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Some Observations on Proper Name Formation in the Book of Mormon Stephen D. Ricks

The Book of Mormon contains several hundred names that offer an opportunity for examination and study. In the following sections are some observations on a few of them.

The Proper Name Anti-Nephi-Lehi

The proper name Anti-Nephi-Lehi (the name given to the Lamanite converts of Ammon who returned with him to Nephite territory) is striking for a number of reasons: (1) The division of the morphemes by hyphens; and (2) the familiarity of the latter two elements of the name and the apparent familiarity of the first. While it is undeniably true that the current edition of the Book of Mormon places hyphens between the elements of the name, this was not the case in the manuscript versions. This leads me to observe a peril associated with determining morphemic elements of a name and of proposing etymologies--variant spellings. Of the 188 Nephite names found in the Book of Mormon (Tvedtnes 1984) there are variant spellings in the manuscripts and in the various editions in over fifty of them. Although most of these differences are in the vowels (e.g., Onti/Anti, Morianton/Morionton), occasionally there are differences in the consonants as well (Paanchi/Paachi, Ammon/Amon, Ammonihah/Amonihah, although any of these may, of course, be the result of a scribal error), which could lead to a very different proposed etymology.

While I do not disagree with the division of the name Anti-Nephi-Lehi into the discrete elements suggested by the hyphens, the hyphens cause us to dissociate the "Anti" in this name from other "Anti" elements in proper names, such as those occurring in Antion, Antionah, Antionum, Antiparah, Antipas, Antipus, Antum, and possibly also Onti. While these may or may not all contain the same element, if they do, it would be just as appropriate to write, e.g., Anti-On as to write it in the manner which is currently found in the Book of Mormon (I suspect that it does not contain the same element, since the separate elements in the name Antion are not as obvious as they are in Anti-Nephi-Lehi). Finally, I would like to mention a possible etymology which has been proposed for the "Anti" element in Anti-Nephi-Lehi (Tvedtnes 1984: N 29). On the fairly likely assumption that the language of the Nephites (and, consequently, of the plates) is Afro-Asiatic, the Egyptian *nty*, "the one who is of, belongs to" renders the sense of the whole admirably. In any event, this gives a more meaningful sense for the name than any provided by the English--or Greek--"anti," although here too, it ought to be noted that occasionally the meanings of names are translated in the Book of Mormon (e.g., Bountiful and Desolation).

Proper Names Common to the Nephites and Jaredites or Jaredites and the Bible

As noted above, in the Book of Mormon there are 188 Nephite names attested, not including names with variant spellings in different editions or sometimes within the same edition (e.g., Amalekites/Amilikites or Ammaron/Ammoron/Amoron), those which have what are clearly or apparently English suffix morphemes (Amlici/Amlicites), and those biblical names which are mentioned outside of a biblical citation but not specifically applied to a Nephite or Lamanite. Similarly, there are sixty-two Jaredite and 148 biblical names mentioned in the Book of Mormon (Welch). Of these, nine names are common to the Jaredites and Nephites, sixteen names are common to the Bible and the Jaredites, and thirty-seven names are common to the Nephites and the Bible. The names common to the Bible and the Jaredites are Aaron, Ephraim, Esrom, Ethem, Ether, Gilead, Gilgal, Heth, Jared, Kish, Levi, Nimrah, Nimrod, Noah, Ramah, and Seth. The names found among both the Jaredites and the Nephites are Aaron, Coriantumr, Gilgal, Moriancumr,

Morianton (Morionton), Nehor, Noah, Shiblom (Shiblom), and Shim. Given the origin of the Jaredites, it is not surprising to find certain names common to the Jaredites and to the Bible in the patriarchal period predating the Tower of Babel, such as Jared, Nimrod, Noah, and Seth. On the other hand, the fact that some of the biblical names found in the Book of Ether are post-Tower (i.e., Aaron, Ephraim, Esrom, Ethem, Ether, Gilead, Gilgal, Heth, Kish, Levi, Nimrah, and Ramah) requires a somewhat different explanation. Among these possible explanations are (1) linguistic coincidence among two otherwise unrelated languages (an explanation which I find rather unlikely in the light of the sheer number of these coincidences: sixteen of a total of sixty-two names); (2) proper names shared by both of the languages, either as borrowings from other language families (Heth, Kish, and Levi may fall into this category) or because the languages are related to each other (it is clear that Hebrew itself has borrowed a number of proper names--e.g., Pinchas, which is a Nubian name--from other languages. It is possible, then, that Hebrew--or proto-Hebrew--borrowed from the Jaredite language or vice versa, resulting in the number of shared names, or that they both derived them from a common source); and (3) the similarities in the names are the result of levelling that took place during the translation process. As the record itself shows, it was Mosiah II who translated the Jaredite record. Although it is quite apparent that Moroni edited the Book of Mormon in its present form (consider the number of times--eleven--that Moroni includes editorial asides in the course of the book), it is not equally clear that Moroni translated, or even knew how to translate, the record of the Jaredites, and it is possible that he was forced to rely solely on the work done by Mosiah II. Although there is no reason to suppose that the translation work of Mosiah was on the whole untrustworthy, it may be that his rendering of certain of the Jaredite names was influenced by his knowledge of biblical names that sounded similar to those found in the Jaredite record. Thus, there may have been a name in the Book of Ether that sounded like Ephraim, and was consequently regularized to a name that was already familiar to Mosiah from his knowledge of the brass plates, even if it was current as a personal name among the Nephites (cf. the practice of finding Hebrew names which sound somewhat like the original name, e.g., Reuben for Robert, Simcha for Stephen, etc.).

What has been said of the biblical names that are also found among the Jaredites holds true for the commonly shared Nephite and Jaredite names. However, it is also possible that certain of these shared names that are not also found in the Bible (Coriantumr, Moriantumr, Morianton, Nehor, Shiblom, Shiblom, Shim) may have been borrowed from the Jaredites following the Mulekite discovery of Coriantumr, the last of the Jaredites. This supposition is, I believe, strengthened by the observation that all of these names occur in the Nephite record only after the Mulekite contact with Jaredite civilization. I think that Coriantumr in particular may have come into use among the Nephites in this manner, since the finding of the Jaredite Coriantumr must have created something of a sensation among the Mulekites and Nephites.

Glosses in the Book of Mormon

Five words in the Book of Mormon are glossed: deseret (a word, apparently of Jaredite origin, meaning "honey bee," Ether 2:3), Irreantum (the name given to the sea in Bountiful by Lehi and his party, 1 Nephi 17:5), Liahona ("a compass," Alma 37:38), rabbanah (powerful or great king, Alma 18:13), and Rameumptom (the "holy stand," Alma 31:21). What do all of these glossed words have in common? They all seem to be in dialects or languages foreign to the language of the editor or the translator within the Book of Mormon itself (there is no strong reason to suppose that the glosses are placed in the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith himself. Rather, he simply translated what was already there). They seem to be placed there for their linguistic interest, or as antiquarian curiosities. This contrasts with the glossed words in the New Testament, for instance. There, the words are given because they were deemed particularly holy or powerful. I

think that the Book of Mormon use of glossed words may be indirect evidence for the role played by the editor in its compilation.

Conclusion

Of the rather considerable amount of literature devoted to the study of the Book of Mormon, comparatively little, even of a preliminary nature, has addressed the topic of personal names. This paper represents a small contribution in this direction. Clearly, much more can--and should--be done.

References

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