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“O Ye Fair Ones”: An Additional Note on the Meaning of the Name *Nephi*

An earlier *Insights* article noted a possible wordplay¹ in the first verse of the Book of Mormon that provides internal textual evidence that the name *Nephi* derives from the Egyptian word *nfr*.² While *nfr* denotes “good, fine, goodly”³ of quality, it also signifies “beautiful, fair”⁴ of appearance. Assuming that at least some senses of the Egyptian word passed into Nephite language and culture, this second sense of *nfr* may have influenced Nephite self-perception. Several Book of Mormon passages evidence the affiliation.

If the name *Nephi* can be translated “good, goodly, beautiful, fair,” then the term *Nephites* might be substantively rendered “goodly ones” or “fair ones.” Interestingly, Mormon, when lamenting the vast scene of slaughtered Nephites following the battles at Cumorah, addressed them as such:

O ye *fair ones*, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord!

O ye *fair ones*, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you! Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss.

O ye *fair* sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye *fair ones*, how is it that ye could have fallen! (Mormon 6:17–19)⁵

Mormon uses the expression *O ye fair ones* in anaphora (i.e., a literary device in which a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of consecutive clauses),⁶ and the word *fair* occurs four times in his lament, his rhetoric clearly suggesting that the quality of being “fair” once distinguished the Nephites from every other people.

Another passage demonstrates an etymological connection between Nephites and “fair ones.” Following the fulfillment of the prophecies con-


cerning Christ’s birth, Mormon records that the Lamanites, apart from those who were Gadianton robbers, underwent a change in appearance, effectively becoming Nephites:

And their young men and their daughters became exceedingly *fair*, and they were numbered among the *Nephites*, and they were called *Nephites*. (3 Nephi 2:16)

Here a wordplay on *fair* and *Nephites* occurs in epistrophe (i.e., repetition of a word or phrase at the end of successive clauses). The parallelism of the phrasing further suggests the approximation of Nephites to “fair ones.”

The language of a third passage suggests the same connection. Mormon reports that following Christ’s appearance, the people of Nephi (Nephites and Lamanites together) had all become a “fair and delightsome people”:

And now, behold, it came to pass that the people of *Nephi* did wax strong, and did multiply exceedingly fast, and became an exceedingly *fair* and delightsome people. (4 Nephi 1:10)

The phrase *fair and delightsome* stands in stark contrast to descriptions such as “filthy” and “loathsome,” as the Lamanites are often described during periods of degeneracy and unbelief (compare 1 Nephi 12:23; 2 Nephi 5:22; Mormon 5:15). It must be noted that Book of Mormon prophets invariably taught that being “fair and delightsome” has everything to do with righteous living and very little to do with perceived cultural or racial superiority (see 1 Nephi 1:17:33–40; Jacob 3; Helaman 15). 

By Matthew L. Bowen

Notes

1. “I, *Nephi*, having been born of *goodly* parents.” This subject is treated at length in Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2.
2. See John Gee, “A Note on the Name *Nephi*,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189–91. It is possible that the connection consists of folk etymology rather than cognates.

3. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1999), 131.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The Hebrew verb meaning “to fall” (*naphal*) resembles the Egyptian term for “fair,” and the use of the Hebrew term

here may be due to folk etymology. See also 1 Nephi 13:15 and 3 Nephi 9:2.

6. See Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 445.

Project Report: Chiasmus Archive

Over three decades ago, John W. Welch’s publication of “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon” opened a new chapter in Mormon studies. The 1969 article in *BYU Studies* announced his 1967 discovery of the presence of this literary form in the Book of Mormon. From that time to the present, the significance of Welch’s extraordinary observation has been discussed at many levels by Latter-day Saint lay readers as well as career academicians.

Welch has continued to contribute to this area of research, including authoring several dozen publications (articles, books, book reviews, and bibliographies) concerning chiasmus exegesis and methodology. His conspicuous position as a pre-eminent chiasmus scholar has made him a magnet for material on the subject. In addition to the sources he collects in his own research, he continues to receive a number of unsolicited articles and inquiries each year from authors around the world. This material ranges from proposed chiasms found by enthusiastic dilettantes intrigued by the pleasing symmetry of the form to rigorous critical analyses performed by renowned scholars.

For many years Welch has envisioned a way to catalog all these studies and proposals—covering canonical and extracanonical literature—so that this material could be organized in one location by scripture reference and made available to interested inquirers via the Internet or in a library archive.

Last summer Welch enlisted the help of John D. Payne, a student at Yale University and amateur chiasmus enthusiast. “I had been an admirer of Welch’s work for some time,” Payne says. “When we worked out an agreement for a summer internship, I couldn’t think of anything I’d rather be doing. I came into the project *in medias res*, on the heels of another intern who had begun a cataloging system and processed about a fourth of Welch’s materials. The ‘chiasmus archive’ consisted of sev-

eral filing drawers and shelves full of books inside one of the FARMS trailers on BYU campus.”

Payne cross-checked the scriptural citations against the massive chiasmus index created several years ago by Robert Smith and others, then against the chiasmus bibliography published by Welch and Daniel B. McKinlay, adding to each source whatever was missing. Payne then photocopied each instance of chiastic analysis in the articles and organized them in another filing drawer by scripture reference, all in anticipation of the next intern who will scan this voluminous material for inclusion in an online database.

The articles are written in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, and they date from the early 1800s to the present. This library ranges from chiastic analysis to criticism of chiastic analysis to metacriticism of chiastic analysis. “Some of the articles were extremely technical and intricate, proposing chiastic structures on all levels—from verse to chapter to scripture book to the entire Torah,” Payne says. “Others put forth radical doctrinal proposals on the meaning of chiasmus itself, some claiming that the phenomenon was a key to the organization of all human history, some to the very mind of God.”

The need among Latter-day Saints and religion scholars in general for a chiasmus database is evident. As a continually expanding resource containing all known research on chiasmus from many angles, it would help dispel common misconceptions, foster greater understanding, and encourage further interest and study in this fruitful area of scriptural and literary scholarship.

As Welch now envisions it, the database would be available to the public via the Internet and would contain numerous items, including statistical models on how to test for probability of authorial intentionality in chiastic composition; studies on what was known about chiasmus at the time of the Book of Mormon’s publication; and extensive

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