical geography in the Book of Mormon.

Now we have covered materials that have been set forth in greater detail by Washburn, Ferguson, Hammond, and others like them, who all agree that the Book of Mormon Ramah-Cumorah, the hill around which the last great battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place, was in Middle America. Our emphasis on the Book of Mormon evidence, independently evaluated, has been different in a number of respects.

Now, if it is agreed that the Book of Mormon evidence points inevitably to a Ramah-Cumorah in Middle America, the question then arises as to how the hill in New York from which the Prophet Joseph Smith received the sacred Nephite records came to be called Cumorah. No details are afforded us as to either how or when the hill was so named. But certainly no adherent of the Middle-American view of Ramah-Cumorah would object to the suggestion that Moroni himself may have called the hill Cumorah in honor of the one in Middle America. He may even have told the Prophet Joseph Smith about it, but of this we have no proof. We do know, however, that the name Cumorah has been applied to the hill from Joseph Smith's day to this.

Finally, it should be pointed out that if the great records hidden up by Mormon in a Middle-American Ramah-Cumorah (Mormon 6:6) were transported eventually to the Cumorah in New York, the Book of Mormon gives no account of it. If the Lord wanted that done after the last great battles between the Nephites and Lamanites, he would have provided a way through his almighty power. But that is not the problem of this chapter.

⁷ See, e.g., Milton R. Hunter and Thomas S. Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, CA: Kolob, 1950), 139. Those who do not have this book can read the significant part concerning rivers and lakes as quoted in Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon*, 91.