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Is There a Surviving Book of Mormon Place Name in Mexico for the Land Desolation?

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In a preceding Research Note, we considered Tabasco, Mexico, the leading candidate for the greater land Bountiful, as a name survival from a compound of two Hebrew names TOB(A)-SHO(A). Both TOB and SHOA mean "bountiful."

Tabasco, like Bountiful, is located in the "narrow neck of land" Isthmus of Tehuántepec territory along the tropical lowland Gulf Coast of Mexico. The positive results of that study lead us naturally to look for a similar surviving Nephite-Hebrew name for the land Desolation. This will also allow us to take a deeper look at the question of possible Hebrew influence in Mesoamerican place names. My procedure for this place-name survey is as follows:

1. Identify primary geographical location of test name in Book of Mormon.
2. Determine Pre-Columbian origin and meaning of loan word.
3. Identify donor language words with similar spelling, structure, and meaning from both Hebrew roots and signification of proper names.
4. Identify any comparable geographical model for possible donor place name.

The neighboring state of Oaxaca is the major territory that lies to the north of the Isthmus of Tehuántepec "narrow neck," like the land Desolation (Alma 22:30-32; Norman 1965). Could Oaxaca similarly be a surviving name for "Desolation" that was translated from the original unknown Nephite-Hebrew name in the Book of Mormon?

Modern Oaxaca is from HUAXYACAC, which is a Nahuatl name for "the spur of the acacias" (Wolf 1966: 10). The North American acacia tree has thorny branches. We can examine the separate parts of the word for its fuller meaning and origin. HUAX-IN (a large tropical tree with edible pods) and related words beginning with HUAX- are all trees, including HUAX-TEPEC (tree hill) and HUAXPEHPEN(A) (tree harvest). HUAX-PITZTLI (dried seed of the guaje tree) combines "dry" with "tree" in HUAX. The origin of this connection between the separate meanings is considered below. HUA means dry as in HUA-YIC and HUACQUI ("something dry"), and related forms HUA-QU(I) ("to dry out, evaporate, wither"), and HUA-TZ(A) ("to get dried out"). HUA could be a transliteration from the Hebrew word HELAH meaning "rust." The meanings suggest the original transliteration was to HUATZ that evolved to HUAX.

The post-position -YACAC combines "nose" or "point" and the "spur" or "thorn" that relates to desolate places in the CAC element. HAK'KOZ is "thorn" in Hebrew. YACA means "pointed" as in YACATL (nose or point), -YACAPAN (postposition "in front of"), YACAPILOA (to draw something out into a point), YACAPITZTIC (something pointed), and YACAPITZ (point). The CAC element has other root relations, as in CACTI, the first element of the common verb CACTIMAN(I) ("to be quiet, empty, deserted"). This suggests an origin of the spiny CACTI of the American desert. (*Note: "Cactus" is Latin, and "kaktos" is Greek.*) *The uncertain origin of the word YUCA, the agave plant in Spanish, is doubtless Nahuatl YACAC, a spiny cactus of and Mexico and western North America. See further analysis of YACAC below.* YACAC compares to BALAC with a Biblical signification of "spoil or destroy." BAKBUK-IAH ("wasting of Jehovah") is apparently a Hebrew adaptation. (SBD)

A very tempting Nephite-Hebrew reconstruction for Oaxaca/Desolation in both phonetic transliteration and meaning is apparent: Nahuatl – HUAX-YACAC (tree, dried out, withered, empty, deserted); Hebrew – HELAH-BALAC (rusted, decayed, spoiled, destroyed).

The only foreign word in this match is the "tree" meaning in HUAX, and the Book of Mormon resolves the anomaly. The Nephites named Desolation for the massive destruction of trees by the Jaredites that left much of the land barren (Helaman 3:5-7). This ancient deforestation is very visible in parts of Oaxaca today. That tree connection must have stuck in the name Desolation to be later adopted as a word for tree in Nahuatl. The Nephites probably named Desolation for destruction of the Jaredite nation as well, and the HELAH-BALAC construction covers both meanings.

To connect BALAC (spoil) and BAKBUK (waste) with YACAC is simple because of the absence of the letter B in Nahuatl that must be dropped or substituted in a transliteration. P can substitute for B as in Monte Alban (pan). PACAC in Nahuatl is an alternative for PAC(A) meaning to bathe, wash, or launder something. PACCA-POLIHU(I) means "to be weak, faint, sickly" (literally waste away). PACCA-YOHUIA means "to suffer something." PACHIHUIA means "to waylay someone." PAPAC(A) means "to ridicule," and PAHPAC(A) is "to scrub something." The common meaning in these words is to do away with something that relates to CACTIMAN(I) ("to be quiet, empty, deserted") noted above.

Additional evidence for a Hebrew connection, independent of the HELAH-BALAC connection to HUAX-YACAC, can be considered. If the HUAX connection to HELAH (rusted) isn't sufficiently convincing, then the related Nahuatl word HUELOA ("to destroy, undo, lay waste something") certainly is! The Nahuatl CACAHU(A) "to turn over [loss of] stewardship to someone," (see -CA in Karttunen), close to PACHIHUIA "waylay someone," is not far from the Hebrew BAKBUKIAH (wasting of Jehovah) as it relates to BALAC (spoil). With the K as C, and the B dropped or substituted in Nahuatl, the Hebrew match from BAKBUKIAH for CACAHU(A) comes close (KUKIAH > CUCIAH).

In conclusion, the linguistic case for TABASCO originating from TOB(A)-SHO(A) (Bountiful), and HUAX-YACAC (Oaxaca) coming from HELAH-BALAC (Desolation) or related Hebrew roots represents a strong argument for a Hebrew-Nahuatl connection within a leading Book of Mormon geographic context. We are just breaking ground in this promising study that could finally put the Book of Mormon on a real map.

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One hill located in the Land of Desolation where the final battles of both the Jaredites and Nephites took place; another twenty-five hundred feet high. Did you know: A DNA study by Emory University, accepted by the Smithsonian, acknowledges that some Native Americans have ancestry in common with the peoples in modern Israel and the Mediterranean area. There are two hills called Cumorah. This book contains a number of evidences in support of the authenticity of various details in the Book of Mormon. A good portion of the examples are unique to Lund's book, for example, the Mayan's obsessions with perfectly "level" roads, which are broken up in the storms at Christ's death. The geographical setting of the Book of Mormon is the set of locations of the events described in the Book of Mormon. There is no universal consensus among Mormon scholars regarding the placement of these locations in the known world, other than somewhere in the Americas. A popular "traditional" view among many Latter-day Saint faithful covers much of North and South America; while many Book of Mormon scholars, particularly in recent decades, believe the text itself favors a limited Mesoamerican or Central American setting. During the next few years, Smith dictated an English translation of this text to his wife and other scribes, and in 1830 The Book of Mormon was published. In the same year, Smith founded the Church of Christ—later known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—in Fayette, New York. The religion rapidly gained converts, and Smith set up communities in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Upon viewing the land, he immediately confirmed the valley to be the new homeland of the Latter-day Saints. Within days, Young and his companions began building the future Salt Lake City at the foot of the Wasatch Mountains. Later that year, Young rejoined the main body of pioneers in Iowa, who named him president and prophet of the church.