The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Document: Proper Names as a Test Case

Abstract: This study considers the Book of Mormon personal names Josh, Nahom, and Alma as test cases for the Book of Mormon as an historically authentic ancient document.

At the beginning of Lehi in the Desert, the late, legendary Hugh Nibley reviews the distinguished American archaeologist William F. Albright’s criteria for determining the historical plausibility of the Middle Egyptian tale of Sinuhe, which Albright considers to be ‘‘a substantially true account of life in its milieu’ on the grounds (1) that its ‘local color [is] extremely plausible,’ (2) it describes a ‘state of social organization’ which ‘agrees exactly with our present archaeological and documentary evidence,’ (3) ‘the Amorite personal names contained in the story are satisfactory for that period and region,’ and (4) ‘finally, there is nothing unreasonable in the story itself.’’ ((Hugh Nibley, Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 3.)) Nibley then asks about the story of Lehi: ‘‘Does it correctly reflect ‘the cultural horizon and religious and social ideas and practices of the time’? Does it have authentic historical and geographical background? Is the mise-en-scène mythical, highly imaginative, or extravagantly improbable? Is its local color correct, and are its proper names convincing?’’ ((Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 4.)) As regards proper names [Page 156] in the Book of Mormon, they are arguably ancient, deriving either from ancient Hebrew, another ancient Semitic dialect, ancient Egyptian, or some other ancient language. The following three Book of Mormon proper names—Josh, Nahom, and Alma (the first of several that will be presented and discussed in forthcoming issues of this journal)—are illustrations of the ancient setting of this book, as well as being of interest in their own right.

Book of Mormon Proper Names: Josh, Nahom, Alma

JOSH

The Book of Mormon proper name Josh (mentioned as a place name in 3 Nephi 9:10 and as a personal name—the name of a Nephite general—in Mormon 6:14) is not, as English speakers might suppose, an abbreviated form of Joshua (Hebrew Yeh??sha?) but of Josiah (Hebrew Y??shiyy??h?). The unabbreviated name means “the Lord is a support,” from the hypothetical Hebrew root ?ashah “to support” (cf. the noun form ?oshy??h, “support, buttress”).

Josh, in a slightly different abbreviated form from this root, appears in the Lachish Letters ((Hugh Nibley was the first person to call attention to the J??u??š in the Lachish letters. See “The Lachish Letters: Documents from Lehi’s Day,” Ensign, 11:12 (December 1981): 51.) as J??u??š ((For the most recent treatment of this name in the Lachish letters see Shmuel Ahituv, Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 481–82.)) (an abbreviated form of y??u??š, “the Lord will give as a gift”), according to the prexilic pronunciation. In their illuminating study, “Book of Mormon Names in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions,” John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper note that “four of the bullae found near Tel Be’it Mirsim and dating from ca. 600 B.C. bear the name Y??š. Three of them were made from the same seal.” ((John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 9/1 (2000): 49, 78, citing Nahman Avigad, Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 42–43, 59; Robert Deutsch and Michael Heltzer, New Epigraphic Evidence from the Biblical Period (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 1995), 56–57; Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), 184, 202–3.) They also point out that the personal name Y??š appears [Page 157] six times in the fifth-century BC Jewish Aramaic papyri from Elephantine in Upper Egypt. ((Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names,” 48, 78, citing Elephantine Documents 12:8; 13:13; 18:5; 22:89; 39:4; 40:5, in Arthur Cowley, Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century BC (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923).)) The Book of Mormon form, Josh, reflects the loss of the consonantal quality of the “waw” from the Hebrew root ?wš, meaning “to give, to gift; gift, reward, etc.” Though the root ?wš does not occur apart from personal names in the Hebrew Bible, it does occur in, for example, Ugaritic usùn, “gift”; Arabic ??sa, “to give, reward”; ?aws, “gift”; Old South Arabian ?ws. (See further Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of
NAHOM

Surprisingly, evidence for Nahom, the name of the place where Ishmael was buried (1 Nephi 16:34), is based on historical, geographic, and archaeological—and only secondarily on etymological—considerations.

Three altar inscriptions containing NHM as a tribal name and dating from the seventh to sixth centuries BC—roughly the time period when Lehi’s family was traveling though the area—have been discussed by S. Kent Brown. ((Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” in Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 55–125, esp. 81–82.)) Dan Vogel, writing in the misleadingly named Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet and responding to two books by LDS authors about Lehi’s journey in the Arabian desert, has objected to the dating of the Arabian word NHM: “There is no evidence dating the Arabian NHM before A.D. 600, let alone 600 B.C.” ((Dan Vogel, Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 609.)) It should be noted, however, that Burkhard Vogt, perhaps unaware of its implications for the Book of Mormon, dates an altar having the initial letters NHM(y)n to the seventh to sixth centuries BC. ((Burkhard Vogt, “Les temples de Ma?rib,” in Yémen: au pays de la reine de Saba (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 144.) This is not insignificant since Vogel’s book was published in 2004, while Vogt’s contribution was published in 1997.

Nhm appears as a place name and as a tribal name in southwestern Arabia in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period in the Arab antiquarian al-Hamdani’s al-Iklil ((Al-Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Hamdani, al-Iklil, ed. Nabih Faris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 35, 94.)) and in his ?ifat Jaz?rat al-‘Arab. ((al-Hamdani, Sifat Jazrat al-‘Arab, ed. David H. Müller (Leiden: Brill, repr. 1968), 49, 1. 9; 81, 1. 4, 8, 11; 83, 1. 8, 9; 109, 1. 26; 110, 112, 2, 4 126, 1. 10; 135, 1. 19, 22; 167, 1. 15–20; 168, 1. 10, 11, where nhm is listed as either the name of a “region, territory” (Ar. balad) or a “tribe” (Ar. qabila); Jawad ‘Ali, Al-Mufassal fi Ta’rikh al-‘Arab qabla al-Islam (Beirut: Dar al-‘IIm lil-Malayin, 1969–73), 2:414, gives “Nhm” as the name of a “region” (Ar. ard) during the period of the “mukarrib们 and the [ancient] kings of Saba” (Ar. fi ayyam al-mukarrribina wa-fi ayyam muluk Saba’); he also gives “Nhm” as a place name, Al-Mufassal, 4:187 and 7:462.)) If, as Robert Wilson observes, there is minimal movement among the tribes over time, ((Robert Wilson, “al-Hamdani’s Description of Hashid and Bakil,” Proceedings of the Seminar on Arabian Studies 11 (1981): 95, 99–100.) the region known in early modern maps of the Arabian Peninsula as “Nehem” and “Nehhm” as well as “Nahom” may well have had that, or a similar, name in antiquity. ((On the names of this location in maps of the early modern era (1751-1814), see James Gee, “The Nahom Maps,” Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture 17/1 (2008): 40–57.)


ALMA

Although the female personal name Alma (from the Latin adjective almus, alma, alnum, “nurturing, fostering,”) is popular in the Western tradition of naming, the male personal name Alma is of incontestable antiquity. The name appears at least eight times in documents dating from the late third millennium BC from the archives at Ebla (located in modern-day Syria). ((Terrence L. Szink, “The Personal Name ‘Alma’ at Ebla,” Religious Educator 1/1 (2000): 53–56; see also Szink, “New Light: Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 8/1 (1999): 70.)) It also occurs in the Bar Kokhba letters, dating from the period of the Second Jewish

The initial consonant of the name Alma in the Bar Kokhba documents is aleph (transliterated as ?). However, the name ultimately derives from the consonant ghayin (hence the pronunciation ghlm? in the period before the third century BC). However, over the centuries the sound ghayin came to be pronounced as ?ayin and, finally, as ?aleph. ((On aleph and ?ayin in the spelling of the name “Alma,” see John A. Tvedtens, “More on the Name Alma” *Book of Mormon Research* (September 2008), which may be accessed online at http://bookofmormonresearch.org/more-on-the-name-alma.))

The Hebrew word ?elem occurs twice in the Old Testament—one at 1 Samuel 17:56 and again at 1 Samuel 20:22 with the [Page 160] meaning “youth, lad.” The personal name Alma (?lm?) may well be a hypocoristic form (a word or name with the name of deity—El—suppressed), thus “God’s lad, youth.” Strikingly, in Mosiah 17:2 when Alma is first introduced, he is described as a “young man,” a subtle play on words that would likely have escaped Joseph Smith, whose education in ancient Hebrew did not begin until after his arrival in Kirtland, Ohio in the early 1830s.

The demonstrable antiquity of these names is significant for understanding the Book of Mormon as an ancient document. The names themselves are arguably Semitic: two (Josh and Alma) are Hebrew but are not found in the Bible, while the third (Nahom) is ancient Arabian and attested archaeologically from the period dating from the seventh to sixth centuries BC. The name Alma contains a subtle play on words that Joseph Smith would most likely not have understood given the state of his understanding of ancient Hebrew at that time. All of this, in turn, obliges the reader to decide whether Joseph Smith was an unsophisticated hayseed who just happened to get these names right, or a divinely inspired translator.