

# Revisiting the Land of Jerusalem

“And behold, [Christ] shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem . . . the land of our forefathers.” (Alma 7:10)

For more than 160 years, beginning at least with the 1833 publication of Alexander Campbell's *Delusions*, countless critics have claimed that the Book of Mormon's use of the phrase *land of Jerusalem* was a major error and proof that the book was false. They have especially criticized the use of this phrase in reference to the place where Christ would be born. That phrase was not used in the Bible nor in the Apocrypha. Therefore, the critics have concluded, it was an example of Joseph Smith's ignorance and evidence that he had tried to perpetrate a fraud.<sup>1</sup> For anyone honestly concerned with the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, there was little to argue about after Hugh Nibley showed in 1957 that one of the Amarna letters, written in the thirteenth century B.C. and discovered in 1887, recounted the capture of “a city of the land of Jerusalem, Bet-Ninib.”<sup>2</sup> Predictably, this evidence, along with further evidence of the general usage of this type of terminology in the Old World<sup>3</sup> has been ignored by critics of the Book of Mormon.

Now from the Dead Sea Scrolls comes an even more specific occurrence of the phrase *land of Jerusalem* that gives insight into its usage and meaning—in a text that indirectly links the phrase to the Jerusalem of Lehi's time.

Robert Eisenmann and Michael Wise, in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, discuss one document that they have provisionally named “Pseudo-Jeremiah” (4Q385). The beginning of the damaged text reads as follows: “. . . Jeremiah the Prophet before the Lord [. . . wh]o were taken captive from the land of Jerusalem” (fragment 1, lines 1-2).<sup>4</sup>

In their discussion of this text, Eisenmann and Wise elaborate on the significance of the phrase *land of Jerusalem*, which they see as an equivalent for Judah (*Yehud*): “Another interesting reference is to the ‘land of Jerusalem’ in Line 2 of Fragment 1. This greatly enhances the sense of historicity of the whole, since Judah or ‘Yehud’ (the name of the area on coins from the Persian period) by this time consisted of little more than Jerusalem and its immediate environs.”<sup>5</sup>

Based on the evidence from Qumran, and in the words of Eisenmann and Wise, we can conclude that consistent usage of such language among a people of Israel who fled Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah also “greatly enhances the sense of historicity” of the Book of Mormon.

Critics of the Book of Mormon will not likely give up this argument, despite the evidence. This is not surprising, after all, because the part of their argument that *the phrase was not known in Joseph Smith's day was correct*. Virtually all opponents of the Book of Mormon have to assume, *a priori*, that the text is a purely human nineteenth-century document in order to justify their rejection of the text. In the case of *land of Jerusalem*, since the phrase could not be explained as being part of Joseph's information environment and since it was not known in biblical literature, they incorrectly concluded that Joseph must have been wrong. Trying to prove a negative, they argued from silence and puffed this supposed error into what they believed was one of their highest polemical mountains of evidence against the Book of Mormon.

The phrase was *not* current in Joseph's day, but, unknown to him, it was an accurate usage for the day in which he claimed the book was written. Thus, despite the critics' best efforts, Joseph's supposed “error” becomes one more

evidence of the Book of Mormon's authenticity.

Research by Gordon C. Thomasson, originally published as a FARMS Update in *Insights* (March 1994): 2.

### Notes

1. For a thorough overview of this argument, see Daniel C. Peterson, "Chattanooga Cheapshot, or The Gall of Bitterness," review of *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism*, by John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 62–78.

2. Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 101.

3. See Robert F. Smith, "The Land of Jerusalem: The Place of Jesus' Birth," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 170–72.

4. Robert H. Eisenmann and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Shaftesbury, Eng.: Element, 1992), 58.

5. *Ibid.*, 57.