

The Plains of Moreh

The second chapter of the Book of Abraham parallels content found in Genesis 12. Both texts narrate the patriarch's flight into Canaan and provide specific geographic details about the route he and his family took as they fled Haran (Abr. 2:14–18; Gen. 12:4–9). The Book of Abraham describes Abraham as “journey[ing] from Haran by the way of Jershon, to come to the land of Canaan” (Abr. 2:16).¹ Thereafter, Abraham and his party “passed from Jershon through the land unto the place of Sechem” (Abr. 2:18).² This Sechem, the text says, “was situated in the plains of Moreh,” which themselves were located within “the borders of the land of the Canaanites.” Here Abraham “offered sacrifice . . . in the plains of Moreh, and called on the Lord devoutly.” He did this, he says, because he discovered that the land of Canaan was an “idolatrous nation” (Abr. 2:18). As read in both Genesis and the Book of Abraham, it is here that Abraham received a theophany of the Lord with the promise “unto thy seed will I give this land” (Abr. 2:19; compare Gen. 12:7).

One of these named toponyms deserves special comment. The mention of the *plains* of Moreh at Abraham 2:18 corresponds to the *plain* (singular) of Moreh named at KJV Genesis 12:6 (compare Deut. 11:30). As scholars have long recognized, however, the rendering of “plain” in

1. The location of this Jershon is unknown and not mentioned in the corresponding chapter, Genesis 12. From the description in the text, it appears to lie somewhere between Haran in northern Mesopotamia and Canaan, placing it, probably, somewhere in modern Syria or Lebanon. Obviously, this Jershon should not be confused with the New World Jershon of the Book of Mormon (Alma 27:22–24).

2. Sechem (or, variously, Shechem or Sicheh) is widely identified with Tel Balata in the modern West Bank and is attested in Egyptian sources from Abraham's day. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 186, 335–36; and Phyllis Saretta, *Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt: Perceptions and Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 20, 185.

the KJV is an error.³ The Hebrew word mistranslated as “plain” in the KJV (*’ēlôn*) actually means “oak” or “terebinth.”⁴ Even the name “Moreh” (rendered in both Genesis and the Book of Abraham as a proper noun) might more technically be rendered “oracle, diviner, teacher” in order to produce a name like “the teacher’s terebinth” or “the oracle oak” for the location.⁵ It would appear that with “plains of Moreh,” Joseph Smith was following the KJV in his own rendering of Abraham 2:18. That the Prophet would at times follow the KJV in his translation of the Book of Abraham is not surprising given the dependence on the KJV seen in his translation of the Book of Mormon.⁶

Although the Book of Abraham follows the KJV with the less-accurate rendition of this passage, it nevertheless departs from the KJV in a subtle and significant way. As mentioned above, the Book of Abraham explicitly mentions that upon arriving at Sechem in the plains of Moreh—the first named location in Canaan—Abraham was shocked to discover that the land of Canaan was an “idolatrous nation” (Abr. 2:18). This detail is left unmentioned in the KJV, which merely notes that “the Canaanite was then in the land” (Gen. 12:6). This idolatry prompted Abraham to offer sacrifices and call on the Lord, details once again missing from Genesis.⁷

How is this significant for the Book of Abraham? As multiple scholars have observed, it is very likely that the “oak of Moreh” (the “oracle

3. Melvin Hunt, “Moreh,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:904. This error was not unique to the KJV. The Great Bible (1539), Bishops’ Bible (1568), and Geneva Bible (1599) also read “plain of Moreh” at Genesis 12:6.

4. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, 2 vols. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1994), 1:54; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 86–87 n. 6; G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974–2021), 6:346. English Bibles preceding the KJV that captured the more accurate reading “oak of Moreh” include the Tyndale Bible (1530), Coverdale Bible (1535), and the Matthew Bible (1537).

5. Speiser, *Genesis*, 87 n. 6; Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 6:346; and J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 971.

6. See Royal Skousen, “The History of the Book of Mormon Text: Parts 5 and 6 of Volume 3 of the Critical Text,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 87–128; and Royal Skousen, “The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 81–110.

7. In Genesis 12, Abraham builds an altar to the Lord only after his theophany in verse 7.

oak”) was a local Canaanite cult site—that is, a sacred or holy tree that functioned as an oracular shrine or Canaanite sanctuary.⁸ “The oak of Moreh clearly belonged to the cultic center at Shechem. . . . The name of the oak . . . suggests that it functioned as an oracular tree.”⁹ It was, in effect, “a site of divination.”¹⁰ Speiser notes that one ancient Jewish source, Targum Onqelos, recognized this and so rendered *’elôn* as “plain” (Aramaic: *meyšar*) instead of “oak,” probably to “avoid the pagan implications of a sacred tree.”¹¹

The Book of Abraham’s added detail about the patriarch’s encounter with Canaanite idolatry also reinforces the point made by Matthew L. Bowen: “Substantial parts of Genesis 12–22 [and Abraham 2] illustrate how Abraham ‘templifies’ the Promised Land—its re-creation as sacred space—by Abraham’s building altars at Shechem, Mamre/Hebron, Bethel, and Moriah.”¹² As told in the Book of Abraham, the idolatry Abraham confronted at the plains (oak) of Moreh near Shechem in Canaan prompted him to consecrate the land by erecting an altar. This he would repeat, as Bowen notes, at other Canaanite locations according to the biblical record (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9). In response, the Lord appeared to Abraham and offered him his own (true) oracle about

8. Douglas and Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 971; Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 6:346; Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 91; Hunt, “Moreh,” 4:904; and K. Nielsen, “Oak,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons of the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 637–38.

9. Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 11:271; compare R. P. Dugan, “Moreh, Oak of,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 3:412, who notes, “The name of the tree or wood may indicate that it was a place to consult a teacher or Canaanite abode of ancestral spirits; or perhaps the name refers to the theophany that occurred there.”

10. Susan Ackerman, “Between Athens and Jerusalem, on the Wings of a Dove?,” in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, ed. Joel Baden, Hindy Najman, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2017), 10.

11. Speiser, *Genesis*, 86; compare Alexander Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic, Volume 1: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2004), 17; and Edward M. Cook, *A Glossary of Targum Onkelos* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2008), 152.

12. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Where I Will Meet You’: The Convergence of Sacred Time and Sacred Space as the Etiological Function of the Tent of Meeting,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space, and Sacred Meaning: Proceedings of the Third Interpreter Foundation Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 5 November 2016*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *The Temple on Mount Zion 4* (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2020), 10.

his seed inheriting the land of Canaan at the place called, literally, the “oracle oak” (Abr. 2:19; Gen. 12:7).¹³

None of this is obvious from reading the King James translation of Genesis 12. So even if the translation of the Book of Abraham is in some degree dependent on the KJV, the underlying narrative captures something deeper and more authentic to the ancient world of Abraham.

Further Reading

Freedman, David Noel. “The Ebla Tablets and the Abraham Tradition.”

In *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, edited by Truman G. Madsen, 67–78. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978.

Lundquist, John M. “Was Abraham at Ebla?: A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham.” In *Studies in Scriptures, Volume 2: The Pearl of Great Price*, edited by Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, 225–37. Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1985.

Ricks, Stephen D. “The Early Ministry of Abraham (Abraham 1 and 2).” In *Studies in Scriptures, Volume 2: The Pearl of Great Price*, edited by Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, 217–24. Sandy, Utah: Randall Book, 1985.

13. As Avram Shannon elaborates, “One of the first things Abraham does when he comes into the land of Canaan is to build an altar at Shechem (Genesis 12:6). In fact, Abraham’s itinerary through the land of Canaan is characterized by his building of altars, many of which become holy places or other important locations in later Israelite history. . . . These altars mark places of divine promise and interaction, showing places where Abraham interacts with his family, God, and others.” Avram R. Shannon, “Abraham: A Man of Relationships,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 285.