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“What Meaneth the Rod of Iron”?

Latter-day Saint scholars Hugh W. Nibley and John A. Tvedtnes have discussed at length how a staff, rod, and sword came to be commonly identified with the word of God in the ancient Near East.¹ The evidence they cite from the Bible, the earliest Hebrew commentators, modern biblical scholarship, and elsewhere affirms Nephi’s unambiguous assertion that the “word of God” is a “rod.”

Further support for the antiquity of Nephi’s imagery is detectable in his own comparison of the word to a rod, a comparison that may involve wordplay with the Egyptian term for “word” and “rod.” Although we have the Book of Mormon text only in translation and do not know the original wording of the text, we can use our knowledge of the languages that the Nephite writers said they used—Hebrew and Egyptian (1 Nephi 1:2; Mormon 9:32–33)—to propose reasonable reconstructions.

We note that the Egyptian word *mdw* means not only “a staff [or] rod”² but also “to speak” a “word.”³ The derived word *md.t*, or *mt.t*, probably pronounced **māteh* in Lehi’s day, was common in the Egyptian dialect of that time and would have sounded very much like a common Hebrew word for rod or staff, *maṭṭeh*.⁴ It is

also very interesting that the expression *mdw-ntr* was a technical term for a divine revelation, literally the “the word of God [or] divine decree.”⁵ The phrase *mdw-ntr* also denoted “sacred writings,”⁶ what we would call scriptures, as well as the “written characters [or] script”⁷ in which these sacred writings were written.

Now consider Nephi’s comparison of the word and the rod in the context of the Egyptian word *mdw*:

I beheld that the **rod** [*mdw/mt.t*, Heb. *maṭṭeh*] of iron, which my father had seen, was the **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] of God.⁸ (1 Nephi 11:25)

And they said unto me: What meaneth the **rod** [*mdw/mt.t*, Heb. *maṭṭeh*] of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree? And I said unto them that it was the **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] of God; and whoso would hearken unto the **word of God**, and would **hold fast unto it**, they would never perish. (1 Nephi 15:23–24)

An indication of Nephi’s awareness of the play on words is his use of the expression “hold fast unto” the “word of God,” since one can physically hold fast to a rod but not to a word (compare Helaman 3:29).

Nephi’s comparison of the rod of iron to the word of God also makes very good sense in light of other scriptural passages that employ the image of the iron rod.⁹ But the comparison takes on even richer connotations when viewed as a play on multiple senses of the Egyptian word *mdw*. Since Lehi’s language consisted of the “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), we would reasonably expect that Lehi and his sons (Nephi in particular) were aware of, and probably even used, the common word *mdw/mt.t* in at least some of those senses. It seems unlikely that the word’s phonetic similarity to Hebrew *maṭṭeh* would have escaped their attention. On the contrary, it would plausibly explain Nephi’s apparent substitution of “word” for “rod” in later remarks to his brothers in 1 Nephi 17:26, 29: “And ye know that by his **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] the waters of the Red Sea were divided. . . . And ye also know that Moses, by his **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] according to the power of God which was in him, smote the rock, and there came forth water.”¹⁰

Nephi’s imagery itself, along with its possible Egyptian language wordplay, further attests the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. Certainly Joseph Smith in 1829 could not have known that *mdw* meant both “rod” and “word.” However, Nephi, in the early sixth century BC,

likely had a good understanding of such nuances, and he may have employed them as part of a powerful object lesson for his brothers. 📖

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Notes

1. Hugh Nibley, “Ezekiel 37:15–23 as Evidence for the Book of Mormon,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988): 311–28; John A. Tvedtnes, “Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 148–55.
2. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 122.
3. Ibid. Significantly, all *mdw*-derived words were originally written with the “walking stick”/“staff” (i.e., “rod”) hieroglyph (see Sir Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* [Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999], 510). Thus “word” in its earliest Egyptian conception was literally identified with a “rod.”
4. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951?), 641. מַטֵּה (*maṭṭeh*) = “staff, rod, shaft.” It is derived from the trilateral root *NṬH*, which as a verb means “stretch out, spread out, **extend**, incline, bend.” Thus I suspect that Lehi’s first mention of the “rod of iron” might well constitute a polyptoton (words derived from the same root and used in the same sentence) on *NṬH*: “And I beheld a **rod** [*maṭṭeh*] of iron, and it **extended** [*nṭh*] along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood” (1 Nephi 8:19). An Egyptian transliteration of the Hebrew *maṭṭeh* (“rod”) and Egyptian *mdw/mt.t* (“rod, word”) would have been graphically similar or even identical if written in demotic characters.
5. Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 122.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Compare the phrase “word of God” to *mdw-ntr* “words of God” = “hieroglyphs.”
9. For biblical examples of the rod of iron, see Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:26–27; 12:5; 19:15; compare Isaiah 11:4. In all of these passages, the rod is emblematic of the deified king’s authority to enforce his own divine decrees—the word of God.
10. Exodus 14:16, Exodus 17:5–6, and Numbers 20:8–11 are the biblical passages to which Nephi alludes. Remarkably, each passage cites the *maṭṭeh* (“rod”) as the instrumentality through which Moses performed the miracles recorded in Exodus. Thus Nephi’s additional wordplay in 1 Nephi 17:26, 29 is likewise sublime.

PUBLICLY SPEAKING

BYU Anthropologist Addresses Maya Origins Puzzle

In 2001 the chance discovery of a 2,000-year-old Maya mural in a chamber buried beneath a pyramid in the Guatemalan jungle stirred the archaeological community. It was a sensational find, one of the most important for Mayanists in half a century. Rendered in brilliant colors with exquisite skill, the remarkably well-preserved mural reveals a highly sophisticated artistic tradition and hieroglyphic script predating the Maya’s golden age by 800 years.

Since then, a team of archaeologists working at the remote site, at San Bartolo in Guatemala’s Petén lowlands, have uncovered another mural in the chamber. They expect to piece together additional murals that once graced the other two

walls, destroyed long ago by Maya workmen making way for newer construction.

Last October, at the Beckman Center of the National Academies of Science and Engineering in Irvine, California, all six members of the San Bartolo field research team presented their latest findings. Among them was BYU professor of anthropology John E. Clark, director of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, who addressed the longstanding puzzle of Maya origins.

He noted that for all the attention given to excavating Maya sites in Mesamerica, scholars remain unclear about the origins of Maya civilization, “and for most of them, it is not a research question.” One result of this neglect is that “the Maya have consistently been given credit for things they did not do,” Clark said. “Many Maya

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