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## “And He Was a Young Man”: The Literary Preservation of Alma’s Autobiographical Wordplay

Thanks to the work of Hugh Nibley, Paul Hoskisson, Terrence Szink, and others,<sup>1</sup> the plausibility of Alma as a Semitic name is no longer an issue. Hoskisson has noted that “Alma” derives from the root *ʿlm* (< \**ġlm*) with the meaning “youth” or “lad,” corroborating Nibley’s earlier suggestion that “Alma” means “young man” (cf. Hebrew *ʿelem*, עֶלֶם).<sup>2</sup> Significantly, “Alma” occurs for the first time in the Book of Mormon text as follows: “But there was one among them whose name was *Alma*, he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a *young man*, and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:2; emphasis in all scriptural citations is mine). This first occurrence of “Alma” is juxtaposed with a description matching the etymological meaning of the name, suggesting an underlying wordplay: *Alma* (*ʿlm*) was an *ʿelem*. A play on words sharing a common root is a literary technique known as polyptoton.

If it is assumed that the language underlying the Reformed Egyptian script of Mormon’s abridgment was Hebrew, and if it is assumed that the Hebrew text can be reconstructed based on Biblical Hebrew (and these two assumptions must remain highly speculative), then we can detect a different kind of punning on “Alma” in the succeeding verses of this narrative. In addition to the Semitic root *ġlm* (> *ʿelem*, “young man”), Hebrew possesses the homonymous verbal root *ʿlm* which means “to hide,” “to conceal,” and reflexively to “hide oneself.”<sup>3</sup> Mosiah 17:3–4 informs us that when King Noah “caused that *Alma* should be cast out . . . he [*Alma*] fled . . . and *hid himself* [*\*hitʿallam*]. . . . And he being *concealed* [cf. *neʿlam*] for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken.” Later, we are told that at the waters of Mormon “[*Alma*] did *hide himself* [*\*hitʿallam*] . . . from the searches of the king” (18:5). In these examples, the text plays on the homophony between Alma and *ʿlm* (“to hide”). Though lacking a true etymological basis, the interplay between “Alma” and *ʿlm* creates a clever explanation of Alma’s providential escape: Alma was not only God’s “young man,” but also “hidden” so that he could teach and baptize the people and establish a church. This play on Alma and an unrelated *ʿlm* root is a literary technique known as paronomasia.

The use of polyptoton and paronomasia together involving a single name is also found in Biblical Hebrew narrative. Rachel’s explanation of the naming of Joseph (“may he add”) involves both its root of origin *ysp* (“to add”) and the similar sounding *ʿsp* (“to take away,” “gather up”): “God hath *taken away* [*ʿasap*] my reproach” and “the Lord *shall add* [*yōsēp*] to me another son” (Genesis 30:23–24; cf. 37:5, 8; 41:17). Similarly “Noah,” which connoted “[divine] rest,” interplays with forms of the related root *\*nwh* and the unrelated root *\*nḥm* (to “comfort,” “console,” “be sorry,” “regret”) throughout the flood narrative. Noah (*nōʿh*, “[divine] rest”) is said to “comfort” (*yʿnaḥʾmēnū*) his forefathers concerning their work and toil (Genesis 5:29), which interplays with the Lord’s “regretting” (*wayyināḥem*, *niḥamtī*) over having created humanity (6:6–7), the ark coming to “rest” (*wattānaḥ*, 8:4), the dove’s attempt to find “rest” (*mānōʿh*, 8:9), and the “sweet savour” (*rēʿh hannīḥōʿh*) of the sacrifice that appeased the Lord after the flood (8:21).

We find a similar use of polyptoton and paronomasia on *\*nwh* and *\*nḥm* in the lead-up to Alma’s story. King Noah and his priests are caricatured as the moral obverse of the biblical Noah.<sup>4</sup> King “Rest” causes the people to “labor exceedingly to support iniquity” (Mosiah 11:6), while his priests laze about on an ornate breastwork built so “*that they might rest* [*\*wayyannīḥū*] their bodies and their arms upon [it] while they should speak lying and vain words to [the] people” (11:11). Ironically, neither Noah nor his priests understood their role in achieving Isaiah’s prophetic promise “the Lord *hath comforted* [*niḥam*] his people” (Isaiah 52:9; quoted by a priest in Mosiah 12:23, see 12:20–27), an idea integral to the folk-meaning of Noah’s name: (“This same *shall comfort us* [*yʿnaḥʾmēnū*] concerning our work and toil of our hands,” Genesis 5:29) and to Zeniff’s hopes for his son and his people (cf. Mosiah 10:22).

Since Alma alone would have been privy to many of the events surrounding his repentance and conversion, we can infer that Mormon relied heavily on Alma’s own account(s) in synthesizing this narrative. Just as Limhi culled a summary (Mosiah 7:21–22) of his grandfather Zeniff’s history from first-person accounts and records in his library (cf. Mosiah 9–10),<sup>5</sup> including using Zeniff’s self-introduction (cf. 7:21 and 9:1–3), Mormon has created an engaging narrative using eyewitness accounts at his disposal.

Using Limhi's quotation of Zeniff as a model, we may further surmise that the initial characterization of Alma (Mosiah 17:2) was originally an autobiographical introduction. Enos's,<sup>6</sup> Benjamin's,<sup>7</sup> and Zeniff's<sup>8</sup> imitations of Nephi's self-introduction suggest that Alma had ample precedents. Alma may have written such an autobiography later in life at Zarahemla, when he would have had access to all the records in Mosiah's possession. Comparing Alma's introduction into the narrative with Nephi's autobiographical introduction, we can see how Mormon may have adapted an autobiographical note by Alma based on the earlier autobiography of his ancestor:

<p>I, <i>Nephi</i>, having been born of <i>goodly</i> parents,  therefore I was taught somewhat in all the <i>learning of my</i> <i>father</i> [<i>'ābī</i>]. (1 Nephi 1:1)</p>	<p>But there was one . . . whose name was <i>Alma</i>, he also being a descendant of <i>Nephi</i>.<sup>9</sup> And he was a <i>young man</i>, (<i>'elem</i>)<sup>10</sup> and he <i>believed</i>  <i>the words which Abinadi</i> had spoken. (Mosiah 17:2)</p>
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I *Nephi*,  
being exceedingly *young* (i.e., he was an *'elem*),  
nevertheless being large in stature,  
and also having great desires to know the mysteries of God,  
wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord;  
and . . . he did . . . soften my heart that *I did believe*  
*all the words which had been spoken by my father* [*'ābī*].  
(1 Nephi 2:16)

The characterization of Alma in Mosiah 17:2 makes use of Nephi's self-characterization in 1 Nephi 1:1 and 2:16. Just as "Nephi"—the name may derive from Egyptian *nfr*<sup>11</sup> ("good," "goodly," "fair")<sup>12</sup>—was a fitting name for one who acquired a knowledge of the "goodness . . . of God" from his "goodly parents" (1 Nephi 1:1)<sup>13</sup> and, as an *'elem*, "did believe all the words [of his] father (1 Nephi 2:16), so too was "Alma" a fitting name for an *'elem* of "goodly" ancestry who "believed the words [of] Abinadi," the *father* of his faith and repentance in Christ. Mormon, for his part, has done a remarkable job incorporating Alma's words into a compelling narrative, without obscuring the latter's use of polyptoton and paronomasia or its possible literary antecedents. ♦

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#### Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 76; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Alma as a Hebrew Name," *JBMS* 7/1 (1998): 72–73; Terrence L. Szink, "New Light: Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma," *JBMS* 8/1 (1999): 70. See further Terrence L. Szink, "The Personal Name 'Alma' at Ebla," *Religious Educator* 1/1 (2000): 53–56. John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, in "Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," *JBMS* 9/1 (2000): 41–51, note in addition that "a number of other biblical names have been found at Ebla, which is in the region that some scholars consider to be the homeland of the Hebrews."

2. Hoskisson, "Alma as a Hebrew Name," 72–73; Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 76. Nibley suggested that "Alma" can mean "a young man, a coat of mail, a mountain, or a sign."

3. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:834–35.

4. Although they are both described as winemakers (Genesis 9:20, Mosiah 11:15), the Book of Mormon king Noah is not described as having comforted or brought rest to his people—just the opposite. Some scholars believe that the etymology for Noah's name ("And he called his name Noah saying, This same shall comfort us [*y'nah'mēnu*] concerning our work and toil of our hands," Genesis 5:29) alludes to wine-making. In any case, the kind of "rest" that King Noah brought his people was quite different from the "rest" implied in his name.

5. See John Gee, "Limhi in the Library," *JBMS* 1/1 (1992): 54–66. Gee shows how Limhi quotes his sources with scrupulous accuracy. We can probably assume similar care on Mormon's part.

6. See Matthew L. Bowen, "Wordplay on the Name 'Enos,'" *Insights* 26/3 (2006). Here I endeavor to show how Enos's self-introduction (Enos 1:1) is modeled on Nephi's, including the latter's use of nameplay.

7. See John A. Tvedtnes, "A Note on Benjamin and Lehi," *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 3. Tvedtnes shows how Benjamin's counsel to his sons (Mosiah 1:2–6) consciously imitates Nephi's language in 1 Nephi 1:1–4. In this instance too, the imitation of Nephi is discernible beneath Mormon's editorial work.

8. Cf. 1 Nephi 1:1: "I, Nephi [cf. Egyptian *nfr* = good, goodly, fair], having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; . . . yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God"; Mosiah 9:1: "I, Zeniff, having been taught in all the language of the Nephites, and having had a knowledge of the land of Nephi, or of the land of our fathers' first inheritance, and having been sent as a spy among the Lamanites . . . that our army might come upon them and destroy them—but when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed."

9. Cf. Mormon 1:5: "I, Mormon, being a descendant of Nephi . . ."

10. Cf. Mormon 2:1 (1 Nephi 2:16) "And notwithstanding I being young, was large in stature . . ."

11. John Gee, "A Note on the Name *Nephi*," *JBMS* 1/1 (1992): 189–91.

12. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1999), 132.

13. Matthew L. Bowen, "Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi's Name," *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2. A play on the meaning of "Nephi" here assumes that Nephi, who indicates at least some knowledge of the Egyptian language (1 Nephi 1:2), integrated the word *nfr*—in at least some of its senses—within the developing Nephite language which was, at its base, a Hebrew dialect.