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Title What's in a Name? Nephi

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Abstract Though the name *Nephi* conforms in some ways to common Semitic patterns, none of the possible consonantal roots that appear in Hebrew can be applied to the name. Other possible sources such as Ugaritic or Egyptian may be considered.



Paul Y. Hoskisson

When seeking to explain the Book of Mormon names of Lehi, his people, and their descendants, the researcher would do well to first explore Hebrew possibilities, since that is the background out of which the Lehiters came. If nothing is found in the Hebrew sources, then the search should be expanded to other closely related North-West Semitic languages. Only after these sources have been exhausted should the researcher turn to other Semitic and non-Semitic, particularly Egyptian, sources.

When searching within Semitic language sources, the researcher should pay close attention to the established noun and verbal patterns common to almost all Semitic languages. For example, most words in Semitic languages are built on a base of three sequential consonants. For any given base, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and other words are formed by following certain patterns of adding to the consonant base various vowels, prefixes,

infixes, suffixes, and consonant doublings. At times one or two of the consonants may elide, that is, be unrepresented in the script. But even these elisions follow regular patterns.

The name *Nephi* appears to conform to the common Semitic noun pattern CvCCi, where *C* stands for “consonant,” *v* stands for “vowel,” and *i* stands for itself. This pattern is exemplified by biblical names, such as *Zimri* and *Omri*, and by the Book of Mormon name *Limhi* and possibly *Lehi*. These names appear to be shortened names of the type well known from North-West Semitic Amorite personal names of the Middle Bronze Age, such as *Zimri-Lim*. Thus, the root for *Nephi* should be sought under the following possible consonantal structures or roots: *np_y*, *np^c*, *n^cp*, *nvp*, *n^p*, or *np²*, where in the case of the name *Nephi* either the [y], the [c], or the [p] has elided as a consonant. ([c] ayin and [p] aleph are consonants that are represented in the Semitic lan-

guages but have no corresponding character in the English alphabet.) Present and apparently earlier LDS pronunciation of the name *Nephi* (i.e., *nē-fi*) would, however, preclude the root *nph/h*, which would require a pronunciation approximating *nep-hī*.

None of the six possible consonantal roots appear in Hebrew in any form that can be applied to the name *Nephi*. The next best place to look for an etymology would be another North-West Semitic language. Ugaritic is one of the better candidates because it is very closely related to Hebrew.¹ It was spoken at a site on the Syrian coast north of Lebanon. After the destructions that brought the Late Bronze Age to a close at about 1200 B.C., there is no evidence that it continued to exist as a written language. Thus, Ugaritic apparently ceased to be written about 600 years before Lehi left Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Ugaritic has proven extremely valuable to students of Hebrew because it opens a win-

dow into the North-West Semitic languages and literature at a time prior to the appearance of the first Hebrew inscriptions.

Of the six possible consonantal roots listed above, *np^c* and *np^c* are attested in Ugaritic. Ugaritic *np^c* appears to mean “to expel, to drive away.”² It is not attested in any personal name, but the meaning could be something like “expelled one.” This root may also be behind the personal name *nfy* found on inscriptions in the Arabian peninsula.³

The Ugaritic root *np^c* could also yield *Nephi*. This root means “to flourish”⁴ and is probably related to the Arabic *nf^c*, “to flourish,” and possibly to Arabic *yf^c*, meaning “to be grown up, climb.” To date, I am not aware of this root being used in a personal name in any Semitic language. Nevertheless, it would not be far afield to posit a meaning for the name *Nephi* from this root, such as “increase [of God].”

Admittedly, it would have been better to have evidence from the time and place where

Lehi and Sariah lived prior to leaving Jerusalem. Despite the lack of such evidence for the present from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., it is good to know that an etymology for *Nephi*, possibly meaning “expelled one” or “increase,” can be suggested from tangential material that predates (Ugaritic) and postdates (texts of the Arabian peninsula) the time of Lehi. This tangential evidence also brackets the geographic area considered to be Lehi’s homeland, that is, north and southeast of Israel.

Etymologies from Egyptian for the name *Nephi* cannot be ruled out. Though Egyptian is not a Semitic language, it certainly should be the first non-Semitic language the researcher should turn to if a Semitic etymology is not readily found. Therefore, I would be remiss if I did not mention that other scholars have offered Egyptian etymologies for *Nephi*.⁵ Hugh Nibley has noted that an Egyptian captain was named *Nfy*, but he offered no etymology.⁶ Others have suggested

that Egyptian *nfw/nfy* may mean “captain.” It has also been suggested that *Nephi* may come from Egyptian *nfr* or from Hebrew *nbi*, neither of which seems as plausible as the other suggestions.

As the previous articles on the personal names in the Book of Mormon printed in this journal have made clear, onomastic studies are composed of informed guesses punctuated with uncertainty. Only time, better knowledge of the sources, and new evidence will help to give precision and resolve questions. Until then, students of the Book of Mormon must be content to live with some degree of uncertainty and imprecision. In the meantime, it is my hope that the discussions of Book of Mormon names in this journal will help to create a sense of wonderment about a book we honor as God’s word and thereby foster a climate of belief. ■

en la costa sur de Guatemala.” in *Investigaciones Arqueológicas en la Costa Sur de Guatemala*, ed. David S. Whitley and Marilyn P. Beaudry (Los Angeles: UCLA Institute of Archaeology, 1989), 29.

21. See R. E. W. Adams, “Early Classic Maya Civilization: A View from Rio Azul,” in *Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization*, ed. Grube, 35–48.

22. See, for example, Juan Antonio Valdés, “El Proyecto Miraflores II dentro del marco preclásico de Kaminaljuyú,” in *X Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala*, ed. Juan Pedro Laporte and Héctor L. Escobedo (Guatemala: Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, y Asociación Tikal, 1997), 1:81–86; Kuniaki Ohi et al., “Los resultados de las investigaciones arqueológicas en Kaminaljuyú,” in *ibid.*, 1:93–100; and Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase, “External Impetus, Internal Synthesis, and Standardization: E Group Assemblages and the Crystallization of Classic Maya Society in the Southern Lowlands,” in *Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization*, ed. Grube, 87–101.

23. Bruce H. Dahlin, Robin Quizar, and Andrea Dahlin, “Linguistic Divergence and the Collapse of Preclassic Civilization in Southern Mesoamerica,” *American Antiquity* 52 (1987): 367.

24. *Ibid.*, 379.

25. See Valdés, “Desarrollo cultural,” 72–73.

26. See, for example, Nicholas P. Dunning, *Lords of the Hills: Ancient Maya Settlement in the Puuc Region, Yucatán, Mexico* (Madison, Wis.: Prehistory Press, 1992), 25–28; Bruce H. Dahlin, “Climate and Prehistory on the Yucatan Peninsula,” *Climatic Change* 5 (1983): 245–63; William J. Folan et al., “Paleoclimatic Patterning in Southern Mesoamerica,” *Journal of Field Archaeology* 10 (1983): 453–68; William T. Sanders et al., *The Natural Environment, Contemporary Occupation and Sixteenth Century Population of the Valley*, Occasional Papers in Anthropology, no. 3 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Department of Anthropology, 1970), 88; and Nicholas P. Dunning, “Coming Together at the Temple Mountain: Environment, Subsistence, and the Emergence of Lowland Maya Segmentary States,” in *Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization*, ed. Grube, 61–69.

27. See Dahlin, Quizar, and Dahlin, “Linguistic Divergence,” 379.

28. See Arthur A. Demarest et al., “Classic Maya Defensive Systems and Warfare in the Petexbatun Region: Archaeological Evidence and Interpretations,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 8 (1997): 229–53; Takeshi Inomata, “The Last Day of a Fortified Classic Maya Center: Archaeological Investigations at Aguateca, Guatemala,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 8 (1997): 337–51; and Arthur A. Demarest, “The Violent Saga of a Maya Kingdom,” *National Geographic*, February 1993, 95–111.

29. See Demarest et al., “Classic Maya Defensive Systems,” 231.

30. See Bruce Dahlin, “The Barricade and Abandonment of Chunchucmil: Implications for Northern Maya Warfare,” *Latin American Antiquity* 11/3 (2000): 283–98.

31. Markus Reindel, “El abandono de las ciudades Puuc en el norte de Yucatán,” in *50 Years of Americanist Studies at the University*

of Bonn: New Contributions to the Archeology, Ethnohistory, Ethnolinguistics and Ethnography of the Americas, Bonn Americanist Studies, vol. 30 (Markt Schwaben, Germany: Verlag Anton Saurwein, 1998), 239–56.

32. See Sorenson, “Fortifications in the Book of Mormon,” 425–44, regarding instances of early militarism.

Was There Hebrew Language in Ancient America? An Interview with Brian Stubbs

1. For other examples, see Brian D. Stubbs, “Looking Over vs. Overlooking Native American Languages: Let’s Void the Void,” *JMBS* 5/1 (1995): 16. This article may be purchased from FARMS in reprint form.

2. See *ibid.*, 27–32, for examples.

3. See *ibid.*, 17.

4. See *ibid.*, 24, 25, 28.

5. Details can be found in *ibid.*

6. See, for example, Brian D. Stubbs, “The Labial Labyrinth in Uto-Aztecan,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 61/4 (1995), 396–422; and “More Palatable Reconstructions for Uto-Aztecan Palatals,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 66/1 (2000): 125–37.

7. See Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 96.

8. See *ibid.*, 55.

9. See *ibid.*, 101.

10. See Martha Schulte and Beverly Seckinger, “The Dating Game: One Last Look at Glottochronology: The Case of Some Arabic Dialects,” in *Atlas Occasional Papers*, No. 5, ed. Barbara Roth and Susannah Hexer (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1984–85), 41–77.

11. See Baugh and Cable, *History of the English Language*, 55.

12. See the discussion in Stubbs, “Native American Languages,” 13.

13. See Stubbs, *ibid.*, 26.

14. Brian D. Stubbs, “The Male Names in Lehi’s Family,” unpublished MS in FARMS library.

15. See Stubbs, “Native American Languages,” 36.

16. See *ibid.*, 21, 24.

17. For *r > y, see *ibid.*, 17–19.

18. Pierre Agrinier compiled an unpublished list of similarities between Hebrew and Zapotec. Robert Smith’s unpublished papers of 1969, 1971, and 1977 followed up on Agrinier’s work with further comparisons under the title “Sawi-Zaa Word Comparisons.”

19. See Arnold Leesburg, *Comparative Philology: A Comparison between Semitic and American Languages* (Leyden: Brill, 1908).

20. See John L. Sorenson, “Evidences of Culture Contacts between Polynesia and the Americas in Pre-Columbian Times” (master’s thesis, BYU, 1952); Mary Ritchie Key, *Polynesian and American Linguistic Connections* (Lake Bluff, Ill.: Juniper Press, 1984); and David H. Kelley, “Tane and Sina: A Uto-Aztecan Astronomical Cult in Polynesia,” in *Circumpacifica: Festschrift für Thomas S. Barthel*, ed. Bruno Illius and Matthias Laubscher (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), 2:137–56.

21. For further discussion, see Brian D. Stubbs, “Book of Mormon Language,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H.

Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:179–81.

Nephi Paul Y. Hoskisson

1. The suggested roots are not attested, as far as I can determine, in other North-West Semitic languages, i.e., Phoenician, Ammonite, Moabite, etc. Aramaic is another candidate, but the sources I have checked produced negative results. Someone with more expertise in Aramaic than I have should make a thorough search of the numerous Aramaic dialects.

2. See Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, *Analytic Ugaritic Bibliography, Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 6 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, 1996), 777, s.v. “npy.”

3. In South-West Semitic languages, the p of other Semitic languages corresponds to an f. As far as I am aware, Hugh Nibley was the first person to draw attention to the relevance of the personal name nfy to Nephi. See his *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 239, n. 27 (or [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 290, n. 28).

4. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, *Analecta Orientalia* 38 (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965), 446, s.v. “npr.” See also Dietrich and Loretz, 778.

5. Not being an Egyptologist, I am not in a position to evaluate the Egyptian suggestions and so offer them here with little comment.

6. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 27.

New Light

1. See Morris Swadesh, “Linguistics as an Instrument of Prehistory,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 15 (1959): 20–35.

2. See Morris Swadesh, “Lexicostatistic Classification,” in *Linguistics*, ed. N. A. McQuown, vol. 5 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 79–116; and Dell H. Hymes, “Lexicostatistics So Far,” *Current Anthropology* 1 (1960), 3–44.

3. See R. E. Longacre, “Swadesh’s Macro-Mixtecan Hypothesis,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 21/1 (1961): 9–29; K. Bergsland and H. Vogt, “On the Validity of Glottochronology,” *Current Anthropology* 3 (1962): 115–53; and D. L. Olmsted, “Lexicostatistics as ‘Proof’ of Genetic Relationship: the Case of ‘Macro-Manguan,’” *VI Congrès International des Sciences Anthropologiques et Ethnologiques*, Paris, 1960 (Paris: 1964), 2/2: 69–73.

4. See C. A. Callaghan and W. R. Miller, “Swadesh’s Macro-Mixtecan Hypothesis and English,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 18 (1962): 278–85; and K. V. Teeter, “Lexicostatistics and Genetic Relationship,” *Language* 39 (1964): 638–48.

5. J. J. Graydon, “Blood Groups and the Polynesians,” *Mankind* 4 (1952): 329–39.

6. A. E. Mourant, *The Distribution of Human Blood Groups* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1954), 144–47.

7. See R. T. Simmons et al., “A Blood Group Genetical Survey of Cook Islanders,

Polynesia, and Comparisons with American Indians,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 13 (1955): 667–90.

8. See A. E. Mourant, “Blood Groups in the Pacific Area,” *Eighth Congress of the International Society of Blood Transfusion* (Tokyo 1960), *Proceedings* (Tokyo: 1962), 149–53.

9. See Rupert I. Murrill, *Cranial and Postcranial Skeletal Remains from Easter Island* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), 77–79.

10. See Frank B. Livingstone, “An Analysis of the ABO Blood Group Clines in Europe,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 31 (1969): 1–10; M. Allison et al., “ABO Blood Groups in Chilean and Peruvian Mummies, II: Results of Agglutination-Inhibition Technique,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 49 (1978): 139–42; and T. E. Reed, “The Evidence for Natural Selection Due to Blood Groups,” *World Population Conference* (Belgrade, 1965), *Proceedings* 2 (New York: United Nations, 1967), 498–502.

11. This is still assumed in a current anthropology textbook. See Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 436: “The language spoken by a human community is the best predictor of what genetic characteristics . . . that community will have.”

12. See, for example, Juan Comas, “Características físicas de la familia lingüística Maya,” *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Serie Antropológica* 20 (México: UNAM, 1966). Comas compared the results of more than half a century of study of Maya-speaking groups to find marked biological differences among distinct groups within the language community, apparently due to intermarriage with non-Mayan groups, genetic drift, endogamy, and adaptive selection. See also M. Layrisse, Z. Layrisse, and J. Wilbert, “Blood Group Antigen Studies of Four Chibchan[-speaking] Tribes,” *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963): 36–55; the tribes do not form a homogeneous genetic group.

13. See R. T. Simmons, “The Biological Origin of Australian Aborigines: An Examination of Blood Group Genes and Gene Frequencies for Possible Evidence in Populations from Australia to Eurasia,” in *The Origin of the Australians*, ed. R. L. Kirk and A. G. Thorne (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and Atlantic Highlands; New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1976), 307–28.

14. See, for example, S. M. Borgognini Torli and G. Paoli, “Survey of Paleoserological Studies,” *Homo* 33/2 (1982): 69–89; and J. Comas, *Antropología de los pueblos iberoamericanos* (Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1972), 35: “It seems that the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century coincides with the end of the myth of the (single) ‘American homotype.’”

15. See “The Human Biology of the Western Pacific Basin,” *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 18 (1976): 202–45.

16. See Rubén Lisker, “El origen de los grupos humanos en América: serología y hematología en general de los Amerindios y sus posibles relaciones trans-pacíficas,” *Thirty-Sixth International Congress of Americanists* (Barcelona and Seville, 1964), *Proceedings* 1 (Barcelona and Seville: 1966), 43–51.