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The Name America—The Accepted Theory of Its Origin—The More Probable Theory

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Truth is calculated to sustain itself; it is based upon eternal facts, and will endure, while all else will sooner or later perish.—*Brigham Young.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NAME AMERICA—THE ACCEPTED THEORY OF ITS ORIGIN—THE MORE PROBABLE THEORY

AMERICA. We have already seen, in a preceding chapter, under "Mulek," that, according to Prof. Jules Marcou, "America" is an American name, and the suggestion was offered that the root of the word is the same as that of "Mulek." It remains to consider, briefly, the accepted theory of the origin of the name.

"The naming of the Western Continent which has since been known as America took its rise from a voyage made in 1499 by Amerigo Vespucci, a distinguished Florentine navigator. Vespucci wrote a number of letters in Latin to Lorenzo de Medici, one of which was printed in 1505 and was the first of his narratives published. On September 4, 1504, he also wrote a letter from Lisbon to René, duke of Lorraine, in which he claimed to have discovered the mainland in 1497. As Vespucci was a man of superior learning and intelligence, and as his name was thus publicly connected with the New World, as the discoverer of the continent—although he was not the first to reach *Terra Firma*, Columbus, Cabot, and others having preceded him—the well-known cosmographer Martin Waldseemüller, of Fribourg, patronized by René, decided in 1507 to give the New World the name of America."¹

This is a concise and correct statement of the popular theory concerning the origin of the glorious name of our country and continents. But does it really rest on facts?

¹*The United States*, Edited by Edwin Wiley, M. A., Ph. D., of the Library of Congress; and Irving E. Rines; Vol. 1, p. 113.

Meaning of Amerigo. As to the meaning of the name, Prof. Fiske informs us that *Amerigo* "is an Italianized form of the old German *Amalrich* which in medieval French became *Amaury*," and that it means "the steadfast."²

The Orthodox Theory not Undisputed. Most readers of history take it for granted that the naming of America after Vespucci is an indisputable and undisputed historic fact. But this is far from the truth. The Amerigo-theory has been under the fire of controversy ever since its first appearance in the realm of letters. It has been pointed out, in the first place, that Vespucci was not the discoverer of America at all, Columbus, and Cabot, and others having preceded him; in the second place, that the country could not, consistently, have been named after him, because he never was the commander of an expedition to the New World. It is not the custom to name a new land, or sea, or river, after the mate or the pilot or any other subordinate officer. It is the commander who is the discoverer, not the pilot. Sancho Ruiz, the pilot of Columbus, would never be mentioned as the discoverer of the West Indies. Nor would Estevan Gomez be regarded as the discoverer of the Straits of Magellan, although he was the pilot of the ill-fated sailor. Why, then, should we be required to believe that an absurd exception has been made in favor of Vespucci?

The story of the expedition of the Florentine in 1497 is, and always has been, disputed, because of lack of evidence. Mr. Bancroft, presents the argu-

²*Discovery of America*, Vol. 2, p. 24. There is quite a gap between the old German *Amalrich* and Waldseemuller's *Americus*, which only a genius could bridge.

ments on both sides,³ and then sums up the case thus:

"To me the proofs seem conclusive that Vespucci made no voyage to South America prior to 1499, when he accompanied Alonzo de Ojeda. Against a North American expedition the evidence, if less conclusive, is still very strong since the most that can be claimed in its favor is a probability that the Central American coast was visited by some navigator before 1502, and a possibility, though certainly a slim one, that Vespucci accompanied such navigator."

In other words, in the opinion of Mr. Bancroft, there is no evidence that Vespucci made an American voyage in 1497, either to North or South America. Emerson was almost vehement in his denunciation of the Amerigo-theory. He gave vent to his feelings thus:⁴

"Strange that broad America must wear the name of a thief! Amerigo Vespucci, the pickle-dealer at Seville, who went out in 1499, a subaltern with Hojeda, and whose highest naval rank was boatswain's mate in an expedition that never sailed, managed in this lying world to supplant Columbus and baptize half the earth with his own dishonest name."

Prof. Marcou's Objections. Prof. Jules Marcou, whose article in the *Atlantic Monthly* for March, 1875, goes into the subject thoroughly, points out that the first name is never used in geography, to honor a person, except in the case of royalty. We say Louisiana, Carolina, Georgia, Maryland, Victoria, etc., in honor of crowned heads; but the Straits of Magellan, Vancouver's Island, Tasmania, Van Diemen's

³*The History of Central America*, Vol. 6, pp. 100-6.

⁴*English Traits*, 1856, (p. 148 Riverside Ed., 1883); quoted by Fiske, *Disc. of Am.*, Vol. 2, p. 162.

Land,, etc., after common mortals. According to this rule, our country ought to have been called Vesputia, or some such name, in honor of Vespucci. In my judgment, this argument is unanswerable.⁵ There is no doubt that a blunder was committed, both historical and philological, when the conclusion was jumped at that "America" somehow was derived from "Amerigo," or "Albericus" which was the name Waldseemüller knew. It is more probable that "Americus" was coined after "Amerique" or "Maraca," — indigenous American words — than that "America" was invented in honor "Albericus." Somehow the cart has been put before the horse in this instance.

Montesinos' Spelling. Montesinos always wrote "Hamerica" instead of "America."⁶ The odd explanation of that peculiarity is that he wanted letters enough to make the anagram *hec Maria* out of the name. But that seems to be far-fetched. It is more probable that, during his many years of residence and travel in America, he had heard the name pronounced

⁵Students of the interesting subject are no longer as sure as they used to be that "America" was really named in honor of Amerigo. In August, 1922, the house in which Waldseemüller—as is supposed—wrote the pamphlet in which the two names were, erroneously, connected, was sold at auction. The press dispatch announcing this event was dated Paris, Aug. 12, 1922, and began thus: "That Amerigo Vespucci's name should have suggested the appellation of the new continent discovered by Christopher Columbus was an historical blunder that has been consecrated by time." On the 12th of March, the same year, a press dispatch from Berlin characterized Vespucci as a "swindler," who never saw America. But, that dispatch added, "It would be a pity to explode the bubble of his fame after a lapse of more than four hundred years, during which he has held an honored place in the annals of his native city of Florence and been placed side by side with her other illustrious sons, such as Dante and Michael Angelo."

⁶*Memorias Antiguas Historiales del Peru*, Hakluyt Society, London, 1920, p. 2.

with an "h." That would seem to him a justification for regarding it as an anagram of the name of the Virgin. If he had added the "h" himself, it would have been no argument for his favorite theory. But his supposition that the name was made up of the letters in the name of Mary proves that he, at least, did not accept the Amerigo-theory.

Of Scandinavian Origin? It has even been claimed that the name America is of Scandinavian origin. Leif Ericson, as is now generally conceded, discovered this country almost 500 years before Columbus. Now, in the Scandinavian languages there is a word "amt," which stands for a subdivision of a country, "a province." It has, therefore, been suggested that the new land would most probably be named after its discoverer, Ericson. A natural name, it is pointed out, would be Amt-Erica, or the Land of Eric. It is only necessary to ellide the letter "t" from the first syllable of the word to produce the word "America." This is much nearer to the present word than the Italian name Amerigo. Also, it is claimed, a land would scarcely be named after the first name of a man. The last name would more likely be used. Amerigo was Vespucci's first name. Eric or Ericson was the surname of Leif. It is hardly necessary to point out the weakness of this explanation. It is about as conclusive as the Amerigo-theory.

America and Amaleki. In another place I have made the statement that *America* is, both in form and meaning, identical with the Book of Mormon names *Amaleki* and *Amalickiah*. These words consist of three parts, "a," which is the same as the Hebrew

definite article,⁷ "the;" "malek," or "malick," which means "king;" and "i," or "iah," which means "Jehovah." Compare *A-meric-a* with *A-malek-i*, or *A-malick-iah*, and note how close the resemblance is. The only difference is that between the "r" and the "l," but that is a difference in appearance only, not in reality.

This statement may need further explanation.

Franz Boas, in his *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, gives this information:⁸

"Certain sounds that occur in American languages are interpreted by observers sometimes as one European sound, sometimes as another. Thus the Pawnee language contains a sound which may be heard more or less distinctly sometimes as an *l*, sometimes as *r*, sometimes as *n*, and again as *d*, which, however, without any doubt, is throughout the same sound, although modified to a certain extent by its position in the word and by surrounding sounds. It is an exceedingly weak *r*, made by trilling with the tip of the tongue at a point a little behind the roots of the incisors, and in which the tongue hardly leaves the palate, the trill being produced by the lateral part of the tongue adjoining the tip. As soon as the trill is heard more strongly, we receive the impression of an *r*. When the lateral movement prevails and the tip of the tongue does not seem to leave the palate, the impression of an *l* is strongest."

Mr. Boas also says that the *r*-sound is rare in the American languages, and that the trill of it is so weak that it merges into *l*, *d*, *n*, or *y*, as the case may be.

The conclusion from this is that the *l*-sound, in all probability, is the original sound, and that the *r*-

⁷The article was originally "hal." This became "ha" in Hebrew and "al" in the Arabic, and, probably "a" in some of the American languages, a soft aspirant like the Hebrew "aleph."

⁸Bulletin 40, Smiths. Inst., Part 1, pp. 16, 17.

sound is a secondary linguistic acquisition; that, in other words, the *l*-sound in *A-maleki* was first in point of time, and that the "r" in *A-merica* is, virtually, the same sound, or the later variant of it. In some Indian dialects the "l" is retained in "America." The Choctaws, for instance, call our country, *Miliki*.⁹ For "king" their word is *Minko*, in which the "l" in "mulek" has merged into a sort of nasal sound instead of one represented by our "r."

Garcilasso de la Vega, speaking of the Quichua, the Cuzco dialect, says it lacks six letters used in the Spanish alphabet, one of which is "l." "R" takes its place, as *peru* for *pelu*, *Rimac*, "he who speaks," as an oracle, for *Lima*, etc. That accounts for the change of *Amalek* to *Amarek*. A conspicuous change from "l" to "r" in North America is found in the word *Oregon*, from *Oligon-unk*, which Rafinesque¹⁰ says means "hollow mountain."

This peculiarity is, by no means, confined to the American languages. According to Champollion, as we have seen in a previous chapter, the Egyptian hieroglyph for "l," the *lion couché*, was the equivalent of the Hebrew *lamed*, but in Greek and Latin proper nouns it was rendered by an "r."¹¹ The old Latin *tellus*, "earth," "ground," has become *terra* in later Latin, and *tlalli* in the old Mexican.¹²

America and Mulek. From all this, the evolu-

⁹*Choctaw Dictionary* by Cyrus Byington, Smiths, Inst., Bull., 46, Washington, 1915.

¹⁰*The American Nations*, Vol. 1, p. 154.

¹¹*Précis du Système Hiéroglyphique des Anciens Égyptiens*, Paris, 1824, pp. 59 and 63.

¹²See Denison, *The Primitive Aryans in America*, p. 45. Just as *Malcom* of the Hebrews became *Marcus* among the Romans.

tion of the name *America* is as plain as the transformation of any word, the origin of which is supposed to be known. The first Aryan roots *mol-ik* became *molouk* in Egyptian and *melech* in Hebrew. Among the descendants of Lehi in this part of the world it became *Mulek*, and from this stem the words *Amaleki*, *Amalickiab*, and others branched out. These names became *marca*, *Americ*, and *Amerique*, and, finally, *America*.

There is less difference between "America" and the root words "mol-ik" than there is between some of the familiar Old Testament names, as written in other records. Compare the following, which are the same names in the two languages:

<i>Hebrew</i>	<i>Egyptian</i>
Zerah (2 Chron. 14:9.)	Usarkon.
Shishak (1 Kings 11:40.)	Sheshenq.
Hittite.	Khati.
Jerusalem, or Jerushalaim,	Ourousalimou
Joseph.	Joshoupilou.
Hebrew.	Apouriou (?)

Compare, further, Amraphel (Gen. 14:1) with Hammurabi (or with Amarapal); Noph (Is. 19:13) with Memphis; the Hebrew Jochanan (or Johana) with our name John, in its various modern forms, such as Johannes, Johan, Janne, Juan, Jean, Ivan, etc. This will help us to realize that the suggestions made in this chapter, and the preceding ones, are well within the laws by which the evolution of words is governed.

The Name Found in Nicaragua. In Chapter Six under "Mulek," it was stated that the name *America*,

or, which is the same, *Amerique*, or *Amerrique*, was found by the noted English traveler and scientist, Thomas Belt, to be an Indian name of a mountain range, and that he so states in his, *Naturalist in Nicaragua*.

Through the courtesy of Mrs. Senator Wm. H. King, who made inquiries at the Pan-American offices in Washington and obtained a copy of the passages in the work mentioned, I am enabled to give in full the extracts to which Prof. Marcou refers:

"We gradually ascended the range that separates the watershed of the Lake of Nicaragua from that of the Blewfields river, passing over grassy savannahs. About two leagues from Libertad there are many old Indian graves, covered with mounds of earth and stones. A well-educated Englishman, Mr. Fairbairn, has taken up his abode at this place, and is growing maize and rearing cattle. There are many evidences of a large Indian population having lived at this spot, and their pottery and fragments of their stones for bruising maize have been found in some graves that have been opened. Mr. Fairbairn got me several of these curiosities, amongst them are imitations of the heads of armadillos, and other animals. Some of these had formed the feet of urns, others were rattles, containing small balls of baked clay. The old Indians used these rattles in their solemn religious dances, and the custom is probably not yet quite obsolete, for as late as 1823 Mr. W. Bullock saw, in Mexico, Indian women dancing in a masque representing the court of Montezuma, and holding rattles in their right hands, to the noise of which they accompanied their motions. Several stone axes have been found, which are called 'thunderbolts' by the natives, who have no idea that they are artificial, although it is less than four hundred years ago since their forefathers used them. Like most of the ancient Indian towns, the place is a very picturesque one. At a short distance to the west, rise great perpendicular cliffs, and huge isolated rocks and pinnacles. The name of this range gives us a clue to the race

of the ancient inhabitants. In the highlands of Honduras, as has been noted by Squier, the termination of *tique* or *rique* is of frequent occurrence in the names of places, as *Chaparistique*, *Lepaterique*, *Llotique*, *Ajuterique*, and others. The race that inhabited this region were the Lenca Indians, often mentioned in the accounts given by the missionaries of their early expeditions into Honduras. I think that the Lenca Indians were the ancient inhabitants of Chontales, that they were the 'Chontals' of the Nahuatls or Aztecs of the Pacific side of the country, and that they were partly conquered, and their territories encroached upon by the latter before the arrival of the Spaniards, as some of the Aztec names of places in Nicaragua do not appear to be such as could be given originally by the first inhabitants; thus Juigalpa, pronounced Hueygalpa, is southern Aztec for 'Big Town.'"—Thomas Belt, F. C. S., *The Naturalist in Nicaragua*, Chap. 9, p. 154.

"The site of Juigalpa is beautifully chosen, as is usual with the old Indian towns. It is on a level, dry piece of land, about three hundred feet above the river. A rocky brook behind the town supplies the water for drinking and cooking purposes. The large square or plaza has the church at one end; on the other three sides are red-tiled adobe houses and stores, with floors of clay or red bricks. Streets branch off at right angles from the square, and are crossed by others. The best houses are those nearest the square. Those on the outskirts are mere thatched hovels, with open sides of bamboo poles. The house I stayed at was at the corner of one of the square blocks, and from the angle the view extended in four directions along the level roads. Each way the prospect was bounded by hills in the distance, northeast were the white cliffs of the *Amerrique* range, mantled with dark woods. The intervening country could not be seen, and only a small portion of the range itself; framed in, as it were, by the sides of the street. It looked close at hand, like a piece of artificial rockery, or the grey walls of a castle covered with ivy. The range to the southwest is several miles distant; and is called San Miguelito by the Spaniards, but I could not learn its Indian name."—*Ibid.*, Chap. 10, p. 176.

"Having finished our business in Juigalpa, we arranged to start on our return early the next morning, Velasquez going

round by Acoyapo whilst Rito accompanied me to the mines. I had a fowl cooked overnight to take with us, and set off at six o'clock. I shall make some remarks on the road on points not touched on in my account of the journey out. After leaving Juigalpa, we descended to the river by a rocky and steep path, crossed it, and then passed over alluvial plains, intersected by a few nearly dry river beds, to the foot of the south-western side of the *Amerrique* hills, then gradually ascended the range that separates the Juigalpa district from that of Libertad. The ground was gravelly and dry, with stony hillocks covered with low trees and bushes."—*Ibid.*, Chap. 10, p. 178.

"At last we reached the summit of the range, which is probably not less than three thousand feet above the sea, and entered on the district of Libertad. Rounded boggy hills covered with grass, sedgy plants and stunted trees, replaced the dry gravelly soil of the Juigalpa district."—*Ibid.*, Chap. 10, p. 183.

"Our road, now lay over the damp grassy hills of the Libertad district. It edged away from the *Amerrique* range on our right. To our left, about three miles distant, rose the dark sinuous line of the great forest of the Atlantic slope. Only a fringe of dark-foliaged trees in the foreground was visible, the higher ground behind was shrouded in a sombre pall of thick clouds that never lifted, but seemed to cover a gloomy and mysterious country beyond. Though I had dived into the recesses of these mountains again and again, and knew that they were covered with beautiful vegetation and full of animal life, yet the sight of that leaden-colored barrier of cloud resting on the forest tops, whilst the savannahs were bathed in sunshine, ever raised in my mind vague sensations of the unknown and the unfathomable. Our course was nearly parallel to this gloomy forest, but we gradually approached it. The line that separates it from the grassy savannahs is sinuous and irregular. In some places a dark promontory of trees juts out into the savannahs, in others a green grassy hill is seen almost surrounded by forest."—*Ibid.*, Chap. 10, p. 184.

"As we rode on, the grass increased, there were swampy places in the hollows, and now and then very muddy spots on the road. On every side the prospect was bounded by long ranges of hills—some of them precipitous, others covered to the sum-

mits with dark foliaged trees, looking nearly black in the distance. About noon we came in sight of the *Amerrique* range, which I recognized at once, and knew that we had reached the Juigalpa district, though still several leagues distant from the town."—*Ibid.*, Chap. 17, p. 324.

I have italicized the name Amerique.

In connection with this the following information, secured by Mrs. Wm. H. King, from authentic sources at Washington, is important and interesting:

In the book entitled *Nicaragua*, by E. G. Squier, published in Boston, 1860, the orographic system to which the highlands in question belong is thus described:

"The second or principal mountain range, the great backbone of the continent and the true Cordilleras, enters the state from Honduras in the Department of Nueva Segovia and extends due southeast until it strikes the San Juan river at a point about fifty miles above its mouth. It sends out numerous spurs or dependent ranges towards the Atlantic, between which flow down the many considerable streams that intersect what is called the Mosquito Shore."

Another reference to these mountains is found in a book by the French traveler, Paul Levy, published in Paris, 1873. Levy designates this range as the "Honduran-Nicaraguan Range," following the authority of the German geographer, Berghaus (*Physikalischen Atlas*, Dresden, 1838.)

Felix Bély, another French explorer, uses the same general denomination in his work *A travers l'Amerique Centrale*, Paris, 1867.

La Republica de Nicaragua, an official guide published by the Nicaraguan government in 1900, gives a description of the orography of the country which follows the terminology of Berghaus.

The work of the celebrated English scientist, Thomas Belt, entitled *The Naturalist in Nicaragua*, and first published in London in 1873, is the one in which the name "Amerrique" is given to the highlands between Juigalpa and la Libertad. Mr.

Belt lived in the province of Chontales from 1868 to 1872 and was employed as Superintendent of the Chontales Gold Mining company. He traveled extensively through Nicaragua and while his assertion regarding this name is not confirmed by other travelers and geographers, this fact will only prove that the use of such name was or is restricted to a small and somewhat isolated region of the country. The authority of Mr. Belt as a keen observer and an accurate writer is very high and there is no possibility of error in statements of this kind, contained in a book recognized as a classic among the literature of natural history. A copy of the passages from the book where the name "Amerrique" appears is enclosed.

In the well known work of Peter F. Stout no mention is made of these mountains, as his narrative deals mainly with historical and political questions. Two chapters of his book contain information about a land grant reported to have been sold to the Mormons.

It is, then, an indisputable fact that the name *America* is an original American word, much older than both Vespucci and Waldseemüller. It is, perhaps, still applied to the mountain region described by Mr. Belt, and in its several variations it is found practically all over the American continents.

Mr. Belt's discovery is of special interest to readers of the Book of Mormon, as an indication of a Mulekite origin of the name of the mountain district he describes.