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What's in a Name? Irreantum

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Abstract   The Book of Mormon was written in a language that was grounded in Hebrew and Egyptian; the people of the Book of Mormon most likely spoke this same language. It is interesting, then, that the Book of Mormon authors periodically included definitions for certain terms that they used in their writing, as if their audience did not understand them. This technique, known as a gloss, suggests that those terms may not have been a part of that ancient language. In an attempt to uncover the true origin of such words, this article dissects the Book of Mormon term *Irreantum* and delves into its linguistic characteristics to determine whether the term could have originated from Hebrew, Egyptian, ancient South Semitic, or another language.

Irreantum

Paul Y. Hoskisson, with Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee

The greatest challenge for persons interested in the meanings of proper names in the Book of Mormon has to do with those names whose meanings we already know, such as *Rameumptom,* "the holy stand" (Alma 31:21); *Rabbanah,* "powerful or great king" (Alma 18:13); and *Irreantum,*[1] "many waters" (1 Nephi 17:5). Six such names with their translations appear in the Book of Mormon.[2] Determining their meanings etymologically is a challenge because any attempt to trace their ancient roots has to come to results that match the translations given in the Book of Mormon and do so without many complicated steps. After all, the ancient people who conferred these names most likely did so with ease, without convoluted linguistic manipulation. On the other hand, names that are not accompanied by a translation are open to any number of possible interpretations because the text does not require a specific outcome.

This study of the name *Irreantum* has been a double challenge, for the reason just given and also because it was necessary to delve into languages outside the Northwest Semitic language group. For the latter reason, I asked two of my colleagues at Brigham Young University, Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee, whose specialties are respectively Arabic and Egyptian, to contribute to this article.

Biblical Hebrew and Egyptian are the obvious first sources to mine when looking for etymologies for Book of Mormon names. This is because Lehi, who spoke Hebrew, had also "been taught in the language of the Egyptians" (Mosiah 1:4) and had in turn apparently instructed his son Nephi in the same (see 1 Nephi 1:2). Hence, Egyptian and Lehi's native language, Hebrew, are legitimate sources to examine for possible etymologies.[3] We therefore expect that most Book of Mormon names, at least those on the small plates, would be derived from Hebrew or Egyptian or both. *Irreantum* and other names accompanied by a translation do not seem to fit into this category.

Why does our English Book of Mormon, the received text, contain both the transliteration, *Irreantum,* and its translation, "many waters"? Because translators of ancient documents normally render either the transliteration or the translation of a proper name, providing both seems rather unusual. Indeed, of the 188 transliterated proper names that are original to the Book of Mormon and reproduce their ancient form (of which *Irreantum* is only one example), only 3 percent, that is, six, have also been given a translation. Why just those six? Why are 97 percent of the unique Book of Mormon names given only in transliteration, such as *Ether* and *Anti-Nephi-Lehi?* The simplest answer must be not only that the name *Irreantum* and its translation were recorded on the small plates but also that the Prophet Joseph Smith dutifully rendered both.

Observing that both transliteration and translation were on the plates only moves the original question back one step: Why would Nephi include both the name and its translation on the plates? We can reasonably assume that Nephi believed that his audience would be able to read the script and the language in which the small plates were composed. (In order to avoid specificity at this time, we will call the language of the small plates of Nephi "Nephite." In fact, the Book of Mormon never mentions what the language and the script on the small plates were.)[4]

If the name *Irreantum* is Nephite, Nephi would not have

Limestone mountains rise dramatically from the Indian Ocean along the coast of south Arabia; similar waters were called "Irreantum" by Nephi. Courtesy S. Kent Brown.

needed to supply a translation. He would have expected his Nephite readers to understand and the translator of his record to provide either the translation, as with *Bountiful* (1 Nephi 17:5), or the transliteration, as with *Nahom* (1 Nephi 16:34).[5] The only rational reason for Nephi to include both the transliteration and translation is that he did not expect his audience to immediately grasp the meaning of *Irreantum,* because it was not a readily recognizable Nephite word. *Irreantum* may have been either a newly coined word in Nephite, thus not immediately transparent for persons who could read that language, or it could represent a borrowing

from another language. In either case, Nephi would have felt obligated to provide a translation for an audience that knew only Nephite.

The literary device of supplying the translation of a foreign word or unknown phrase within a text is called a gloss and is well documented in ancient Near Eastern texts. Perhaps the most widely known examples come from the Amarna letters, which were discovered more than a 100 years ago in central Egypt and which were composed in the land of Canaan in the 14th century B.C. These letters, written by scribes who were not native speakers of the language that they were writ-

ing (Middle Babylonian), occasionally exhibit a Canaanite gloss,[6] that is, a translation of a Middle Babylonian word into Canaanite as a helpful guide to the reader.

If *Irreantum* is therefore not Nephite, what language is it? Another way of stating our question is, To what language should we turn to provide a possible etymology for *Irreantum?* Hebrew and Egyptian can be ruled out because Nephi would have expected Nephites to know both languages and both scripts, just as he did.[7] That is, if the small plates were composed in Egyptian and *Irreantum* were a Hebrew word, a gloss would not be necessary, and

vice versa. Hence, when looking for an etymology for *Irreantum,* we need to look in languages other than Hebrew and Egyptian. At the same time, we need to restrict the search to roots that would allow the translation "many waters."

During the eight years that Lehi and his family traveled in the wilderness toward the land of Bountiful, they either could have picked up enough of other local languages to coin exotic place-names or they could have borrowed non-Nephite place-names from local people, which is evidently the case with the place-name *Nahom.* Such a language could be ancient South Semitic, which was used in the general area through which Lehi and his family traveled during their eight-year journey.

In turning now to *Irreantum,* and in particular the first part of the name, the root *rwy,* whose basic meaning has to do with watering,[8] appears in South Semitic pre-Islamic proper names of Arabia. The most interesting name among these texts is *ʾrwy,* because it is both the name of a town[9] and is phonologically fairly close to the assumed first element in *Irreantum.* This South Semitic place-name apparently exhibits a helping, or prosthetic, letter aleph attached to the beginning of the root, written here as [ʾ]. Even though we do not know the pronunciation of *ʾrwy,* prefixed alephs normally are added to break up an initial consonant cluster. Semitic languages do not easily tolerate an initial consonant cluster, such as *str–* in *strong.* Thus, the prefixing of the aleph strongly suggests that an initial consonant cluster is being broken up. Because

the second letter, *w,* is a semivowel, it would not create a consonant cluster with *r.* More likely, the consonant cluster consisted of a doubled *r.* This would account both for the initial vowel and the double *r* of *Irreantum.*[10]

The existence of this root, *rwy,* in pre-Islamic South Semitic inscriptions might answer the question of what language other than Hebrew could explain the origin of Irreantum. Lehi and his family could have borrowed elements or whole words from one or more South Semitic languages either on their journey to Bountiful or even after they arrived in Bountiful. If they borrowed whole place-names, they might have been able to recognize the general meaning of the root because South Semitic is very similar to Hebrew. However, the form in which *Irreantum* occurs in the Book of Mormon might not have been immediately recognizable to a Nephite.

If we accept the possibility that *irre* can be derived from an ancient South Semitic root, perhaps similar to the place-name *ʾrwy,* with a meaning connected to watering, then only the *–an* and the *–tum* of Irreantum require explanation. Because ancient peoples of the Near East rarely if ever mixed languages in coining names,[11] both of these elements must be explainable on the basis of South Semitic. This is precisely what we find. The first element, *–ān,* is a common affix (a particle appended to a word) used in all the Semitic languages, including ancient South Semitic. It occurs "especially in abstracts,"[12] meaning abstract nouns, similar to the use of the particle *–ship* in the English word *kingship.* An abstraction

from "watering" seems to fit the requirement here that *Irreantum* have something to do with water.

As the element is rendered here, it cannot be a Hebrew form of the affix. Due to the so-called Canaanite shift, Hebrew and a few other Northwest Semitic languages have a long *ō* where other Semitic languages have an (accented) long *ā.* Thus, this common Semitic affix, *–ān,* became *–ōn* in Hebrew.[13] Therefore, *irre–ān* fits well what we might expect from a South Semitic word but not from Hebrew, from which we would expect *irre–ōn.* This may be the reason that at first glance *Irreantum* might not have been immediately transparent to the native Nephite reader.

The final presumed element of the name, *–tum,* could be derived from the fairly common Semitic root *tm(m),* which has meanings related to "completeness" or "wholeness" or "entirety," as in the last word of the phrase *Urim and Thummim.* Thus, a phrase in Isaiah 47:9, which includes the element *–tum* and is translated in the KJV as "in their perfection," literally means "in their entirety." But "a more free rendering is in superabundance."[14] If we accept this explanation, then *-tum* in *Irreantum* could represent the common Semitic root *tm(m).* In keeping with our hypothesis above that irre and *–ān* could be South Semitic, *–tm* also occurs as an element in pre-Islamic South Semitic names.[15]

To sum up, if *Irreantum* is a South Semitic name, it could be composed of *irre–ān* plus *–tum.* These words would form a two-noun construct chain that would mean something like "watering of completeness" or "watering of (super)abundance," a meaning

that is compatible with the translation "many waters." Admittedly, arriving at this proposed etymology required considerable dexterity and several conjectures. But all of the conjectures fall well within accepted Semitic philological norms.

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Because some scholars in the past have proposed an Egyptian derivation for *Irreantum,* a glance at possibilities in Egyptian might be in order. Indeed, such a derivation, if it were clean and neat, would be desirable. It would obviate the need to propose Semitic language conjectures that cobble together a number of linguistic possibilities.

It has been suggested that *Irreantum* might be derived from the Egyptian phrase *iiry ʿnḏ.t,* attested only in a fourth-century B.C. Egyptian papyrus. On the surface this appears to be a good candidate for *Irreantum.* However, the suggestion stems perhaps from seeing the determinative for water, 𓈖, as the writing of the word *mw,* "water." The writing of both possibilities would be identical,

iiry ʿnḏ.t mw. But reading the final signs as *mw,* "water," is grammatically less likely than reading them as the water determinative. A possible later Coptic equivalent could be ⲉⲣⲉ-???-ⲙⲟⲩ, where the question marks represent the word *ʿnḏ.t,* which is unattested in Coptic. We would need a Coptic form, *ⲱⲛⲧⲉ, from a hypothetical Old Kingdom *ʿấnvḏat* (where *v* represents an unknown vowel), in order to have a proper vocalization of *Irreantum* in Nephi's day.

In addition, the passage in which this lone candidate for *Irreantum* occurs does not entirely support the meaning of "many waters." The words of the passage that correspond to *iiry ʿnḏ.t* have been bolded in the following translation: "O lord of the slaughter **that is** beside **the water of Busiris**, who is over the water of the ocean, who extends the life of the chief of the palace, who lives and causes others to live, come that you may protect me from death today, and the terror and the coming of darkness because I am he who binds on heads and establishes necks, and who gives breath to the weary of heart" (Urk. VI 67). Though water is

mentioned in the passage, the plain reading of the text does not seem to support a meaning such as "many waters." Thus, the suggestion based on Egyptian, as morphologically tempting as the phrase *iiry ʿnḏ.t* may be, is not any better than the South Semitic proposal above, and in fact may not be as plausible. In addition, it does not explain why Nephi provided a translation.

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In conclusion, the best solution seems to be the South Semitic etymology, *irre–ān tum,* meaning "watering of completeness" or "watering of (super) abundance." Perhaps future scholars will find a cleaner derivation in Egyptian or an even better suggestion from one or more Semitic languages. Nevertheless, future explanations would still need to explain why Nephi provided both the transliteration and the translation and would still need to account for each element in the name using accepted philological methods. The present South Semitic suggestion adequately addresses both issues. ▨

[What's in a Name?]
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1. The printer's manuscript contains the spelling as we now have it in our 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon contains a partly readable spelling, *Irreantum,* where –*rre*– are only partially legible and the second a has been crossed out. See Royal Skousen's critical texts, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* and *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).

2. The complete list of six are *Irreantum,* "many waters" (1 Nephi 17:5); *Rabbanah,* "powerful or great king" (Alma 18:13); *Rameumptom,* "holy stand" (Alma 31:21); *Liahona,* "compass" (Alma 37:38); *deseret,* "honey bee" (Ether 2:3); and *Ripliancum,* "large, to exceed all" (Ether 15:8). In addition, several proper nouns are rendered into English without the transliteration of the ancient name, such as *Bountiful* and *Desolation.*

3. In addition to Hebrew and Egyptian, the following languages could provide help when looking for etymologies of Book of Mormon names, given here in the approximate descending order of importance: Northwest Semitic languages (of which Hebrew is one), such as Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Aramaic; South Semitic, such as Arabic and Epigraphic South Arabian; Assyrian and Babylonian (both are East Semitic languages related to Hebrew, though more distantly than the Northwest and South Semitic languages); Hurrian (a people mentioned in Genesis but who are not related to any other known ethnic group); Hittite (Indo-Europeans who are mentioned in the Bible); and Sumerian (an altogether unrelated language from Mesopotamia that died out as a spoken language about 1,400 years before Lehi left Jerusalem but continued to be used as a classic language until after the time of Christ).

4. Despite popular assumptions, nowhere in the Book of Mormon—small plates or Mormon's abridgment—does an author or redactor ever state what the language of either set of plates was. Nephi's statement in 1 Nephi 1:2 is ambiguous because it does not discuss which script he wrote in, leaving open the possibility that "language" could refer to either the spoken language or to the script. Only a thousand years after Lehi is a script ever singled out, and that passage applies to Mormon's abridgment of the large plates of Nephi only and not to the small plates of Nephi, with which we are dealing (see Mormon 9:32-34). Mosiah 1:4 speaks of the brass plates only, not of the large or the small plates.

5. For example, in 1 Nephi 16:34, the chapter previous to the one in which *Irreantum* appears, Nephi provided only the transliteration of the place-name *Nahom.* By contrast, in the very same verse in which *Irreantum* appears (1 Nephi 17:5), he provided only a translation for the place-name *Bountiful.* Why provide both transliteration and translation for *Irreantum* when that is not the normal practice in the Book of Mormon?

6. I use the name Canaanite for simplicity's sake, knowing that there is still controversy over what that term denotes and connotes. I use it here simply to designate the people in the Late Bronze Age who wrote the letters sent from Palestine to Egypt.

7. For hints at what Nephi and subsequent writers could expect their readers to know, see 1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4; and Mormon 9:32–34.

8. In inscriptional Qatabanian the root *rwy* means "irrigation system" (Stephen D. Ricks, *Lexicon of Inscriptional Qatabanian* [Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico], 153). In Sabaic *yhrwy[n]* means to "provide with irrigation," while *rwym* is a well or watering place (see Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabean Dialect, Harvard Semitic Studies* 25 [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982], 482). Finally, in modern Arabic the root *rwy* is associated with water for drinking and irrigation (see Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* [Beirut, Lebanon: Librairie du Liban, 1980], 3:1194–95).

    This root, *rwy,* also appears in Hebrew and other Northwest Semitic languages. For example, Hebrew has רוה, which has the following meanings in its various verbal forms: *Qal,* "to drink one's fill, to be refreshed"; *Piel,* "to give to drink abundantly, water thoroughly"; and *Hifᶜil,* "to water thoroughly" (see Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* CD-ROM version [Leiden: Brill],

under רוה). In Ugaritic the root occurs also in a personal name, *bn rwy,* but the meaning of the name is uncertain (see Frauke Gröndahl, *Die Personennamen der Texte aus Ugarit,* Studia Pohl 1 [Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1967], 312).

9. G. Lankester Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 38. (I have not yet been able to find the location of the town based on the information provided, partly because the BYU library does not have the relevant sources.) In addition, there are family, clan, and/or tribe names in pre-Islamic inscriptions, such as *rwyn* and *rwym,* containing the root *rwy,* which in the Arabic form *rawiy* means "abundant, well watered" (see ibid., 291).

10. Another possibility from pre-Islamic inscriptions, *yrwy,* is less likely because it is a personal name (see ibid., 668). Yet even this name carries the basic meaning of "watering" and exhibits an initial vowel before the root, though the *y* would not necessarily suggest a doubling of the *r.*

11. I am not aware of a single instance of an ancient Semitic name being composed of more than one language, though this may reflect more my ignorance than reality. Some scholars in the past have suggested that *Jerusalem* is composed of a Sumerian and a Hebrew word. This proposed etymology has been rejected by nearly all Hebrew scholars today.

12. Sabatino Moscati et al., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969), 82, §12.21.

13. An example of where this shift appears in the Book of Mormon occurs in the place-name *Jershon.* This name represents no doubt the Hebrew root *yrš,* "inherit," plus the Hebrew form of the abstract-forming affix –ōn. Possible exceptions to the Canaanite shift in Hebrew might be *šulḥān,* "table," and *qorbān,* "offering" or "sacrifice" (see Moscati et al., *Comparative Grammar,* 82, §12.21).

15. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon,* under חתם, 2,d. The phrase is כְּתֻמָּם, *kĕtummām.*

16. See Harding, *Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions,* 136, under TM.