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What's in a Name? Sebus

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When I first began studying Book of Mormon proper names more than 30 years ago, the name *Sebus* appeared to present a Gordian knot. Hebrew words, like other Semitic words in general, are most often built on a structure of three different consonants. This language feature emphasizes the consonants and their sequence and order. The problem with *Sebus* is that its first and third consonants, /s/ and /s/, are the same—something that is extremely rare in any Semitic language.[1] That being the case, for a long time I shelved any attempt to etymologize *Sebus*.[2]

Recently I stumbled onto Amos 5:11 and the hapax legomenon *bšs*, which in context seems to mean "to gather a tax."[3] Some scholars have suggested that the word, albeit by metathesis, derives from the Akkadian[4] *šabāšu*, meaning "to collect (taxes), to gather in."[5] It appears, however, that this Akkadian word in its Neo-Babylonian form, *subbusu*, derives from an Aramaic[6] root, *sbs*.[7] My initial worry about the identical first and third consonants vanished because of this rare example in both Aramaic and Babylonian, even though in the Hebrew word the sibilants are differentiated as *šbs[8] (supposedly borrowed from Aramaic or Babylonian).[9]

The vowels fit the pattern of a passive participle or stative verbal form, that is, /ū/ or /u/ between the second and third consonants.[10] The meaning would be "to be gathered," a fit name for a watering hole.

It may seem a stretch to use a biblical hapax legomenon meaning "to gather/to be gathered" with an Aramaic/Neo-Babylonian cognate to explain a Lamanite (Nephite?) place-name. But what makes this stretch plausible is that the Book of Mormon passage in which the name occurs seems to be playing off the meaning "assemble, gather," namely, "all the Lamanites drive their flocks" to the "water of Sebus" (= assembly; Alma 17:26). At this place where the Lamanites *gathered* to water their flocks, "a certain number of the Lamanites" *scattered* the flocks of the king (v. 27). Ammon responded by telling his fellow servants that they should *gather* the flocks "and bring them back unto the place of water," to *Sebus* (v. 31).

Thus a possible Aramaic word from around the time of Lehi meaning to "gather," as well as a well-attested word in Babylonian (including the Neo-Babylonian of Lehi's day), could provide the etymology for the Book of Mormon place-name *Sebus*. The consonants line up; the vowels match. Additionally, it is telling that the only name in the Book of Mormon that begins and ends with the same consonant, a sibilant, corresponds well with one of the rare Semitic words that begin and end with a consonant, also a sibilant.

If I may be allowed to speculate further afield, I would suggest that there is a possible secondary wordplay involving *Sebus*. The East Semitic (Babylonian) word *šabāsu*, which means "to be angry,"[11] also begins and ends with a sibilant and contains a medial /b/. Perhaps the choice of the word *angry* in Alma 17:36 was not just serendipitous but a conscious play on a word that sounded similar to *Sebus*.

Nevertheless, as with any suggestion, this etymology of *Sebus* must remain only a possibility whose plausibility depends on the eye of the reader. ◆

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Notes

1. The only other examples known to me of original Semitic words with the same first and third consonants, other than the lexemes suggested below, are the Hebrew words for "root," *šōrēš*; "three," *šālōš*; and, from Ugaritic, "sixth," *ṯdṯ*. Note that all of these, like *Sebus*, begin and end with a sibilant or, in the case of *ṯdṯ*, what became a sibilant in Hebrew, *šēš*.

2. The word appears several times in Alma 17–19.

3. While the King James Bible reads "your treading," the New English Bible (Oxford, 1971) reads "levy taxes." The *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford, 2004) cautiously reads "impose a tax" and notes "meaning of the Heb. uncertain."

4. That is, the East Semitic languages Babylonian and Assyrian.

5. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, CD-ROM (Brill, 1994–2000), שבס (hereafter *HALOT*). See *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Oriental Institute, 1989), 17:6, s.v. *šabāšu*, "to collect, gather," and in the D stem (= Hebrew *piel*) "to collect taxes, to gather in" (hereafter *CAD*). See also *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Harrossowitz, 1981), 3:1119, s.v. šabāšu, "einzammeln" (hereafter *AHw*).

6. Aramaic is a West Semitic language closely related to Hebrew that educated Israelites of Lehi's day knew.

7. *Dictionary of North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (Brill, 1995), 2:775. See CAD, 15:341, s.v. *subbusu*; and *AHw* (1972), 2:1053, s.v. *subbusu*. It appears once as a verb, *us-sa-ab-bi-is*, and once as an adjective, *su-ub-bu-su-tu*. See also H. ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* (KTAV, 2009),

61; and Michael Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 2002), 1107. I thank my friend Robert Smith for the last two references.

8. The transcription in the Book of Mormon of a Hebrew word would mask the difference because in English we have only the letter *s* for Semitic /š/, /ś/, and /s/.

9. There is some question about the quality of the sibilants in this word. It would appear that the Ugaritic cognate is *ṯbš* (see *HALOT*, בשׂ). The issue is complicated because the Akkadian cuneiform script often does not distinguish between the sibilants /š/, /ś/, and /s/.

10. The theme vowel of the passive participle in Hebrew is /ō/, from an original /ū/, and the theme vowel of the stative verbal form is /u/. A stative verbal form denotes a condition, such as the Hebrew word meaning to be sick, *maruṣ*.

11. *CAD*, 17:4, s.v. *šabāsu*.

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