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What's in a Name? Mormon—Part 1

Despite sporadic attempts to sideline the name *Mormon* in favor of “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” it continues to be used as the most ubiquitous moniker for the Church. Members of the Church are known as “Mormons.” It appears in the title of the keystone publication of the Restoration, *The Book of Mormon*. Within the book bearing this name, *Mormon* is, first of all, the name of the waters in the forest of Mormon (Mosiah 18:8; Alma 5:3) in the land of Mormon (Mosiah 18:30). Of course, *Mormon* is also the name of the military leader who abridged the Nephite records (Words of Mormon 1:1, 3; Mormon 1:1; 2:1).

Any serious discussion of the meaning of the name *Mormon* must begin by dealing with a passage in a letter attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith and published in 1843 in the Latter-day Saint newspaper *Times and Seasons*. But first a probable explanation of why the letter was written in the first place is in order. In E. D. Howe's 1834 *Mormonism Unveiled*, it is claimed that “the word *Mormon*, the name given to his [Joseph Smith's] book, is the English termination of the Greek word ‘*Mormoo*,’ which we find defined in an old, obsolete Dictionary, to mean ‘*bug-bear, hob-goblin, raw head, and bloody bones.*’”¹ Almost any knowledgeable reader, even in 1834, would have recognized that this definition is not only fabricated but downright silly. Closer in time to the letter in question is this passage from a local Illinois newspaper in 1841: “I will here give you the signification of the word Mormon, and also, book of Mormon, which every person that has read a dictionary of the reformed Egyptian tongue knows to be correct. *Mormon*—A writer of wicked, absurd, fictitious nonsense, for evil purposes, to make sorcerers. *Book of Mormon*—A book of gross, fictitious nonsense, wrote by Mormon, for Gazelom's diabolical purposes. *Mormons*—Anciently in Egypt—a set of black-legs, thieves, robbers, and murderers.”² This satirical attempt to define *Mormon* is even more fanciful and absurd than E. D. Howe's. Such doggerel regarding *Mormon* became the standard fare in the yellow journalism of the times. But no matter how outdated and fetid the nonsense, a reply seems to

have been the reason for writing the letter that was published in 1843 in the *Times and Seasons*. And now the letter, which was printed over the name of the Prophet:

I may safely say that the word Mormon stands independent of the learning and wisdom of this generation.—Before I give a definition, however, to the word, let me say that the Bible in its widest sense, means *good*; for the Savior says according to the gospel of John, “I am the *good* shepherd;” and it will not be beyond the common use of terms, to say that good is among the most important in use, and though known by various names in different languages, still its meaning is the same, and is ever in opposition to *bad*. We say from the Saxon, *good*; the Dane, *god*; the Goth, *goda*; the German, *gut*; the Dutch, *goed*; the Latin, *bonus*; the Greek, *kalos*; the Hebrew, *tob*; and the Egyptian, *mon*. Hence, with the addition of *more*, or the contraction, *mor*, we have the word MORMON; which means, literally, *more good*.³

It is possible that the tone of the letter was meant to ape the flippant anti-Mormon literature of the previous ten years. After all, satire is a tempting retort to satire. And though some of the letter might be an application of *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye), there is a more salient crux that needs to be addressed.

The first issue with this statement is that we are not certain Joseph Smith is responsible for all the content. The Prophet's journal entry for May 20, 1843, reads, “In the office heard Bro Phelps read a deffinition of the Word Mormon—More-Good—corrected and sent to press.”⁴ Unfortunately, not enough information is given to determine which parts of the letter published over Joseph's name stem from W. W. Phelps and which parts Joseph corrected. What is certain is that Joseph was not the original or sole author, that he made changes in the text, and that he gave approval to have it published over his name. This was not the first or last time that Phelps was a ghostwriter for Joseph.⁵

B. H. Roberts, when compiling the *History of the Church*, also “found evidence that the editor of *Times and Seasons*, W. W. Phelps, rather than Joseph Smith, wrote this paragraph and that it

was “based on inaccurate premises and was offensively pedantic.” In saying that the content of the letter was “offensively pedantic,” Elder Roberts seems to have concluded that the tone of the letter was pompous and, like the anti-LDS literature, flippant. He asked for and received permission from the First Presidency to leave the offending paragraph out of the official history he was producing.⁶ In the print version of his history, Roberts introduced the letter with a paraphrase of Joseph’s journal entry, writing rather frankly, “Corrected and sent to the *Times and Seasons* the following.” After leaving out all the words after “the wisdom and learning of this generation,” Roberts summarized the last sentence as “The word Mormon, means literally, more good.”⁷ He seems to have understood that the “inaccurate premises” lacked merit and therefore did not include them in his history. ♦

By Paul Y. Hoskisson

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In the next issue, part 2 will discuss metaphorical and philological aspects of the meaning and derivation of the name Mormon.

Notes

1. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: E. D. Howe, 1834), 21, emphasis in original.
2. “Communications,” *Warsaw Signal*, August 11, 1841 (anonymous letter to the editor).
3. *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, 194.
4. My thanks and appreciation to Andrew Hedges, Church History Library, for calling my attention to this passage. I have quoted the passage from Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 378, entry for May 20, 1843. Original spelling preserved.
5. For W. W. Phelps as a ghostwriter for Joseph Smith, see Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34/1 (2008): 26-62. See especially pages 42-43, where Brown discusses this *Times and Seasons* passage; see also page 54. Another piece ghostwritten by Phelps is discussed by Michael Hicks in “Joseph Smith, W. W. Phelps, and the Poetic Paraphrase of ‘The Vision,’” *Journal of Mormon History* 20/2 (1994): 63-84.
6. Truman Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 291-92. Madsen cites no source for his information.
7. *History of the Church*, 5:399-400.

Writing in Seventh-Century BC Levant

Harold B. Lee Library Auditorium (HBL 1080)

1:30–5:30 pm, 31 August 2012

The Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies invites you to an afternoon of lectures on the topic “Writing in Seventh-Century BC Levant.” The seventh century BC was a pivotal period in the history of the world. Not only did this century span the time between the Assyrian captivity and the impending Babylonian captivity, it was also the century when Isaiah ended his work and Jeremiah started his. This was the period of the Pax Assyriaca; it marked the height of the Assyrian Empire, its demise, and the rise of Babylon. It is the time when Lehi’s family was born and when he himself was the most active.

What was the state of writing in this time period? Four lectures will be given on different aspects of writing in the seventh century. Subscribers to Maxwell Institute publications will recognize the importance of these topics.

Presenters and Topics

- Marvin Sweeney, Claremont Graduate University, “Seventh-Century Judean Historiography”
- K. Lawson Younger Jr., Trinity International University, “The Role of Aramaic in the Neo-Assyrian Empire: Interactions in Writing Systems”
- Christopher Rollston, Emmanuel Christian Seminary, “The State of Literacy in the Levant of the Seventh Century BC”
- Stefan Wimmer, University of Munich, “Palestinian Hieratic”

Visit our website, maxwellinstitute.byu.edu, for the latest updates regarding this event.