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

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Preliminary
Report

An Introduction to the

Relevancy and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names

of the Book of Mormon

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Many scattered and disconnected statements (mostly proffered etymologies) have been made about the proper names in the Book of Mormon.[1] Because of the mixed quality of these statements this paper proposes an apposite methodology. First a few words need to be said about the relevance of name studies to our understanding of the Book of Mormon.

Relevancy

With the exception of a few modern proper names coined for their composite sounds,[2] all names have meanings in their language of origin. Often people are not aware of these meanings because the name is very old and the meaning has not been transmitted, or the name has a private interpretation, or the name has been borrowed into a language in which the original meaning is no longer evident. For example, the English personal name *Wayne* is an old form of the more modern English word *wain*, meaning a

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[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.

"wagon or cart;" hence the surname *Wainwright*, "builder/repairer of wagons."[3] However, to our contemporary ears *Wayne* no longer has a meaning; it is simply a personal 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 Russian[6] 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 ἀλέξανδρος , "defender of 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. 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 usually preserve phonemes and lexemes of the language of origin. Thus, *Alexander* retains a semblance of the original phonemes and the initial and final lexemes *aleks* and *andr*,

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[3]See Leslie Dunkling and William Gosling, *Everyman's Dictionary of First Names* (London & Melbourne: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1983), p. 290. Cf. also *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1981), pp. 3667-3668.

[4]E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 186. See also Dunkling, pp. 148-149.

[5]Withycombe, p. 28; and Dunkling, p. 276.

[6]Withycombe, p. 13; and Dunkling, pp. 251 and 247.

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 *y*, *i* and *g* can under certain conditions represent
each other at various stages of the language, 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 transmigrations involving intermediate
languages. For example, the English name *Esther* can be traced
ultimately back to the Babylonian name for the goddess of love and
war, *Ištar*. However, the English form of the name is derived
undoubtedly from the King James Bible, *Esther*, which goes back
to the Greek form in the Septuaginta or to the Hebrew, *Esther*,
both of which ultimately derive from the Babylonian, *Ištar*.

For the above two reasons,[9] the onomasticon[10] of the Book

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[7]The *OED* entries on pp. 3667-3668 list the earliest readings
for *wayn* (first entry @1250) while the spelling *wain* usually
appears several centuries later.

[8]See the previous footnote. The spelling *wagon* was adopted
into English around the 16th century (*OED*, "wagon," p. 3666).

[9]That is, 1.) when enough is known about a name 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]Unless all substantives are included in a definition of
the Book of Mormon onomasticon (a list of proper names), nouns
like *rameumptom* (Alma 31:21) and *irreantum* (1 Nephi 17:5), which
normally would not be included in an onomasticon, form an exception

of Mormon can preserve the lexemes of the languages used to compose the book; and 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 be valuable for two reasons. First, giving a name in antiquity usually involved more than labeling an item. 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 us insight into the literary work of a great prophet.[12]

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to this rule.

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

[12]The names, Shear-jashub "a remnant shall return" (Isaiah 7:3; 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], p. 984), and Maher-shalal-hash-baz "Hurry the spoil, hasten the plunder" (Isaiah 8:3; see also the translation on page 555 of the above dictionary), refer to the impending captivity and the return of a small remnant from that captivity. See Isaiah 8:18.

Second, we also know there was an open season on names for literary treatment or mistreatment. For example, one of Saul's sons must have been less than appreciated, and this is reflected not only in the material about 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 I Ch. 8:33 and I Ch. 9:39. However, in the earlier account found in II Samuel 2-4, his name was changed by his contemporaries to *Ishbosheth*, meaning "man of shame." (This is the opposite of a euphemism, a *dysphemism*.) This play on the name of Saul's son probably expresses an opinion of the author of II Samuel about that person. The redactor or author of I Chronicles used the original name, perhaps out of respect for the person since Saul's son was removed temporally and personally from those times, 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 name of a famous Babylonian king, *Nebuchadnezzar* in Kings[14] and *Nebuchadrezzar* in Jeremiah[15], could have been made only by someone familiar with the times

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[13] The root *b^cl* in later Biblical texts came to be the proper name of the Canaanite god, whose name is otherwise not known. In the earlier Biblical texts this root still carries its original meaning, "lord" or "master."

[14] E.g., 2 Kings 24:1.

[15] E.g., Jeremiah 37:1.

of these passages. The latter can be translated from Babylonian as "Nabu protect the heir," while the former means "Nabu protect the mule."[16] 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 and/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 must have been borrowed from a current Mesopotamian wordplay on the Babylonian king's name.[17]

If a Semitic Vorlage is posited for the Book of Mormon, it also becomes evident that its authors used wordplay. 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."[18] 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 word play in the Book of Mormon and also makes a

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[16]For a recent handling of this topic see A. van Selms, "The Name Nebuchadnezzar," in *Travels in the World of the Old Testament*, M. van Voss, Philo Houwink ten Cate and N. A. van Uchelen, eds. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), Studia Semitica Neerlandica 16, pp. 223-229.

[17]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.

[18]The root in Hebrew is *yrš*. ([š] = the sound "sh" and is the letter in Hebrew called shin.) See below for another proposed etymology, albeit undoubtedly false.

statement about the Nephite action of giving the land to the converted Lamanites.[19]

An exacting study of the names also can reveal otherwise unknown influences on Nephite society. One of the better known apostates of the Book of Mormon carried a Jaredite name, *Korihor*.[20] Likewise, perhaps the second most infamous apostate movement in the Book of Mormon also carries a Jaredite name, order of *Nehors*, named after the Nephite, *Nehor*.[21] This name however is a Jaredite toponym,[22] appearing as a personal name in the Book of Ether. These two examples suggest that Nephite apostate movements might have been inspired by Jaredite history, either through the 24 gold plates found by Limhi's people and translated by Mosiah or through contact with actual 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*, a recent and still used manual of the Church, quoting a Book of Mormon commentary, states that the name

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

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

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

[22]See Ether 7:4 and 9. It is not attested as a Jaredite personal 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, *gēr*. 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 goes back to a Hebrew yod ([y]). Therefore, the meaning "exile" or "stranger" for the word *Jershon* is not possible. In addition, the sound [š] in *Jershon* would still be unexplained.[23]

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 Bilblical 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, namely, Akkadian, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, etc. Semitic languages first attested after the time of Lehi, such as Classical Arabic, the

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[23]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 to be understood as deriving from -*ân*, used in Ugaritic (see §8.58 in C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965], Analecta Orientalia 38), in Hebrew (confer 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).

later Aramaic dialects, Ethiopic dialects, etc., are not as relevant as the earlier languages, but may be used with extreme caution. Other non-Semitic languages with which the Hebrews may have had contact before the time of Lehi, such as Hittite, Greek, Hurrian, Sumerian, etc., 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 tracable to more than one language. For example, one author has seen in *Alma* an Arabic name,[24] while in Hebrew there could be as many as four possible etymologies, *'lm*, ^{c}*lm/ǵlm*, *'lm'*.

The use of an edition of the received text that also renders all the possible variants of the names is absolutely necessary for any study of the proper names of the Book of Mormon.[25] 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 vs. 2, while vs. 5 has *Comorah*. In the 1830 edition *Camorah* is standard throughout the Book of Mormon. *Cumorah*

[24]Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), p. 59.

[25]Such an edition is now in the process of publication by "The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies," P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602. The first of three projected volumes covering the entire Book of Mormon was published in 1984.

appears in all subsequent editions.[26]

In addition, some variations of the spellings of names have slipped into the present editions seemingly with no justification, e.g., *shiblum* in the present editions. In Alma 11:15-19 *shiblum* is juxtaposed with *shiblon*. In the Printer's Manuscript the *b* is not there, i.e., *shilum*.[27] The *b* probably was 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] or [y] or [g] or [ǵ]? 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 can expect relative but not absolute consistency in the transliterations of the Book of Mormon onomasticon.

A further complication involves the commingling of Jaredite names among the Nephite names. Unless and until it can be determined

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[26]For this information I am indebted to Robert Smith. *Cumorah* appears in 6:2, 6:4(2x), 6:6(2x) and 8:2; *Camorah* in 6:2; and *Comorah* in 6:5 and 6:11. This type of information will be contained in the edition of the book mentioned in the above footnote.

[27]For this information I thank Robert Smith.

from which cultural background the Jaredites departed,[28] 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 record[29] and should not be considered with later names when etymologies are proposed.

This paper would not be complete without a word of warning.[30] 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.

We hope this introductory statement on relevancy and methology will lead to even more significant progress in the study of the proper names of the Book of Mormon.

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[28]The popular conception in the Church is that the Jaredites departed from Mesopotamia. Hugh Nibley, an LDS scholar, believes that the Jaredites departed from somewhere around Lake Van. (See his treatment in *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), pp. 143-272.

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

[30]Because over-zealous pseudoscholars have abused this approach to Book of Mormon studies, and no doubt will do so again, this word of warning is appropriate.