

## Nicknames and Dysphemisms in the Bible and Ancient Mediterranean

Even in the Bible, nicknames and dysphemisms—expressions whose connotations may be offensive to the hearer—are not rare and were equally so in other parts of the ancient and early medieval world. In 1 Samuel the ungenerous husband of Abigail rudely refused hospitality to the men of David, greatly angering them. David and his men were so incensed at his offense against the laws of hospitality that they intended to punish him for his boorish behavior before they were dissuaded from their plan by Abigail (1 Samuel 25:1-35). Shortly thereafter the husband died suddenly and mysteriously (1 Samuel 25:36-37). To all subsequent history his name was given as “Nabal,” which means either “churl” or “fool,” ((Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* tr. M.E. J. Richardson (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1995), 2:663-64.) a rather harsh nickname that might also shade off to a dysphemism.

The Babylonian conqueror of Jerusalem was officially named Nebuchadrezzar, a transliteration of the Hebrew name based on the Babylonian *Nabu kudurri usur*, “Nabu preserve my prince, my boundary.” Among his less grateful subjects he was called—perhaps privately—Nebuchadnezzar, which may be from the Babylonian *Nabu kidanu usur*, “Nabu, preserve the donkey,” quite an unflattering name or nickname.

[Page 192]Because as a small child Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (AD 12-41) made his way around the Roman military camp, where his father was commanding, in specially designed soldier’s sandals (Lat. *caligae*), he was affectionately called Caligula, “little boots.” ((Suetonius Caligula IX; Tacitus, *Annales* I, 41, 69.)) However, calling the emperor by his nickname, originally a term of endearment, would likely have been insulting during the early part of his reign (AD 37-41) and later, after an illness left him mentally unbalanced and borderline insane, may have proved fatal.

Al-Mansur, Abbasid emperor (A.D. 754-775) during the apogee of Arab power, was given the nickname (Arab. *laqab*) Abu Dawaniq, “father of farthings,” on account of his thriftiness, which many interpreted as penury and miserliness. ((*History of Tabari: Abbasid Authority Affirmed*, tr. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), xviii.))

## Zeezrom as a Nickname in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon proper name Zeezrom may follow a naming pattern parallel to the Hebrew *zeh Sinai*, “he of Sinai” (i.e., God) (cf. Judges 5:5; Psalm 68:8) and may have the meaning “he of the Ezrom.” Ezrom/Ezrum is a Nephite word mentioned in Alma 11:6, 12, as a unit of silver measure. As a silver measure (which, in Hebrew, is *kesep*, “silver; money”), it may be the equivalent of money as well, indicating the meaning “he of silver, money,” suggesting Zeezrom’s early obsession with money or his willingness to resort to bribing Alma and Amulek with money to have them deny their belief in God (Alma 11:22). Happily, however, Zeezrom underwent a powerful conversion, forsook his sins, and became, with Alma and Amulek, fervent missionaries and ardent exponents of the faith. ((The proper name Sherem may be understood as a dysphemism in the Book of Mormon. Sherem may be related to the Arabic noun *surm*, “anus.” John A. Tvedtnes observes that “although an unlikely name for a man, his character would certainly prompt some contemporary readers to think the name was an appropriate dysphemism.” From the Book of Mormon Names website at <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/SHEREM>.)

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## **A Book of Mormon “Slam Dunk”: The Proper Name Jershon ((In this section I have relied heavily on the study by John A. Tvedtnes and myself, “The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 257-58.))**

When the Lamanites converted by the sons of Mosiah left their homeland to escape persecution, the Nephites allowed them to settle in the land of Jershon. The name, though not found in the Bible, has an authentic Hebrew origin, the root \*YRŠ meaning “to inherit,” with the suffix -ôn that denotes place-names, and may have the meaning “place of inheritance.” Wilhelm Borée, in his important study *Die alten Ortsnamen Palästinas (The Ancient Place Names of Palestine)*, cites fully 84 ancient Canaanite place names with the ending -ôn in biblical and extrabiblical sources (Egyptian and Mesopotamian writings, the El-Amarna letters, ostraca), including—to cite only a few examples—Ayyalon (Elon) (Joshua 19:42, 43), Eltekon (Joshua 15:58), Ashkelon (Judges 1:18), Gibeon (Joshua 9:3), Gibbethon (Joshua 19:44), and Dishon (Genesis 36:21).

We should understand Jershon in the sense of “place of inheritance” and its Hebrew root yarash in the sense of “to inherit” in Alma 27:22 (“and this land Jershon is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an inheritance”), Alma 27:24 (“that they may inherit the land Jershon”), and Alma 35:14 (“they have lands for their inheritance in the land of Jershon”) as plays on words.

Why is the Book of Mormon proper name Jershon a “slam dunk?” Because the name with all its subtle connotations is not something that Joseph Smith would have understood at the time that the Book of Mormon was translated. He began to study Hebrew seriously only while he was living in Kirtland, [Page 194]Ohio in the 1830’s, several years after the publication of the Book of Mormon. ((The first “slam dunk” was the name Alma, mentioned previously by myself in “Some Notes on Book of Mormon Names,” in *Interpreter* 4(2013): 155-60, esp. 159-60, which had connotations (based on the Hebrew noun ‘elem, meaning “young man”) which Joseph Smith would not have known given the current state of his knowledge.))

## **Conclusion**

Austin Farrer, observing C. S. Lewis as an ardent and articulate defender of Christianity, noted that “though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish” ((Austin Farrer, “The Christian Apologist,” in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 26.)) (this quotation was cited on several occasions by Neal A. Maxwell). In the spirit of this quotation, I believe that proper names in the Book of Mormon are arguably ancient. With regard to critics of the Book of Mormon, the question may thus be shifted to, “If the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, why are there so many features in it—including proper names—that are so arguably ancient?”