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An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon

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An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon

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Since the appearance of the Book of Mormon in 1830, its proper names have been discussed in diverse articles and books.¹ Most of the statements proffer etymologies, while a few suggest the significance of various names. Because of the uneven quality of these statements this paper proposes an apposite methodology. First, though, a few words need to be said about the relevance of name studies to our understanding of the Book of Mormon.

Relevance

With the exception of a few modern proper names coined for their composite sounds,² all names have meanings in their language of origin. People are often not aware of these meanings because the name has a private interpretation, or the name has been borrowed into a language in which the original meaning is no longer evident, or the name is very old and the meaning has not been transmitted. For example, the English personal name *Wayne* is an old form of the more modern English word *wain*, meaning a “wagon” or “cart,” hence the surname *Wainwright*, “builder/repairer of wagons.”³ However, to our contem-

porary ears *Wayne* no longer has a meaning; it is simply a personal name.

With training and experience, it is often possible to define the language of origin, the meaning, and, when applicable, the grammatical form of a name. Names like *Karen*, *Tony*, and *Sasha* (also written *Sacha* from the French spelling) have been borrowed into English from Danish,⁴ Italian,⁵ and Russian⁶ respectively. The latter is particularly instructive because it represents a rather complicated transference of names. *Sasha* is a Russian diminutive (nickname) for *Aleksandr* (English *Alexander*), which in turn was borrowed from Greek *alexandros*, "defending men(?)." To most speakers of English, *Sasha* conveys neither the diminutive nature of the Russian nor any trace of the Russian form it was derived from, let alone the Greek origin and meaning of the name.

Names can preserve phonemes and lexemes of the language of origin. Thus, English *Alexander* retains a semblance of the original phonemes plus the initial and final lexemes *alex* and *andr*, but not the case ending *-os* of the Greek. In English the name "Wayne" was frozen in a state of the English language when *y* represented the sound later spelled *i*.⁷ When we realize that the phonemes represented by *y*, *i*, and *g* can under certain conditions represent each other at different stages and in various dialects of written English, it is easy to see that wayne = wain = wagon.⁸

Even when the source language has been lost to memory, i.e., has become a nonspoken language, names often retain in their adopted language many of the sounds and therefore phonemes of the original, despite several transmutations involving intermediate languages. For example, the English name *Esther* can be traced ultimately to the Babylonian name for the goddess of love and war, *Ištar*. However, the English form of the name is derived undoubtedly from the English Bible translations that go back

to the Greek form in the Septuagint or to the Hebrew, *Esther*, both of which ultimately derive from the Babylonian *Ištar*.

For the above two reasons,⁹ the onomasticon¹⁰ of the Book of Mormon can preserve lexemes of the languages used to compose the book. Through a careful study of these names we can draw conclusions about their possible language origin and meaning. In this respect, the proper names in the Book of Mormon form a unique and useful tool for the study of the languages of the peoples of that book and make possible new insights for understanding the cultures of the Book of Mormon.

Such conclusions are valuable for two reasons. First, names can be employed to convey content. Giving a name in antiquity usually involved more than supplying a label. Names had meanings, and though not all names necessarily were consciously based on meaning,¹¹ some were. For instance, Isaiah gave his two sons long and, for most English speakers, unpronounceable names. These names were not given for any intrinsic quality of the two children but as a testimony to Isaiah's contemporaries. The names contained a message, and understanding that message gives insight into the literary work of a great prophet.¹²

Second, names can supply information about the milieu of the author or redactor. Names in the ancient world were subject to literary treatment or mistreatment. For example, one of Saul's sons must have been less than appreciated by his contemporaries. This is reflected not only in the biblical information concerning him (he was murdered), but also in the treatment of his name. His proper name, *Eshbaal*, which means "man of the lord,"¹³ is preserved in the late account found in 1 Chronicles 8:33 and 1 Chronicles 9:39. However, in the earlier, more contemporary account found in 2 Samuel 2-4, his name was changed by the compilers of the book to *Ishbosheth*, meaning "man of shame." Changing a respectable word to a

disreputable word is called a *dysphemism*, the opposite of a euphemism. This play on the name of Saul's son probably expresses an opinion of the author of 2 Samuel about that person. The redactor or author of 1 Chronicles used the original name, perhaps out of respect for the person since Saul's son was removed temporally and personally from the time of the composition of 1 Chronicles, or perhaps because any name containing *Baal* in those days was by itself sufficient shame.

A careful scrutiny of names can also lead to information about the times in which a work was composed. The relatively unknown play on words between the names of a famous Babylonian king, *Nebuchadnezzar*, in Kings (e.g., 2 Kings 24:1) and *Nebuchadrezzar* in Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 37:1), could only have been made by someone familiar with the times these passages portray. The latter can be translated from Babylonian as "Nabu, protect the crown prince," while the former means "Nabu, protect the mule."¹⁴ Only someone writing from an anti-Babylonian perspective would have used the dysphemism. The correct form of the name would have been used by pro-Babylonian, neutral, or politically removed writers. This corroborates the general anti-Babylonian tenor of Kings and the pro-Babylonian stance of Jeremiah. However, unlike *Ishbosheth* mentioned above, this dysphemism cannot be Hebrew in origin, but must have been borrowed from a current Mesopotamian wordplay on the Babylonian king's name.¹⁵

If a Semitic *Vorlage* is posited for the Book of Mormon, then the Semitic propensity to play with names should be evident in it, and it is. For instance, in the book of Alma the people of Ammon are given a land called *Jershon*. The etymology of this toponym can be traced to a Hebrew root meaning "to inherit."¹⁶ Alma 27:22 states that "this land *Jershon* [that is, inheritance] is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an inheritance." This is an excellent

example of wordplay in the Book of Mormon and also makes a statement about the Nephite action of giving the land to the converted Lamanites.¹⁷

An exacting study of the names can also reveal otherwise unknown influences on Nephite society. One of the better known apostates of the Book of Mormon carried a Jaredite name, *Korihor*.¹⁸ Likewise, one of the most infamous apostate movements in the Book of Mormon also carried a Jaredite name, order of *Nehors*, named after the Nephite, *Nehor*.¹⁹ This name, however, is a Jaredite toponym,²⁰ appearing as a proper name in the book of Ether. These two examples suggest that some Nephite apostate movements might have been inspired by Jaredite history, either through the twenty-four gold plates found by Limhi's people and translated by Mosiah or through contact with survivors of the Jaredite culture.

Methodology

Requisite to any study of the Book of Mormon onomasticon is primary and accurate control of philologic possibilities. In the example *Jershon* given above, a recently discontinued manual of the Church, quoting a Book of Mormon commentary, states that the name means "land of the exiled, or of the strangers." This false etymology is probably based on the assumption that the root in Hebrew for the Nephite *Jershon* is to be derived from the Hebrew word for stranger, *ger*. This root begins with a *gimel* (/g/), which normally is transliterated in the King James Bible with a *g* and not a *j*. As discussed below, the *j* in the Hebrew names of the King James Bible usually represents the Hebrew *yod* (/y/). Therefore, if it can be assumed that the normal transliteration techniques employed in the King James Version apply to the Book of Mormon, the meaning "exile" or "stranger" for the word *Jershon* is not possible. In addition, "exile" or "stranger" is unlikely because the sound /s/ in *Jershon* would remain unexplained.²¹

Inseparable from a control of the primary languages is a knowledge of which languages apply to the Book of Mormon onomasticon and to what extent they apply. When considering possible language *Vorlagen* for the Book of Mormon, Hebrew of the biblical period is the first choice. Nearly equal in consideration to Hebrew is Egyptian, followed by the other Semitic languages in use at or before the time of Lehi, including Akkadian, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite, and Ammonite. Semitic languages first attested after the time of Lehi, such as Classical Arabic, the later Aramaic dialects, and Ethiopic dialects, are not as relevant as the earlier languages, but may be used with extreme caution. Other non-Semitic languages with which the Hebrews could have had contact before Lehi's departure, such as Hittite, Greek, Hurrian, and Sumerian, should be a last resort.

Even with these precautions, problems cannot be avoided. A name can have several etymologies based not only on several roots in one language, but it may also be traceable to more than one language. For example, one author has seen in the word *Alma* an Arabic name,²² while in Hebrew there are at least six theoretical roots: *'lm*, *ʿlm*, *glm*, *lm'*, *lm^c*, *lmġ*, though not all of these are necessarily attached to an etymon in West Semitic.

The use of an edition of the received text that also renders all the possible English variants of the names is absolutely necessary for any study of the proper names of the Book of Mormon.²³ For instance, any etymology of the toponym *Cumorah* must be based on an acceptable reading of the received text. The present editions of the Book of Mormon are unanimous in reading *Cumorah*. However, this place name is spelled three different ways in the Printer's Manuscript. Thus, Mormon 6 contains the spelling *Camorah* and *Cumorah* in verse 2, while verse 5 has *Comorah*. In the 1830 edition *Camorah* is standard throughout the

Book of Mormon. *Cumorah* appears in all subsequent editions.²⁴

In addition, some variations of the spellings of names have possibly slipped into the present editions seemingly without justification, e.g., *shiblum*. In Alma 11:15-19 *shiblum* is juxtaposed with *shiblon*. In the Printer's Manuscript the *b* is not there, i.e., *shilum*. The *b* could have been inserted inadvertently because of the *b* in *shiblon*.

Second only to the need for a critical edition is the need to posit a theoretical model for the possible transliteration into English of the names as they might have been on the *Vorlage*. Thus, does a *j* in a name in the Book of Mormon represent the phoneme /j/, /y/, /g/, or /h/? The *j* in the transliterated Hebrew names in the King James Bible usually stands for a /y/, the Hebrew letter *yod*. It is notable, however, that the King James renderings are not consistent. The initial Hebrew phonemes of *Jeremiah*, *Isaiah* and *Job* are /y/, /y/, and /h/ respectively. Extrapolating from this example, we might expect relative but not absolute consistency in the transliterations of the Book of Mormon onomasticon.

A further complication involves the commingling of Jaredite and Nephite names. Unless and until it can be determined from which cultural background the Jaredites departed,²⁵ it will be impossible to do anything but guess about etymologies for Jaredite names. It also appears that Jaredite names surface rather early in the Nephite record²⁶ and should not be considered together with Lehite and Mulekite language names when etymologies are proposed.

Conclusion

An understanding of the proper names in the language of the *Vorlage* of the Book of Mormon can reveal, via literary nuance, aspects of Nephite/Lamanite culture that remain unrecognized by the reader who is limited to modern languages. However, such results are valid only to the extent

that the conclusions are based on sound methodology. This study has proposed an apposite methodology, i.e., control of the posited primary languages, discretion in determining the primary languages, thorough and rigorous examination of all the philological possibilities in the various target languages, and the use of a critical edition that indicates all variations in the various manuscripts and editions.

Needless to say, as the title of this paper indicates, this is only an incipient attempt at defining the relevance of and establishing a methodology for a study of the proper names of the Book of Mormon. Much work still begs attention.

This paper would not be complete without a caveat. Extreme caution both in the tools used and the ways in which they are used must always be the standard. Less is better and conservatism is a virtue. Yet the study of the onomasticon of the Book of Mormon is a must if we are to understand the world of the Nephites and Jaredites. I hope this introductory statement on relevance and methodology will lead to even more significant progress in the study of the proper names of the Book of Mormon.

Notes

1. In making a list of proposed etymologies of Book of Mormon names I have logged over 300 suggestions made over a period of more than 140 years and in more than thirty publications.

2. For example, *LaDell*, *Shalynn*, *Sonda*, etc.

3. See Leslie Dunkling and William Gosling, *Everyman's Dictionary of First Names* (London & Melbourne: J. M. Dent, 1983), 290. Cf. also *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter OED) (Oxford: Oxford University, 1981), 3667-68.

4. E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 186. See also Dunkling and Gosling, *Everyman's Dictionary*, 148-49.

5. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary*, 28; and Dunkling and Gosling, *Everyman's Dictionary*, 276.

6. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary*, 13; and Dunkling and Gosling, *Everyman's Dictionary*, 251 and 247.

7. The *OED* entries on pp. 3667-68 list the earliest readings for *wayn* (first entry on p. 1250) while the spelling *wain* usually appears several centuries later.

8. See the previous footnote. Though “wagon” was adopted into English around the sixteenth century from Dutch and/or German, see the Early Modern English *wagan* and Old English *wæn*, *wægn* (*OED*, “wagon,” p. 3666).

9. That is, (1) when enough is known about a name that it can be traced to its language of origin, and (2) the names can preserve original phonemes and lexemes of the language of origin even though the name originated in a language no longer spoken.

10. Normally the onomasticon (a list of proper names) of the Book of Mormon would not include simple substantives. However, all transliterations of Book of Mormon substantives should be included in any study of the proper names even if there is a question whether or not the substantive is a proper name. For example, *rameumptom* (Alma 31:21) and *irreantum* (1 Nephi 17:5) fall into this category.

11. For instance, see Rivkah Harris, “The *naditu* Woman,” in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1964), 127, who states, in speaking of the names given to *naditu* priestesses in the Old Babylonian period, “Then as now there were vogues in names.”

12. The names, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, “Hurry the spoil, hasten the plunder” (Isaiah 8:3; for the translation, see F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968], 555), and Shear-jashub, “a remnant shall return” (Isaiah 7:3; for the translation, see *ibid.*, 984), refer to the impending captivity and the subsequent return of a remnant from that captivity. See Isaiah 8:18.

13. In the earlier biblical texts Baal (from the Hebrew root *bʿl*) still carries its original meaning, “lord” or “master.” In later biblical texts Baal came to be the proper name of a Canaanite god whose name is otherwise not known.

14. For a recent handling of this topic see A. van Selms, “The Name Nebuchadnezzar,” in M. van Voss, Philo Houwink ten Cate, and N. A. van Uchelen, eds., *Travels in the World of the Old Testament*, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* 16 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), 223-29.

15. The play on words works best in Akkadian, not at all in Hebrew, and only partially in Aramaic. For this reason it is likely that this dysphemism originated in the cuneiform world and not in Palestine.

16. The root in Hebrew is *yrs. See further in the text for another proposed etymology, albeit undoubtedly false.

17. This was first drawn to my attention by John W. Welch of the BYU Law School faculty.

18. The Jaredite form is with a *c*, *Corihor*. The use of a *c* in the Jaredite name and a *k* in Nephite poses no phonological problems.

19. For the movement "order of the Nehors," see Alma 21:4 and 24:28. Nehor himself first appears in Alma 1:15.

20. See Ether 7:4 and 9. It is not attested as a Jaredite personal name.

21. For the most likely etymology of the name *Jershon* see the example given above. With the etymology proposed there, the only unaccounted-for element in the name *Jershon* is the ending *-on*, which is probably related to the substantive suffix *-an* used in Ugaritic (see 8.58 in C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, *Analecta Orientalia* 38 [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965]), in Hebrew (compare its probable use in the eponym *Zebulon* [the original pronunciation is preserved in the gentilic in Numbers 26:27 and Judges 12:11]), and in Akkadian (see Wolfram von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969], *Analecta Orientalia* 33/47, 56r, where it appears to be used only in a narrow sense).

22. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 76.

23. Such an edition is now in preparation by Royal Skousen of Brigham Young University. In the meantime, *Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference* (Provo: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1984-87), though not comprehensive, is available.

24. *Cumorah* appears in Mormon 6:2, 6:4(2x), 6:6(2x) and 8:2; *Camorah* in 6:2; and *Comorah* in 6:5 and 6:11; cf. *Book of Mormon Critical Text*, 3:1086-88.

25. The popular conception in the Church is that the Jaredites departed from Mesopotamia. Hugh Nibley has written that the Jaredites departed from somewhere around Lake Van. See his treatment in *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 153-282.

26. The Small Plates in the form we now have, 1 Nephi through the Words of Mormon, do not contain any obviously Jaredite names. Beginning at least with the book of Alma, Jaredite names begin to appear among the Nephite personal names, e.g., *Korihor* (= Jaredite *Corihor* in Ether 13:17) in Alma 30. See also *Coriantumr* in Helaman 1:15-32 and Ether 12-15.