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What's in a Name? Mormon—Part 2

by Paul Y. Hoskisson

In part 1 of my discussion of the name *Mormon*,¹ I presented the evidence that Joseph Smith did not originally write the letter published over his signature in the 1843 *Times and Seasons*, but that he made some corrections to the letter William W. Phelps had composed and then gave his approval to have it published. I also mentioned the fact that B. H. Roberts left most of the letter out of his *History of the Church* because he believed the full letter was “based on inaccurate premises and was offensively pedantic.”

This second installment of my examination of the name *Mormon* begins with an analysis of Roberts’s objections, finds support from a modern Church leader, and concludes with a discussion of what *Mormon* might mean in an ancient Near Eastern context.

Roberts’s dismissal of the body of the letter leads to an examination of the “premises” that he mentions. When the letter states that “the Bible in its widest sense, means *good*,” the writer (Joseph Smith or W. W. Phelps?) was not suggesting that the word *Bible* etymologically means “good.” Rather, the writer was suggesting that the Bible is good, that reading it promotes good, and that the Bible metaphorically means “good.” This certainly is an acceptable figurative meaning of the word *Bible* that no Christian in the 19th century would have denied.

That the word *Bible* figuratively means “good” leads to an examination of the statement “The word *Mormon*, means literally, more good.” Just as it does today, the word *literally* had various connotations in Joseph Smith’s day. It was used to mean “word by word” and “real, not figurative or metaphorical.”² But *literally* could also be used in a figurative sense, that is, as an intensive.³ The use of *literally* as an inten-

sive can be traced back at least 150 years before the *Times and Seasons* letter.⁴ Closer in time and in a Latter-day Saint context, a sentence from the *Evening and Morning Star* in 1834 uses *literally* as an intensive: “We admit, that our country is literally filled with stated publications, and many are conducted under the title of *religious periodicals*.”⁵

Therefore, just as “good” is not a translation of the word *Bible*, the conclusion can be drawn that “more good” is not a translation of the word *Mormon* but a figurative etymology that highlights the value of the Book of *Mormon*, even if it might have been used tongue in cheek. Thus, if the Bible, which is true as far as it was transmitted correctly, means “good” in a figurative sense, then the Book of *Mormon*, which was transmitted correctly, “means, literally, *more good*,”⁶ with *literally* acting as an intensive.

Elder Gordon B. Hinckley spoke to this issue in the October 1990 general conference.⁷ While on his mission in England many years earlier, he had a discussion with his companion about the appropriateness of using the name *Mormon*.⁸ His companion had stated, “I am not ashamed of the nickname *Mormon*. Look,” he went on to say, “if there is any name that is totally honorable in its derivation, it is the name *Mormon*. And so, when someone asks me about it and what it means, I quietly say—‘*Mormon* means *more good*.’” Then Elder Hinckley made his own observation: “His statement intrigued me—*Mormon* means ‘more good.’ I knew, of course, that ‘more good’ was not a derivative of the word *Mormon*. I had studied both Latin and Greek, and I knew that English is derived in some measure from those two languages and that the words *more good* are not a cognate of

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the word *Mormon*. But his was a positive attitude based on an interesting perception. And, as we all know, our lives are guided in large measure by our perceptions. Ever since, when I have seen the word *Mormon* used in the media to describe us—in a newspaper or a magazine or book or whatever—there flashes into my mind his statement, which has become my motto: *Mormon* means ‘more good.’ We may not be able to change the nickname [of the Church], but we can make it shine with added luster.”⁹

If the definition of *Mormon* as “more good” was merely a figurative etymology, I can now consider nonfigurative explanations of the name.

Notwithstanding the warning “that the word Mormon stands independent of the learning and wisdom of this generation,”¹⁰ many attempts have been made to provide a sound etymology for *Mormon* based on secular knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages. The following discussion reviews some of the promising suggestions that have been made. Unfortunately, the most likely suggestion (the first) has no etymology, and the other suggestions that do have an etymology are less likely.

- On a limestone stela of the Egyptian Nineteenth to Twenty-first Dynasty in the Museum of Gizeh, the name *mrmnu* appears, accompanied by the title “doorkeeper.” In an article that has yet to be superseded, Wilhelm Spiegelberg treats the name as Semitic in Egyptian transcription, although he is not certain that it is Semitic and does not provide a meaning. He transcribes it into Hebrew characters with *mr/lmn(w)*. Spiegelberg’s description of the stela unfortunately does not permit its current identification.¹¹ Despite various difficulties, such as dating to at least 600 years before Lehi and not having an etymology, this name *mrmn*¹² on an Egyptian inscription seems like a direct hit, as Hugh Nibley pointed out years ago.¹³

- Nibley has also pointed out that *mrm*, be-

sides appearing as an Egyptian personal name, is attested in Hebrew and Arabic and means “desirable” or “good.”¹⁴ In this case, *Mormon* would consist of the root *mrm* plus the common Semitic ending *-ōn*, often used for geographic and personal names such as *Kidron* and *Gideon*. For possible Hebrew examples of the lexeme, see the biblical personal name *Mirmâh* in 1 Chronicles 8:10¹⁵ and the personal name *Merēmoth* (also of questionable etymology), the name of a priest in Ezra 10:36 (= Nehemiah 10:5).¹⁶ The latter name also appears as *mrmwt* on an eighth-century-BC ostrakon from Arad.¹⁷ Note also the personal name *ma-ri-ma-na* at Ugarit,¹⁸ though the language origin of this Ugaritic name is uncertain.¹⁹

- Ben Urrutia has called attention to Egyptian *mr-mn*, “love established forever,”²⁰ while Robert Smith has suggested “strong/firm love” or “love remains steadfast/firm.”²¹ The translation “love is established forever” brings to memory the words of Paul: “Charity never faileth” (1 Corinthians 13:8).²² Interestingly, Mormon used similar words when writing, “But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever” (Moroni 7:47).²³

- Finally, and less likely, is Egyptian *mr* (Nubian and Coptic *mur, mor*), “bind, girth.”²⁴

What conclusion can be drawn? While the name *Mormon* can designate figuratively that which is “more good,” the etymology remains uncertain. The most likely suggestion, from the pen of Hugh Nibley, is that the name *Mormon* appears to have a direct analog in the name *mrmn* on an Egyptian stela. Other Egyptian and Hebrew possibilities exist. In fact, we are blessed with several possibilities, which is a very comfortable position to be in.

Paul Y. Hoskisson is director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies.

(Mormon to page 7)

Kristian Heal Appointed Director of Advancement

Dr. Kristian Heal has been appointed to serve as the Maxwell Institute's new director of advancement (fundraising). He succeeds in this position Professor Daniel C. Peterson, who has elected to step down and return to full-time teaching as professor of Arabic and Islamic studies in BYU's Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages. Professor Peterson will continue to serve as editor-in-chief of the Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative series.

Dr. Heal is a native of the United Kingdom and received his education at the Universities of London, Oxford, and Birmingham. He is a

specialist in the early literature of the Christian Middle East and coordinates the Institute's work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as several projects in Syriac studies, in his capacity as the director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. "Dan has been a wonderful advocate for the Institute," says Dr. Heal, "and it has been a real pleasure serving with him and others in the Institute's development team over the past year. I'm delighted to now have an opportunity to devote more time to working with our donors and staff in my new capacity."

(Mormon from page 3)

Notes

1. See "What's in a Name? Mormon—Part 1," *Insights* 32/2 (2012): 2-3.

2. See Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1844 ed., s.v. "literal" and "literally."

3. For example, "For more than a hundred years, critics have remarked on the incoherency of using *literally* in a way that suggests the exact opposite of its primary sense of 'in a manner that accords with the literal sense of the words.' . . . The practice does not stem from a change in the meaning of *literally* itself—if it did, the word would long since have come to mean 'virtually' or 'figuratively'—but from a natural tendency to use the word as a general intensive." *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (2004), CD-ROM, s.v. "literally." I thank my friend and colleague Don Brugger for pointing out to me some of these dictionary entries.

4. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (2009), CD-ROM (v. 4.0), s.v. "literally," 3b.

5. Editor, "To Our Subscribers," *Evening and Morning Star*, May 1834, 160.

6. *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, 194.

7. At the time, he was a counselor in the First Presidency.

8. I thank editing intern Dustin Schwanger for bringing this item to my attention.

9. In Conference Report, October 1990, 69; or "Mormon Should Mean 'More Good,'" *Ensign*, November 1990, 51.

10. *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, 194. This statement may refer to the fact that the Restoration, including the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon, was not done by any secular, academic, or scholarly means of our enlightened age.

11. Wilhelm Spiegelberg, "Zu den semitischen Eigennamen in ägyptischer Umschrift aus der Zeit des 'neuen

Reiches' (um 1500-1000)," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898): 51. My friend and colleague John Gee maintains that to date he has not been able to identify the stela, despite some search attempts.

12. According to John Gee, Egyptologists are divided about whether to represent word-final *w/w*. I have chosen to leave it off.

13. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 500 n. 30. Nibley states that "the common Egyptian *Mr*-[means] . . . 'intention, wish, desire.'"

14. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 500 n. 30.

15. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* does not offer an etymology.

16. Suggestion by Jo Ann Hackett.

17. Arad ostrakon no. 50. See Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period*, trans. Anson F. Rainey (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 149. On page 484 Ahituv explains this personal name as "Blessed by the god Mawt, death."

18. Suggestion by Jo Ann Hackett.

19. The name appears in the appendix "Liste ungedeuteter oder ihrer sprachlichen Herkunft nach unsicherer Namen," in Frauke Gröndahl, *Die Personennamen der Texte aus Ugarit*, Studia Pohl 1 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1967), 304.

20. Ben Urrutia, "The Name Connection," *New Era*, June 1983, 40.

21. Suggestion by Robert F. Smith.

22. Suggestion by Ben Urrutia.

23. Suggestion by John A. Tvedtnes.

24. Suggestion by Robert F. Smith. On the element *mr* meaning "binding," see Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 109.