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# JOSEPH SMITH AND THE “RED SEA” IN 2 NEPHI 19:1

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E. Jan Wilson

**Abstract:** *When Nephi quotes Isaiah 9:1 in 2 Nephi 19:1, Isaiah’s the “way of the sea” (KJV translation) becomes “the way of the Red Sea” in the Book of Mormon, a change that is often said to reflect an egregious blunder by Joseph Smith or a scribal error. However, there may be a scenario in which it could reflect a reasonable interpretation of an authentic ancient passage.*

When one reads the Book of Mormon, it quickly becomes evident that a large amount of material from Old Testament prophets is included in that work. First and foremost are the quotations from Isaiah. Two things strike the reader immediately: first, the language used is frequently that of the King James version (or KJV) of the Bible, and second, the quotes are not always *exactly* what one finds in the KJV. Hugh Nibley addressed these phenomena over fifty years ago:

It is always the *audience* which determines in what language God shall speak to men — the experience of Pentecost should make that clear — and also through what version or edition of the Scriptures he shall speak. The edition is naturally the one which is both understood and accepted by the hearer; in short, as missionaries know, people are always preached to from their own Bible. To the world to which the English translation of the Book of Mormon was addressed [during the lifetime of Joseph Smith] there was only one acceptable Bible, the King James translation. And so the Book of Mormon follows that. But no edition or translation is perfect and the Book of Mormon does not follow the King James version slavishly by any means — that is a thing which the critics studiously overlook. As long as the King James version conveys the correct meaning it is naturally the text to follow;

but the quotations from it in the Book of Mormon are full of changes. Are they significant? Let us see.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Nibley then proceeds to adeptly deal with that question, using facts that have come to light since the time of Joseph Smith. But I would like to add some conjecture (speculation?) concerning Joseph Smith's methodology.<sup>2</sup>

First, regarding the Old Testament prophets who are also quoted in the Book of Mormon, it is apparent that Joseph Smith seems to have not attempted to correct *all* of the mistakes that were made by the King James translators. Things that were of no great theological or doctrinal significance were often left alone, and the KJV translation was put into the Book of Mormon essentially as it appeared in the KJV. A good example of this is the second part of 2 Nephi 13 (Isaiah 3), verses 16–26. In these verses are several occurrences of something that Hebraists refer to a *hapax legomenon*, which is a word or expression that only occurs once in the entire corpus. For that reason, it may be difficult, or even impossible, to know exactly what it means.<sup>3</sup> Most of these occurrences are words referring to jewelry worn by the women who are being criticized in those verses. Information that has come to us from cognate languages, not yet fully deciphered during Joseph Smith's lifetime, such as Akkadian (the language of the Babylonians and Assyrians), suggests that some of the words that the KJV translators used for jewelry were simply educated guesses. Moreover, when the KJV translators were dealing with very difficult passages, there is reason to believe, or at least suspect, that they turned to the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament made at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, 285–247 BC), which, itself, was not always reliable, and differed in some parts rather significantly from the traditional Hebrew text. Here we could also mention the issue of how words in italics in the KJV are treated in the Book of Mormon, where the

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1. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1967), 129. However, another retired professor from BYU pointed out to me that while the KJV was used by almost everyone in America, the Puritans had used the Geneva Bible, even though the KJV had been published in 1611.

2. It was Prof. Nibley himself who once said that speculation is “good, clean fun.” Hugh Nibley, “Lecture 31: Mosiah 7,” *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 2: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 20, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/71/>.

3. Hence the phrase often used by scholars is *locus unus*, *locus nullus*, meaning that if it only occurs once, then that single occurrence is not really any more valuable than nothing at all!

results do not show a consistent effort to correct numerous minor details in the text.<sup>4</sup>

Second, Joseph did seem to make changes when doing so was of theological/doctrinal importance. It is unclear whether this arises from differences between what was written on the gold plates and the eleventh-century AD Hebrew text that was the basis for the KJV translation, or from inspired changes given to Joseph via inspiration. An example is found in Isaiah 3:9, where the KJV reads:

The shew of their countenance doth witness against them; and *they declare their sin* as Sodom, they hide it not. (italics mine)

But in the 2 Nephi 13:9 we read:

The show of their countenance doth witness against them, and *doth declare their sin* to be even as Sodom, and they cannot hide it.

The KJV version of the verse in question is indeed an accurate translation of the Hebrew that is found in the text that is traditionally accepted as authoritative. But even the Hebrew does not make sense from a legal perspective. If the people in question are witnessing against themselves (i.e., confessing their sins), then what need is there for additional witnesses? In such a case, the guilty look on their faces is not needed as an additional witness. However, in the Book of Mormon rendering, the people in question are *not* confessing, therefore the guilty look on their faces is the *only thing* that gives them away and condemns them. Therefore, only the rendering in the Book of Mormon makes sense. But is there anything to further substantiate that rendering? Well, in this case there is, but that requires a quick introduction to the nature of the manuscript used for the KJV as opposed to the Isaiah writings that Lehi would have carried with him from Jerusalem some 2,600 years ago.

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4. Stan Spencer, “Missing Words: King James Bible Italics, the Translation of the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith as an Unlearned Reader,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 45–106, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/missing-words-king-james-bible-italics-the-translation-of-the-book-of-mormon-and-joseph-smith-as-an-unlearned-reader/>. Spencer infers from the data that the characteristics of Book of Mormon variants relative to italicized KJV words are “better explained as the product of the well-intentioned but uncoordinated efforts of two individuals, each trying to adapt the Book of Mormon translation for a contemporary audience. Specifically, many of these variants are best explained as the results of Joseph Smith’s attempts to restore missing words to a text from which some words (those italicized in the KJV) had been purposefully omitted by a prior translator” (p. 45).

The Hebrew text used by the KJV translators was what is referred to as the “Masoretic text.” Originally, Hebrew was written without vowels — only the consonants were needed for the native speakers. But after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., the Jews were largely scattered and knowledge of the correct pronunciation of the Hebrew words was in danger of being lost. Therefore, certain scholars, called Masoretes,<sup>5</sup> created special markings (between the seventh and tenth centuries AD), which could be added above, below, or even within the already-written consonants, and thereby preserve the knowledge of the correct pronunciation. However, complete manuscripts of the Old Testament were rare, and one composed in Cairo around 1008 AD by the ben Asher family became the accepted version, and a copy of it, called the Leningrad codex, ended up in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg (re-named Leningrad after the Russian revolution in 1917, hence the name Leningrad codex, but in 1991 the name of the city was later changed back to St. Petersburg). In any case, that manuscript has been there since 1863.

Unfortunately, the text of that copy only dates back approximately 1,000 years, but that was the earliest complete manuscript we had until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940s. Now we have copies of the Isaiah text going back to at least 100 BC, such as the Great Isaiah Scroll of Cave I (of Qumran), known to scholars, and hereafter cited, as 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>. That document is over 1,000 years older than the text available to the King James translators and therefore likely to contain fewer mistakes and fewer “corrections” made by copyists over the centuries. That record of Isaiah’s writings seems to substantiate the Book of Mormon reading of Isaiah 3:9.

The main difference between the two readings, as far as the Hebrew text is concerned, is the displacement of one letter (the *waw* which is simply a vertical line in modern Hebrew) from the beginning of one word (where that letter constituted the conjunction “and”) to the ending of the previous word, and in so doing, this eliminated the original final letter of that word, thereby turning a feminine singular verb into a plural verb. This process may be demonstrated as follows, using Hebrew letters (note also that Hebrew is written from right to left rather than left to right as we do in English).

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5. The term *Masoretes* is derived from the Hebrew term *Ba‘ālēy Hammāsōrā*, meaning “Masters of the Tradition.” They were Bible scholars living mainly in the cities of Jerusalem and Tiberias, and the vowel system they devised is often referred to as “Tiberian vocalization.”

Relative to the original text segment of interest from the Dead Sea Scrolls הגידהו, in the KJV, the *waw* (ו) moves to the right, eliminating the final letter of the previous word, thus producing הגידו, meaning “they declared.” The movement of letters is slightly more complicated than just a movement of the *waw*, because the verb, which was changed by the addition of the *waw* to plural, originally had a final *heh*, thus marking the verb as third feminine singular. This *heh* is a critical component of the change and will be discussed in more detail later.

If we look at the entire segment in question (using a translation that is as literal as possible), we have this for the Dead Sea Scroll version, with emphasis added to highlight the letters *waw* and *heh* that will be moved or replaced, respectively, in the Masoretic version:<sup>6</sup>

הַפֶּרֶת פְּנֵיהֶם עָנְתָה בָּם וְחָטְאוּתָם כְּסוֹדִם הַגִּידוּ וְלֹא כִחְדוּ....

The show of their countenance has testified against them, and declared their sin *to be* as Sodom; and they did not hide *it*. (Isaiah 3:9 from the Isaiah scroll 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, of the Dead Sea Scrolls, my translation)

In contrast, the Masoretic text on which the KJV is based has the following (with emphasis added to show the location of the shifted letter *waw* that now replaces a once-final *heh*):

הַפֶּרֶת פְּנֵיהֶם עָנְתָה בָּם וְחָטְאוּתָם כְּסוֹדִם הַגִּידוּ וְלֹא כִחְדוּ....

The show of their countenance has testified against them, and they have declared their sin *to be* as Sodom; they did not hide *it*. (Isaiah 3:9 from the Masoretic text, my translation)

If we compare the version found in 2 Nephi 3:9 we find that it is indeed supported by 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>:

The show of their countenance doth witness against them, and doth declare their sin to be even as Sodom, and they cannot hide it.

There is, however, one caveat: the first part of this verse is written on line 13 of column III of the Isaiah scroll and then continues on line 14. The crucial word, i.e., the Hebrew word meaning to “declare,” is the final word on line 13 and so close to the left edge of the page, that the

6. This can be seen on line 13 of column III of the Great Isaiah Scroll from Cave I of Qumran. That text has no actual vowels (this was written long before the Masoretes invented their vowel system).



scribe (writing from right to left) was forced to squeeze the final letter in by writing it slightly higher than the other letters, thereby distorting the letter. It is not easy to decide whether the scribe was writing a *heh* (corresponding to English “h” and indicating the word was a singular feminine verb) or a *waw* (which would make that verb plural, as in the KJV). However, in addition to the vertical line, there is the obvious beginning of a horizontal line starting on the upper left side of the vertical line, which would definitely eliminate the possibility of its being a *waw* and instead indicate an almost certain *heh*, thus confirming the suggestion presented here, and thus also the Book of Mormon reading. Furthermore, this interpretation of that partial letter was also confirmed by the noted Dead Sea Scroll scholar Frank Moore Cross.<sup>7</sup>

This means that we do, indeed, have historical evidence supporting the plausibility of Joseph Smith’s translation of that particular Isaiah passage, consistent with the claim that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text, with the Isaiah passages in 2 Nephi originating from an Isaiah text predating Nephi’s departure from Jerusalem around 600 BC, not long after the time of Isaiah himself, while the later versions would naturally have had more time in which the “lying stylus of the scribes” (Jeremiah 8:8, a more literal translation of עַט שֶׁקֶר) could tamper with the writings.

This brings us up to the puzzle of the “Red Sea” in 2 Nephi 19:1, quoting Isaiah 9:1 in the KJV (Isaiah 8:23 in the Hebrew text). Let us first look at the complete verses:

Nevertheless the dimness *shall* not *be* such as *was* in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict *her by* the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations. (Isaiah 9:1, italics original in the KJV)

Nevertheless, the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun,

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7. Frank Moore Cross, 1921–2012, was a Harvard Professor and one of the three original members of the Dead Sea Scroll committee of the American Schools of Oriental Research, located in Jerusalem. It was under that committee that a book containing the original photographs of the Great Isaiah Scroll, which were taken by John C. Trever in the late 1940s, was published in 1974 (John C. Trever, *Scrolls from Qumran Cave I: The Great Isaiah Scroll, The Order of the Community, The Peshet to Habakkuk* [Jerusalem: The Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and The Shrine of the Book, 1974]). Using the photographs in that book, he and I discussed that particular Isaiah verse during one of his visits to Jerusalem in July 1989, and he confirmed my reading.

and the land of Naphtali, and afterwards did more grievously afflict by the way of the Red Sea beyond Jordan in Galilee of the nations. (2 Nephi 19:1)

The change of “sea” to “Red Sea” poses an obvious problem since the Red Sea is not beyond Jordan in Galilee, but to the south of Israel. John Tvedtnes has suggested that this was a scribal error from Oliver Cowdery, “probably influenced by the fact that he had already written about the Red Sea in a number of earlier passages (1 Nephi 2:5, 8–9; 4:2; 16:14; 17:26–27).”<sup>8</sup> While such a scenario could occur, the last use of “Red Sea” in 1 Nephi is over twenty chapters earlier than 2 Nephi 19, which might seem long enough to reduce the residual impact of having written the term several times before. Another proposed resolution has been offered by D. Charles Pyle involving the King’s Highway, a route that led out of Egypt along the shores of the Red Sea, passed through Edom, and changed direction after meeting with the Way of the Sea, in Galilee, to go into Mesopotamia.<sup>9</sup> Joseph may have taken Jesus along this route when he went to Egypt, and Christ may have later traveled along portions of that route, making it possible that the light of Christ passed along a route that could align with the reference in 2 Nephi 19:1 to the way of the Red Sea. It is possible, but seems to lack adequate support and is not a particularly satisfying proposal. Further investigation may change that. An alternative perspective is presented in this paper.

We should note that in addition to the use of the term “Red Sea” instead of merely “sea,” there is one other noticeable difference in the wording (the differences in punctuation may be ignored for our purposes). In the KJV, the direct object of the verb “afflict” is the pronoun *her*, which is not in the Hebrew (as indicated by the Italics). The insertion of that word is plausible because the thing that is being afflicted is the land, and the Hebrew word for “land” is indeed feminine. Therefore, the inserted word in the KJV, *her*, refers to the land. However, this is not a critical point for the current investigation.

As we proceed with our investigation, we suggest that the reader keep in mind the possibility that the version in the Book of Mormon may reflect a deeper understanding of the original text. If correct, that

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8. John Tvedtnes, “2Nephi 19:1.RedSea,” Book of Mormon Research (website), <https://bookofmormonresearch.org/specific-criticisms/criticisms-2-nephi/2-nephi-191-red-sea>.

9. D. Charles Pyle’s proposal in personal correspondence from 2004 is quoted and discussed by Jeff Lindsay in “Feeling Blue About the Red Sea in the Book of Mormon?,” *Arise from the Dust* (blog, formerly *Mormanity*), October 18, 2019, <https://www.arisefromthedust.com/feeling-blue-about-red-sea-in-book-of/>.

would reflect a deeper understanding inherent in what was revealed to Joseph. Here we must recognize that there are different schools of thought in the Church regarding the details of the divine translation of the Book of Mormon and how revelation was given. Some argue that revealed concepts were given that led Joseph to use his own words to express the concepts from the Book of Mormon, while others maintain that actual words must have been given to Joseph, at least in many cases. The important thing, though, is not how the revealed text of the Book of Mormon was created, but that it reflects revelation, and if so, there may be more to the wording of 1 Nephi 19:1 than a human error from Joseph. It is possible that a more “correct” or detailed translation could have been given but was not necessary or appropriate in the Lord’s eyes (or in Joseph’s judgment).

To explore the potential of added meaning related to 1 Nephi 19:1, it will be necessary to re-translate the entire verse of Isaiah 9:1 using the modern tools now available for that job such as the *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*.<sup>10</sup> Here is my proposed translation:

For there is no gloom in him who (was) a distress to her<sup>11</sup> in the former time, when he brought contempt upon the land of Zebulun, and upon the land of Naphtali; but later he brought honor (to) the way (by) the sea, beyond the (river) Jordan, (in) the district<sup>12</sup> of the nations.

Note that in this updated (alternative) translation, the Hebrew word *galil* has not been translated as “Galilee” but rather “district.” With this plausible translation, it can indeed be a place on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River.

We have now reached a point where we can deal with the only real vocabulary difference between the KJV reading and Joseph Smith’s version, and that is the word *sea* in the KJV as opposed to the term

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10. One of the standard tools today is Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), hereafter *Brown-Driver-Briggs*. I carefully checked their interpretation of each word in the verse, not just the general definition of each word, but also its meaning in the context of this verse specifically.

11. “Her” here refers to the land (which is feminine in Hebrew) which had been mentioned in the preceding verse.

12. The Hebrew word *galil* in this case means “district.” Elsewhere, it can be used to mean “Galilee,” but not here, because when it is used to denote the Galilee, it always has a definite article, i.e., *ha-galil*. In this verse, that prefixed article is missing, so it simply means “district.” See *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 165.

*Red Sea* in the Book of Mormon version. Let us begin with the word for *sea* in the Masoretic text itself.

The Masoretic text (and hence also the KJV) merely says “sea” (*yam*), which itself is already puzzling. The Hebrew word *yam* is occasionally used by itself to refer to the Mediterranean Sea, but only once to refer to the Sea of Galilee (Deuteronomy 33:23)<sup>13</sup> and only twice to refer to the Dead Sea (Isaiah 16:8 and Jeremiah 48:32). Of these three possibilities, the Sea of Galilee would be the most enticing, because in the verse under examination, Isaiah also mentions the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, which are both in the northern part of the Biblical land of Israel. In fact, the land of Naphtali actually bordered the Sea of Galilee on the western side. However, that choice is not without its problems. The main problem being that in addition to referring to seas, the Hebrew word *yam* can also mean “west.” That is because it was so frequently used to refer to the Mediterranean Sea, which was the western border of the land of Israel. Thus, *yam* also came to mean simply “west” in many cases. And that is precisely how it is translated in the KJV version of Deuteronomy 33:23. So we cannot be sure that it *ever* was used to refer specifically to the Sea of Galilee.<sup>14</sup> If that is the case, then we might reasonably assume that it either refers to the Mediterranean Sea or that it was a scribal “correction” that was put there by some scribe who saw a different word in the text that he was copying, but perhaps did not understand that other word, so he replaced it with what he *thought* it should be.

In any case, the translator of the Book of Mormon would have to have been very ignorant of Middle Eastern geography to have included a reference to the Red Sea in a verse which clearly dealt with matters hundreds of miles from any part of it. So why do we have the “Red Sea” in 2 Nephi 19:1?

We do know that the Book of Mormon adheres very closely to the word usage in the KJV in quoting from the Old Testament, so we might ask ourselves if there was anything besides the Red Sea itself that was translated in the KJV as “Red Sea?” At this point, we might well point out that the term “Red Sea” is itself a mistranslation. The Hebrew term

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13. This reference is given in *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 411.

14. However, it is only fair to point out that the eleventh-century Jewish commentator Rashi also understood the term *yam* in Isaiah 9:1 (8:23 in the Masoretic text) to refer to the Sea of Galilee and used Deuteronomy 33:23 as his proof-text for that assumption in his commentary on Numbers 21:14. See “Yeshayahu (Isaiah) — Chapter 8,” Chabad.org, [https://www.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/15939/showrashi/true](https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15939/showrashi/true) and “Bamidbar (Numbers) — Chapter 21,” Chabad.org, [https://www.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/9949/showrashi/true](https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/9949/showrashi/true).

*yam suf* does not, in fact, mean “Red Sea,” but rather “reed sea.” But during Joseph’s lifetime, and for centuries before as well, no one would have accepted a blanket rejection of the Red Sea as a main player in the Exodus story. Such a rejection would not add anything of theological importance anyway, and that may be why he retained it as a viable translation for *yam suf*.

Let us press ahead with our search for something else which might have been translated by the KJV folks as “Red Sea.” If we look up all occurrences of “Red Sea” in Strong’s concordance,<sup>15</sup> we find there was indeed one other term which was translated as “Red Sea” by the KJV translators. And that occurs in Numbers 21:14, which refers to an account, recorded in the now missing “Book of the Wars of the Lord,” that deals with things that happened on the eastern (Jordanian) side of the Dead Sea where the Arnon River flows into it.

The word in question is *sufah*, which might have been mistakenly viewed by the KJV translators as merely a feminine form of the word *suf* (“reed”) that appears in the term *yam suf*, which they had consistently translated as Red Sea. Therefore, they perhaps assumed that this was therefore merely a variation on that expression and hence also referred to the Red Sea, and that might be why they rendered it as such in Numbers 21:14. Since that time, however, evidence has come to light to indicate that *Sufah* was actually the name of a place near the Arnon River on the eastern side of the Dead Sea.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, it is conceivable that what Joseph Smith was translating as Red Sea in 2 Nephi 9:1 was not the equivalent of *yam suf* but rather the only other term translated as “Red Sea” by the KJV translators, namely *sufah*, which in Numbers 21:14 refers to something that took place east of the Dead Sea during the time of Moses. But would a placename from the Arnon region fit the context of Isaiah 9:1?

If we were to replace *sea* with the placename *Sufah*, then we have the reading:

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15. James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1890), <https://archive.org/details/exhaustiveconcor1890stro/page/n13/mode/2up>.

16. The definition is given as מקום בסביבת נחל ארנון, which means “a place in the environs of the Arnon River,” by Rabbi Dr. Raphael Pozner, Prof. Shalom Paul, and Prof. Ephraim Shtern in *האנציקלופדיה של התנ”ך* [*The Encyclopedia of the Tanakh*] (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House for Yedioth Ahronoth [ידיעות אחרונות], 1987), 3:150.



Nevertheless, the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun, and the land of Naphtali, and afterwards did more grievously afflict by the way of Sufah beyond Jordan in Galilee of the nations.

Or, if we insert that word in the more modern translation of Isaiah 9:1 given above, we have:

For there is no gloom in him who (was) a distress to her<sup>17</sup> in the former time, when he brought contempt upon the land of Zebulun, and upon the land of Naphtali; but later he brought honor (to) the way of Sufah, beyond the (river) Jordan, (in) the district<sup>18</sup> of the nations.

This is a most interesting result, because it makes sense and the geography is now correct.<sup>19</sup> But this now brings up the question of why

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17. “Her” here refers to the land (which is feminine in Hebrew), which had been mentioned in the preceding verse.

18. The Hebrew word *galil* in this case means “district.” Elsewhere, it can be used to mean “Galilee,” but not here, because when it is used to denote the Galilee, it always has a definite article, i.e., *ha-galil*. In this verse, that prefixed article is missing, so it simply means “district.” See *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, 165.

19. The reader may have noticed one additional difference, viz. that the verse first mentions a negative deed and then a positive deed: “He first brings *contempt* upon Zebulun and Naphtali, and later brings *honor* to Sufah.” This is in contradistinction to the KJV translation where he (the Lord) first *lightly afflicts* and later *more grievously afflicts* an area. The problem here is that the verb involved can have two very different meanings. This was discussed already in the nineteenth century by the cleric Albert Barnes, who wrote,

Did more grievously afflict — הִכְבִּיֵד הִ'kebbi'yd. This verb has very various significations. It properly means “to be heavy, to be grievous, to lie or fall heavy on anyone, to be dull, obstinate; also, to be honored, respected;” that is, of weight, or influence in society. It means, in Hiphil, the form which is used here, “to make heavy, or grievous;” 1 Kings 12:10; Isaiah 47:6; “to oppress,” Nehemiah 5:15; and it also means to “cause to be honored, or distinguished, to favor. — Gesenius.” The connection requires that it should have this sense here, and the passage means, that the land which he had made vile in former times, or had suffered to be despised, he had purposed to honor, or to render illustrious by the great light that should rise on it. So Lowth, Rosenmuller, and Gesenius, translate it; see a similar use of the word in Jeremiah 30:19; 2 Chronicles 25:19; 1 Samuel 2:30. (Albert Barnes, “Isaiah Chapter 9.” *Notes on the Bible* (1834), as cited at Sacred-Texts.com, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/isaiah/9.htm>.)

that word might have been in the Isaiah text that Joseph Smith was reading but not in the Masoretic text.

We have to remember that the text that Joseph Smith was translating was brought out of Jerusalem around 600 BC by Lehi and therefore was much closer in time to Isaiah himself (who was active roughly between 740 and 686 BC) than even the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (not earlier than the third century BC, and in that text the word *yam* already appears). It is conceivable that the word *sufah* was replaced using the term *yam* by some scribe between Lehi's time and the time when the Great Isaiah Scroll was copied. The reason for changing it would have been similar to that of the KJV translators for mistranslating Numbers 21:14 — namely, that the scribes were not familiar with the word *sufah* and possibly assumed that it must refer to some “sea” and therefore sought to avoid any further confusion by simply writing *yam*, i.e., “sea.” That would mean that the word “sea” was simply not part of that verse when Isaiah originally wrote it. We may also point out that in the Greek version of the Isaiah writings in the Septuagint (written in the third century BC), the Greek word for “sea” also appears, and hence also in Matthew 4:15 where it is quoted, thus confirming that the change took place at least a couple of hundred years before the time of Christ.

We may therefore posit the following:

1. The original word in Isaiah 9:1 (8:23 in the Masoretic text) was not “sea,” but rather *sufah*, a place name for a location near the Arnon River on the east side of the Dead Sea.
2. This word was still in the copy of the Isaiah writings that Lehi brought with him when he left Jerusalem.
3. Sometime between ca. 600 BC and the time of both the creation of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint in the third century BC) and also the writing of 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> (probably in the second or third century BC) some scribe changed *sufah* to *yam* because he did not understand what *sufah* meant.

This hypothesis, though speculative, satisfactorily explains the facts presented and, not surprisingly, makes sense when that verse is translated back into Hebrew using the word *sufah* instead of *yam*.

Finally, we could also propose that the translation might have been more precise, but perhaps there were constraints such as limits to what people were able to accept during his day, or perhaps more significant changes to clarify the verse were not viewed as necessary at that time. Yet perhaps by changing “sea” to “Red Sea,” the translation leaves a hint

concerning the original verbiage of that verse and what Isaiah was actually saying. A more modern and understandable translation can now be made if we simply correct that one word in the Hebrew text.

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