

The Hill Cumorah—Where?

“He saw that there had been slain by the sword already nearly two millions of his people, and he began to sorrow in his heart; yea, there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children. . . . And it came to pass that the army of Coriantum, did pitch their tents by the hill Ramah; and it was that same hill where my father Mormon did hide up the records unto the Lord.” (Ether 15:2, 11.)

“And it came to pass that [the Lamanites] did fall upon my people with the sword, and with the bow, and with the arrow, and with the ax, and with all manner of weapons of war. And it came to pass that my men were hewn down, yea, even my ten thousand . . . [and] the ten thousand of my people who were led by my son Moroni. And behold, the ten thousand of Gidgiddonah had fallen, . . . and Lamah had fallen with his ten thousand; and Gilgal had fallen with his ten thousand, and Limhah had fallen with his ten thousand, and Jeneum had fallen with his ten thousand, and Cumenihah, and Moronihah, and Shiblom, and Shem, and Josh, had fallen with their ten thousand each. And it came to pass that there were ten more who did fall by with sword, with their ten thousand each; yea, even all my people . . . (Mormon 6:8-15.)

"According to the Book of Mormon the Hill Cumorah of the Nephites—the Ramah of the Jaredites— must be regarded as a natural monument overlooking ancient and extensive battle fields. Around it early in the sixth century B.C., the Jaredites were destroyed. Here, also, a thousand years later, at the close of the fourth century A. D., the Nephites met with practical annihilation in a battle which, whether judged by the importance of the changes it wrought in the affairs of one of the world's continents, or the number slain, ranks as one of the world's great battles. In view of these Book of Mormon facts one would naturally expect to find some evidences in this section of the country for such wonderful historical events. Here one has a right to expect the evidences of military fortifications; for, though a thousand years had elapsed between the destruction of the Nephites and the discovery of America by the Europeans, still some military monuments would doubtless survive that length of time." (B.H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, Vol.3, Ch.34, p.67)

"One of the most noted places in ancient American history was the land in which was situated the hill known to the Jaredites as Ramah and to the Nephites as Cumorah. In its vicinity two great races were exterminated; for it was there that the last battles were fought in the history of both peoples. There also the sacred records of the Nephites found their final resting place." (Elder George Reynolds, *The Story of the Book of Mormon*, Ch.69, p. 325)

I. Traditional Position: Hill Cumorah in New York

A. Oliver Cowdery. Oliver Cowdery wrote in a church history in 1835: “ At about one mile west rises another ridge of less height, running parallel with the former . . . between these hills the entire power and national strength of both the Jaredites and Nephites were destroyed. . . . He [Mormon] deposited . . . all the records in this same hill, Cumorah.” He had previously described the Hill Cumorah and was talking about the hill close to Joseph Smith's home. (*Messenger and Advocate*, July 1835, p. 158.)

B. William W. Phelps. In a letter to Oliver Cowdery, in November 1835, W. W. Phelps wrote: "Cumorah, the artificial hill of north America, is well calculated to stand in this generation, as a monument of marvelous works and wonders. Around that mount died millions of the Jaredites; yea, there ended one of the greatest nations of this earth. In that day, her inhabitants spread from sea to sea, and enjoyed national greatness and glory, nearly fifteen hundred years.—That people forsook the Lord and

died in wickedness. There, too, fell the Nephites, after they had forgotten the Lord that bought them. There slept the records of age after age, for hundreds of years, even until the time of the Lord." (*The Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Vol.2, No.2, p. 221)

C. Orson Pratt. Orson Pratt preached in February 1872: "About 370 years after the birth of Christ, the Nephites occupying North America, the Lamanites South America, and wars having existed between them for nearly fifty years, the Lamanites began to overpower the Nephites, and they drove them northward from the narrow neck of land, which we call the Isthmus of Darien . . . The Nephites continued to flee before their conquerors until they came into the interior of the State of New York . . . Many millions on both sides were here gathered together . . . The great and last battle, in which several hundred thousand Nephites perished was on the hill Cumorah, the same hill from which the plates were taken by Joseph Smith . . ." (*Journal of Discourses*, 14:331.)

1. Ramah=Cumorah. Orson Pratt preached in the Ogden Tabernacle, May 18, 1873: "The Jaredites, acquainted with the art of writing, kept their records. And among the host of records kept by them, were twenty-four plates of pure gold, which were kept by the Prophet Ether . . . These records were carried by Ether from the hill Ramah, afterwards called Cumorah, where the Jaredites were destroyed, as well as the Nephites. He carried them forth towards South America, and placed them in a position north of the Isthmus, where a portion of the people of King Limhi, about one hundred years before Christ, found them." (*Journal of Discourses*, 16:50.)

2. Located in New York. "Thirty-six years prior to this time his nation was destroyed in what we term the State of New York, around about a hill, called by that people the Hill of Cumorah, when many hundreds of thousands of the Nephites—men, women and children, fell, during the greatest battle that they had had with the Lamanites." (Orson Pratt, Aug. 25, 1878, *Journal of Discourses* 20:62.)

3. Joseph Took Plates from Cumorah. "It will be, next Thursday night, 54 years since the Prophet Joseph Smith, then but a lad, was permitted by the angel of the Lord to take the gold plates of the Book of Mormon from the hill Cumorah, as it was called in ancient times, located in the State of New York." (Orson Pratt, Sept. 18, 1881, *Journal of Discourses*, 22:224)

4. Millions Killed Near Cumorah. "Finally, they became so utterly wicked, so fully ripened for destruction, that one branch of the nation, called the Nephites, gathered their entire people around the hill Cumorah, in the State of New York, in Ontario County; and the Lamanites, the opposite army, gathered by millions in the same region. The two nations were four years in gathering their forces, during which no fighting took place; but at the end of that time, having marshalled all their hosts, the fighting commenced, the Lamanites coming upon the Nephites, and destroying all of them, except a very few, who had previously deserted over to the Lamanites." (Orson Pratt, April 6, 1874, *Journal of Discourses*, 17:30.)

D. Elder George Albert Smith. "We visited the Hill Cumorah and were accorded the courtesy of going thereon by the wife of Mr. George Sampson, a brother of Admiral Wm. Sampson, who before his death owned the property. . . . We were delighted to be there. Looking over the surrounding country we remembered that two great races of people had wound up their existence in the vicinity, had fought their last fight, and that hundreds of thousands had been slain within sight of that hill." (Elder George Albert Smith, *Conference Report*, April 1906, p. 56)

E. B. H. Roberts. “This time it will have to do with so important a matter as a war of extinction of two peoples, the Nephites and the Jaredites, on the self same battle site, with the same 'hill' marking the axis of military movements. By the Nephites this 'hill' was called the 'Hill Cumorah,' by the Jaredites the 'Hill Ramah'; it was that same 'hill,' in which the Nephite records were deposited by Mormon and Moroni, and from which Joseph Smith obtained the Book of Mormon, therefore the 'Mormon Hill' of today—since the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—near Palmyra, New York.” (B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, p. 277.)

F. James E. Talmage. “Moroni told of the existence of the record . . . at that time lying buried in the side of a hill near Joseph’s home. The hill, which was known by one division of the ancient peoples as Cumorah, by another as Ramah, is situated near Palmyra in the State of New York .” (James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 1890, 1952, Chapter 14, pp. 255-6.)

G. Pres. Anthony W. Ivins: Cumorah and Ramah Identical. At the April 1928 general conference, President Anthony W. Ivins stated: “The passages which I have quoted from the Book of Mormon and the more extended discussion of this subject by Elder B. H. Roberts which was published in *The Deseret News* of March 3, 1928, definitely establish the following facts: That the Hill Cumorah, and the Hill Ramah are identical; that it was around this hill that the armies of both the Jaredites and Nephites, fought their great last battles; that it was in this hill that Mormon deposited all of the sacred records which had been entrusted to his care by Ammaron, except the abridgment which he had made from the plates of Nephi, which were delivered into the hands of his' son, Moroni. We know positively that it was in this hill that Moroni deposited the abridgment made by his father, and his own abridgment of the record of the Jaredites, and that it was from this hill that Joseph Smith obtained possession of them.” (President Anthony W. Ivins, *Conference Report*, April 1928.)

H. Joseph Fielding Smith. “Within recent years there has arisen among certain students of the Book of Mormon a theory to the effect that within the period covered by the Book of Mormon, the Nephites and Lamanites were confined almost within the borders of the territory comprising Central America and the southern portion of Mexico . . . This modernistic theory of necessity, in order to be consistent, must place the waters of Ripliancum and the Hill Cumorah some place within the restricted territory of Central America, notwithstanding the teachings of the Church to the contrary for upwards of 100 years. Because of this theory some members of the Church have become confused and greatly disturbed in their faith in the Book of Mormon. It is for this reason that evidence is here presented to show that it is not only possible that these places could be located as the Church has held during the past century, but that in very deed such is the case. . . . In the face of this evidence coming from the Prophet Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer, we cannot say that the Nephites and Lamanites did not possess the territory of the United States and Central America. Neither can we say that the great struggle which resulted in the destruction of the Nephites took place in Central America.” (Pres. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church News*, Feb. 27, 1954, pp. 2-3).

1. Only One Cumorah, and it is in New York. Joseph Fielding Smith stated the official position clearly: “It is known that the Hill Cumorah where the Nephites were destroyed is the hill where the Jaredites were also destroyed. This hill was known to the Jaredites as Rama. It was approximately near to the waters of Ripliancum, which the Book of Ether says, ‘by interpretation, is large, or to exceed all.’ Mormon adds: ‘And it came to pass that we did march forth to the land of Cumorah, and we did pitch our tents round about the hill Cumorah; and it was in a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains; and here we had hope to gain advantage over the Lamanites.’ It must be conceded that this description fits perfectly the land of Cumorah in New York, as it has been known since the visitation of Moroni to the

Prophet Joseph Smith, for the hill is in the proximity of the Great Lakes and also in the land of many rivers and fountains. Moreover, the Prophet Joseph Smith himself is on record, definitely declaring the present hill called Cumorah to be the exact hill spoken of in the Book of Mormon. Further, the fact that all of his associates from the beginning down have spoken of it as the identical hill where Mormon and Moroni hid the records, must carry some weight. It is difficult for a reasonable person to believe that such men as Oliver Cowdery, Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, David Whitmer, and many others, could speak frequently of the Spot where the Prophet Joseph Smith obtained the plates as the Hill Cumorah, and not be corrected by the Prophet, if that were not the fact. That they did speak of this hill in the days of the Prophet in this definite manner is an established record of history. . . . “ (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* , Vol.3, 1956, pp. 232-33.)

I. Bruce R. McConkie. “Both the Nephite and Jaredite civilizations fought their final great wars of extinction at and near the Hill Cumorah (or Ramah as the Jaredites termed it), which hill is located between Palmyra and Manchester in the western part of the State of New York. Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery and many of the early brethren, who were familiar with all the circumstances attending the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in this dispensation, have left us a pointed testimony as to the identity and location of Cumorah or Ramah.” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1958, 1966, 174-5.)

J. Marion G. Romney. At the October 1975 General Conference, President Marion G. Romney said: “In the western part of the state of New York near Palmyra is a prominent hill known as the ‘hill Cumorah.’ On July twenty-fifth of this year, as I stood on the crest of that hill admiring with awe the breathtaking panorama which stretched out before me on every hand, my mind reverted to the events which occurred in that vicinity some twenty-five centuries ago—events which brought to an end the great Jaredite nation. . . . This second civilization to which I refer, the Nephites , flourished in America between 600 B.C. and A.D. 400. Their civilization came to an end for the same reason, at the same place, and in the same manner as did the Jaredites” (President Marion G. Romney, October 4, 1975, *Ensign*, November 1975, p. 35.)

K. President Gordon B. Hinckley. In 1990, F. Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency, responded on behalf of President Gordon B. Hinckley to a man and his bishop in Oklahoma City who had enquired as to the location of the events spoken of in the Book of Mormon. Elder Watson responded, on First Presidency stationery: “Dear Bishop Brooks: I have been asked to forward to you for acknowledgment and handling the enclosed copy of a letter to President Gordon B. Hinckley from Ronnie Sparks of your ward. Brother Sparks inquired about the location of the Hill Cumorah mentioned in the Book of Mormon, where the last battle between the Nephites and Lamanites took place.

“The Church has long maintained, as attested to by references in the writings of General Authorities, that the Hill Cumorah in western New York state is the same as referenced in the Book of Mormon. The Brethren appreciate your assistance in responding to this inquiry, and asked that you convey to Brother Sparks their commendation for his gospel study. Sincerely yours, (signed), F. Michael Watson, Secretary to the First Presidency.” (Photo-copy of original Oct. 16, 1990 letter; mazeministry.com/frontpage/dna/cumorah/cumorah.htm; accessed September 22, 2010.)

II. More Than One Hill Cumorah?

A. Two Hill Cumorahs. "It is now my very carefully studied and considered opinion that the Hill Cumorah to which Mormon and his people gathered was somewhere in Middle America. The Book of Mormon evidence to this effect is irresistible and conclusive to one who will approach it with an open mind." (Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 1968, p. 447.)

B. Cumorah Doesn't Fit Spot of Final Battle. "As noted above, the hill should be located in the land northward, north of the narrow neck of land, and near the east sea. It should also have been large enough to have accommodated two wars of extermination involving tens of thousands of casualties. The area round about would have to have been highly productive agriculturally to sustain the warring Nephites during their few years of preparation. Finally, we have a plausible expectation of finding evidence of war, whether fortifications, habitations, weapons, or skeletons of victims. This evidence should reasonably date to two different time periods about one thousand years apart. The Palmyra Cumorah does not meet any of these expectations. It is awkwardly located; it is much too small; the area lacked the necessary agricultural potential, at least in Book of Mormon times when New York natives still were not using corn; and it lacks the expected archaeological record." (John E. Clark, *FARMS Review of Books*, Vol. 14, Nos. 1-22, 2002, pp. 29-30.)

C. Were There Two Cumorahs? "In 1937 Elder Jesse A. Washburn hinted, in the final pages of his book *From Babel to Cumorah*, that the last great battles of the Nephites and the Lamanites took place near the lands of their early settlements. And in 1940 he more strongly affirmed that fact in his book, *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography*. In other words, he was convinced that the Cum-orah of which the Book of Mormon speaks was somewhere in Middle America. And in 1947 Elder Thomas Stuart Ferguson, 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. 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." (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, [BYU], *Preliminary Report: Sidney B. Sperry Archive*, 1983, 1.)

1. Cumorah Not Logical for Final Battles. "It is highly speculative and unreasonable to conclude that any major battles involving tens of thousands of soldiers—perhaps even hundreds of thousands in the case of the Jaredites—would have used the New York Cumorah, merely a small drumlin, as a base of operations for battle. And the Book of Mormon text never states that Moroni placed the sacred records back in the hill before he died. For all we know, Moroni could have deposited the plates in the New York hill, providentially near the young Joseph Smith, after Moroni became an angel and had the unique capability of 'flying through the midst of heaven' (Rev. 14:6). (Bruce Van Orden, *FARMS Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 1 [1996], p. 57.)

D. No Longer Tenable. "For Mr. Metcalfe agrees with Dr. [John] Sorenson and most serious Latter-day Saint students of the subject that the so-called 'traditional' view of Book of Mormon geography—in which Nephite history covers most or all of North and South America—is untenable." He calls that theory a "probably indefensible position." (Daniel C. Peterson, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, Vol. 4, 1992, p. lxxii.)

1. Only a Few Die-Hards Still Advocate for One Cumorah. "All recent geographies of the

Book of Mormon can be divided into variants according to their initial assumptions concerning (1) the scale of Book of Mormon lands and (2) the location of Cumorah. The first division has, for all intents and purposes, been resolved. Only a few die-hards still advocate the folklore version of Book of Mormon geography that imagines a Pan-American geography with the location of Cumorah in New York, the narrow neck of land in Panama, and the land southward as South America. This traditional view simply cannot be supported with the internal evidence from the Book of Mormon, which clearly indicates that the lands of the Nephites and Lamanites had to be much more limited in extent, perhaps similar in size to the Holy Land of the New Testament.” (John E. Clark, *FARMS Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 2 [1996], p. 5.)

E. Cumorah Not Necessarily in New York. The quasi-official *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* notes: “This annual [Hill Cumorah] pageant has reinforced the common assumption that Moroni buried the plates of Mormon in the same hill where his father had buried the other plates, thus equating this New York hill with the Book of Mormon Cumorah. Because the New York site does not really 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 (Palmer), there are no conclusive connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site that has been suggested.” (David A. Palmer, “Cumorah,” *Encyclo-pedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, Macmillan, 1992, 1:346-7.)

F. Critic's Suggestion. “Many self-proclaimed Book of Mormon scholars have told me over the years that ‘we don't really know the exact location of the Hill Cumorah spoken of in the Book of Mormon.’ The obvious reason they want to deny that Joseph Smith's Hill Cumorah is the same one that is mentioned in the Book of Mormon is simple; there is literally not a trace of evidence to support the claim that 2,230,000 men died in battle using steel weapons and armor at the tiny hill now owned by the LDS Church in the State of New York called Cumorah.” (mazeministry.com/frontpage/dna/cumorah/cumorah.htm; accessed September 22, 2010.)

1. Sarcastic Conclusion. “The facts seem to indicate that the official stance of the LDS Church is that the Hill Cumorah in New York is the site of two major Book of Mormon battles which resulted in a combined body count of approximately 2,230,000 men, women and children. Considering the archaeological gold mine this place must be it's too bad the Church doesn't at least turn the site over to National Geographic to start some digging and recovery work on what must be the burial site of millions of bones and tons of primitive early American weaponry. Yeah, right.” (*Ibid.*)

Compiled by
Reed Wahlquist
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