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KnoWhy #489 - Where is the Location of the Hill Cumorah?

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon describes the final battle place between the Nephites and Lamanites as the land and hill Cumorah. Not long after the Book of Mormon was published, Latter-day Saints began speculating about the location of this hill. While it has been commonly believed that the hill in New York where Joseph Smith received the gold plates is the same Hill Cumorah described in the Book of Mormon, this identification has been questioned. A close analysis of historical, textual, and archaeological data reveals the location of the Hill Cumorah may be more complicated than previously supposed.



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“The Hill Cumorah” by George Anderson, colorized by Katie Payne

WHERE IS THE LOCATION OF THE HILL CUMORAH?

“Therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni.”

Mormon 6:6

THE KNOW

The extinction of the Nephites occurred about A.D. 385 at “the land of Cumorah, by a hill which was called Cumorah” (Mormon 6:2, 5). This same hill was known centuries earlier by the Jaredites as Ramah (Ether 15:11). Knowing that he and his people faced impending doom, Mormon “made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni” (Mormon 6:6). That is to say, Mormon deposited what remained of Nephite textual sources in the hill Cumorah for preservation and entrusted the plates of what would later become the published Book of Mormon (the record obtained

by Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century) to his son Moroni, who finished and later sealed the record.

Not much is known about the land and hill Cumorah. The only Book of Mormon authors to discuss the location were Mormon and Moroni. Based on a statement given by Mormon, the land of Cumorah was “a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains” (Mormon 6:4). Other geographical clues given in the Book of Mormon appear to situate Cumorah north of the narrow neck of land and near an eastern seacoast (cf. Mormon 2:3, 20, 29; Ether 9:3).¹ The hill itself was tall enough that it could be used as a strategic defensive position as well as an observation point for surveillance of the surrounding countryside (Mormon 6:2, 7, 11).

There is “no historical evidence that Moroni called the hill ‘Cumorah’ in 1823” during his first encounter with

the Prophet Joseph Smith. The name Cumorah came into “common circulation [amongst Latter-day Saints] no earlier than the mid-1830s.”² The first documented person to identify the drumlin hill³ in Manchester, New York where Joseph Smith received the plates with the hill Cumorah appears to have been William W. Phelps in 1833.⁴ Phelps’s identification was later followed by Oliver Cowdery in 1835.⁵ Probably due to the popularity and influence of these two early leaders’ writings, the identification of the hill in New York as same the hill Cumorah mentioned by Mormon in Book of Mormon became commonplace amongst early Latter-day Saints.⁶

As far as can be determined, the Prophet Joseph Smith himself only associated the hill in New York with the Cumorah in the Book of Mormon towards the end of his life. In an 1842 epistle the Prophet spoke of hearing “Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfilment of the prophets—the book to be revealed” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:20).⁷ Before then, Joseph left the name of the New York hill where Moroni gave him the plates unnamed in his accounts of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.⁸ Whether the Prophet arrived at this conclusion about the location of Cumorah by revelation, or by conforming to usage that had become common among the early members of the Church about Book of Mormon geography, or in some other way is historically unknown.⁹

In the decades after Joseph Smith’s death, other prominent early Latter-day Saints, including Lucy Mack Smith,¹⁰ Parley P. Pratt,¹¹ and David Whitmer,¹² recounted earlier incidents in which the New York hill was identified as Cumorah by the angel Moroni and by Joseph Smith. Since these statements are somewhat late recollections, coming after the identity of Cumorah as a hill near Palmyra, New York, had become widespread, they should be used cautiously.¹³

Similarly, second and thirdhand sources from after Joseph Smith’s lifetime speak of a hidden cave within the New York drumlin which supposedly contains an abundance of surviving Nephite records (presumably Mormon’s repository described in Mormon 6:6).¹⁴ As described by these sources, Joseph and Oliver are said to have entered the cave and beheld this repository after finishing the translation of the Book of Mormon.

However, these sources are based on hearsay, and are somewhat ambiguous as to whether Joseph and Oliver’s purported experience was literal or they were taken there in a vision.¹⁵ As with other late or second-hand reminiscences describing any hill as Cumorah, these accounts should likewise be viewed cautiously.

The identification of the Hill Cumorah in New York as being the same hill where the Nephites perished has remained commonplace amongst members and leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁶ However, most Church leaders have simply and accurately said that the geography of the Book of Mormon is not revealed.¹⁷ Additionally, several Latter-day Saint scholars have questioned whether the hill in New York could feasibly be the hill Cumorah described in the Book of Mormon.

Due to inconsistencies between the location of the hill described in the Book of Mormon and the real-world topography of western New York, as well as the lack of any archaeological evidence for the violent, mass destruction of hundreds of thousands of people in one concentrated location in that area through sustained warfare (cf. Mormon 6:10–15), some have suggested that the location of the final battle took place somewhere other than the New York hill, such as in modern day Mexico just northwest of the isthmus of Tehuantepec.¹⁸ Because Moroni had to flee for his life, getting away from the area of the final battle and wandering wherever he could “for the safety of [his] own soul” (Moroni 1:1–3), and because he did not bury the plates until A. D. 421 (Moroni 10:1), which was 36 years after the final battle at the Nephite hill (Mormon 6:5), one could expect that thousands of miles might lie between that battle site and the final repository of the plates.

“Those who assume that the final Book of Mormon events took place in what is now the northeastern United States believe that the hill in upstate New York is the only hill called Cumorah,” wrote one historian summarizing the issue. “Others conclude there must be two hills called Cumorah: one in Central America, where they believe the final battles of the Book of Mormon took place; and the other in New York, where Moroni ultimately buried the gold plates he later delivered to Joseph Smith.”¹⁹ The Church itself has no official position on this matter, leaving individual

Latter-day Saints to decide for themselves which theory they prefer to follow.²⁰

THE WHY

The location of where Joseph Smith obtained the golden plates which he translated by the gift and power of God is well known.²¹ Whether that was the same location as the final destruction of the Nephites remains open to discussion. Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles recognized this when he wrote in 1950 that “the hill from which the Book of Mormon plates were obtained is definitely known. In the days of the Prophet this hill was known among the people as Cumorah. This is a fixed point in Book of Mormon later history. There is a controversy, however, about the Hill Cumorah—not about the location where the Book of Mormon plates were found, but whether it is the hill under that name near which Nephite events took place.”²² Elder Widtsoe further explained that, “As far as can be learned, Joseph Smith, translator of the book, did not say where, on the American continent, Book of Mormon activities occurred.”²³

Much more important than precisely where the Book of Mormon hill Cumorah may be located is what transpired at a “hill of considerable size” near the town of Manchester, New York in the early morning hours of September 22, 1827 (Joseph Smith—History 1:51–59). President Thomas S. Monson testified of “the momentous events that unfolded” on that occasion:

A plowboy prophet took a horse and wagon and, in the dark of night, rode to this hill, where he received an ancient record from the angel Moroni. In a remarkably short time, this untutored young man translated a record detailing 1,000 years of history and then prepared the Book of Mormon for public distribution. . . . The visitor often comes [to the Hill Cumorah] with an attitude of curiosity. He or she departs with a soul touched by the Spirit of the Lord. . . . I bear an apostolic witness that Jesus is the Savior of the world and that He and His Father appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith to usher in this dispensation of the fulness of times.²⁴

Since the Book of Mormon presents itself as a historical text, it is appropriate to ask and remain open to questions about its ancient geographical and historical setting. “Out of diligent, prayerful study, we may be led to a better understanding of times and places in the history of the people who move across the pages of the divinely given Book of Mormon,” Elder Widtsoe allowed.²⁵ However those facts may appear to any individual, all readers of the Book of Mormon should focus on its witness of Jesus Christ and the eternal truths it teaches, which is indisputably its primary purpose.

FURTHER READING

Rex C. Reeve, Jr. and Richard O. Cowan, “The Hill Called Cumorah,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: New York*, ed. Larry C. Porter, Milton V. Backman, Jr., and Susan Easton Black (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1992), 71–91.

Sidney B. Sperry, “[Were There Two Cumorahs?](#)” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 1 (1995): 260–68.

Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 13, no. 1–2 (2004). [This entire issue of the journal is dedicated to topics surrounding the Hill Cumorah.]

Book of Mormon Central, “[Where Did the Book of Mormon Happen?](#)” *KnowHy* 431 (May 8, 2018).

Jed Woodworth and Matt Grow, “[Saints and Book of Mormon Geography](#),” online at www.history.lds.org

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NOTES

1. David Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon in Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1981), 28–53, esp. 44–53; Matthew P. Roper, “[Plausibility, Probability, and the Cumorah Question](#),” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 2 (2009): 135–158. These additional criteria for the location of Cumorah inferred from the text have been critiqued by Andrew H. Hedges, “[Cumorah and the Limited Mesoamerican Theory](#),” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 2 (2009): 111–134.
2. Jed Woodworth and Matt Grow, “[Saints and Book of Mormon Geography](#),” online at www.history.lds.org.
3. See Michael J. Dorais, “[The Geologic History of Hill Cumorah](#),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (2004): 136–43, 173–74.
4. William W. Phelps, “[The Book of Mormon](#),” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 8 (January 1833): 57.

5. Oliver Cowdery, "[Letter VII](#)," in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 10 (July 1835): 158–159.
6. This is reflected in early Latter-day Saint popular culture, such as hymns which speak of Cumorah. See for instance "[An angel came down from the mansions of glory](#)," in *A Collection of Sacred Hymns*, comp. Emma Smith (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams, 1835), #16; "[An Angel from on high](#)," in *A Collection of Sacred Hymns*, comp. Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, and John Taylor (Manchester, England: W. R. Thomas, 1840), #197. Contemporaneous Latter-day Saint missionary publications likewise reflect this understanding. See Orson Pratt, *A Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 22; Orson Pratt, "[The Hill Cumorah](#)," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 28, no. 27 (7 July 1866): 417–419.
7. [Letter to "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints," 6 September 1842 \[D&C 128\]](#), 7.
8. See [History, circa Summer 1832](#), 4; [History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 \[23 December 1805–30 August 1834\]](#), addendum, 7; *Elders' Journal* (July 1838): 43.
9. See Matthew Roper, "[Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations](#)," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 225–275; "[Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography](#)," *FARMS Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): 15–85; Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and Atul Nepal, "[Joseph Smith, the Times and Seasons, and Central American Ruins](#)," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 84–97; Neal Rappleye, "["War of Words and Tumult of Opinions": The Battle for Joseph Smith's Words in Book of Mormon Geography](#)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 37–95; Matthew Roper, "[John Bernhisel's Gift to a Prophet: Incidents of Travel in Central America and the Book of Mormon](#)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 207–253; Mark Alan Wright, "[Joseph Smith and Native American Artifacts](#)," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 119–140; Matthew Roper, "[Joseph Smith, Central American Ruins, and the Book of Mormon](#)," in *Approaching Antiquity*, 141–162; Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 375–379.
10. [Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845](#), 11, bk. 3; [Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845](#), 104.
11. Parley P. Pratt, Jr., ed., *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (New York, NY: Russell Brothers, 1874), 59.
12. David Whitmer Interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, 7–8 September 1878, in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2003), 5:44–45.
13. Martin Raish, "[Encounters with Cumorah: A Selective, Personal Bibliography](#)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (2004): 40; Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 129–131.
14. Cameron J. Packer, "[Cumorah's Cave](#)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (2004): 50–57, 170–71.
15. Packer, "Cumorah's Cave," 52. "With these reports of a cave in the Hill Cumorah comes the question, Was this a real cave that Joseph and others actually walked into, or was it a visionary, or 'virtual,' experience? The wording of the accounts leaves the issue open." See also John A. Tvedtnes, "[Review of Little Known Evidences of the Book of Mormon by Brenton G. Yorgason](#)," *FARMS Review of Books* 2, no. 1 (1990): 258–259; John E. Clark, "[The Final Battle for Cumorah](#)," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 2 (1994): 95–98.
16. See for instance Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:232–243; Marion G. Romney, "[America's Destiny](#)," *Ensign* (Nov 1975); Rod L. Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America's Heartland: A Visual Journey of Discovery* (New York, NY: Digital Legend, 2011), 38–47.
17. "Some say the Hill Cumorah was in southern Mexico (and someone pushed it down still farther) and not in western New York. Well, if the Lord wanted us to know where it was, or where Zarahemla was, he'd have given us latitude and longitude, don't you think? And why bother our heads trying to discover with archaeological certainty the geographical locations of the cities of the Book of Mormon like Zarahemla?" Harold B. Lee, "Loyalty," in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Educational System and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 65. See further the quotations from Church leaders collected and analyzed in Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon," 255–260; "Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography," 17–22.
18. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 44, 347–351; Sidney B. Sperry, "[Were There Two Cumorahs?](#)" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 1 (1995): 260–268; David A. Palmer, "[Cumorah](#)," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 1:346–347; John E. Clark, "[Archaeology and Cumorah Questions](#)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (2004): 144–51, 174; John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2013), 142–143.
19. Rex C. Reeve Jr., "Hill Cumorah," in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald W. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000), 481.
20. F. Michael Watson, Secretary to the First Presidency, fax from the Office of the First Presidency to FARMS dated April 23, 1993, online at [FairMormon](#): "The Church emphasizes the doctrinal and historical value of the Book of Mormon, not its geography. While some Latter-day Saints have looked for possible locations and explanations [for Book of Mormon geography] because the New York Hill Cumorah does not readily fit the Book of Mormon description of Cumorah, there are no conclusive connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site."
21. See *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 20–42.
22. John A. Widsote, "Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?" *Improvement Era*, July 1950, 547. Compare Palmer, "Cumorah," 1:347. "Because the New York site does not readily fit the Book of Mormon description of Book of

Mormon geography, some Latter-day Saints have looked for other possible explanations and locations, including Mesoamerica. Although some have identified possible sites that may seem to fit better, there are no conclusive

connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site that has been suggested.”

23. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” 547.
24. [“Special Witnesses of Christ,”](#) *Ensign*, April 2001, 19–20.
25. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” 597