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Abstract Review of *The Name of God: From Sinai to the American Southwest. A Script and Language of Ancient Palestine Also Found in the Ancient American Southwest* (1998), by James R. Harris, assisted by Dann W. Hone.

GOD'S NAME?

Stephen D. Ricks

I must begin my review of this volume with a word of praise for its authors, James R. Harris and Dann W. Hone. They are among the most sincere and energetic defenders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the staunchest supporters of the Book of Mormon. I also share with them a belief in pre-Columbian contacts with the ancient Near East. However, I find this book a baffling and peculiarly unfulfilling effort at establishing an epigraphic link between the Yahweh worshipers of ancient southern Palestine and the writers of the petroglyphs of the American Southwest.

The Name of God, according to its authors, attempts to link the “alphabetic script used by peoples of the Negev (Israel) and ancients of the American Southwest by which both peoples expressed a commitment to a covenant relationship with the God of Israel” (p. xxii). In the first part of the book, Harris and Hone look at epigraphic inscriptions from the Negev in southern Palestine, which the authors wish to identify as “Old Negev” rather than the more traditional “Old Thamudic.” These “Old Negev” inscriptions, according to Harris and Hone, should not be rendered “as an Arabic language but translated

Review of James R. Harris, assisted by Dann W. Hone. *The Name of God: From Sinai to the American Southwest. A Script and Language of Ancient Palestine Also Found in the Ancient American Southwest*. Orem, Utah: Harris House, 1998. xxv + 259 pp., with bibliography. \$19.95.

as Proto-Canaanite or Old Hebrew” (p. 29). In practice, however, there is heavy if not exclusive reliance on the Hebrew-English lexicon rather than attention to shades of meaning that only an examination of other ancient Semitic languages and dialects would provide, with the result that many of the renderings are forced. Much of this section may be puzzling to LDS readers, who would view Harris and Hone’s assertion as a semantic quibble best debated with scholars in the field of comparative Semitics or of ancient Canaanite dialects. In fact, the bibliography of the volume includes a reference to the text of a lecture in which Harris and Hone present their views on the “Dating and Ethnic Origins of the Old Negev Inscriptions” in a symposium held some years ago in Italy, though they do not discuss the results of their presentation.

The balance of the volume—all of which is peppered with grammatical and typographical infelicities that are ubiquitous, sometimes egregious, often distracting, and that desperately cry out for an editor—is devoted to showing how the “Old Negev” script and language migrated from the Old World to the New. According to Harris and Hone, since “Old Negev” writing “was not in use after the Babylonian Captivity (598–597 B.C.), the script and language it expressed must have come to America prior to the above events” (p. 94). For LDS readers this is a straightforward claim of transoceanic contact and an implicit, reasonably clear claim that it took place at the beginning of Book of Mormon history. Harris and Hone further claim that the “script, and language, accompanied by appropriate icons and symbols have been found in the Valley of Mexico and identified with Olmeclike cultures of the Gulf Coast and Valley” (p. 94). From there it was brought to the American Southwest. My main problem—and it is an insuperable one at that—is their use of a highly imaginative system of reading the “icons” and “ligatures” and their method of stringing signs together in order to create meaningful words. Harris and Hone’s reading of Red Rock Canyon petroglyph #3 (see p. 117) will suffice as an example of these difficulties. This petroglyph consists of what appears to be, reading from right to left, a stick figure of a man with a “head” that is dark and filled in, a tiny rectangular “flag” on a pole, and what looks like a shepherd’s

crook with a tail. By separating these signs into smaller symbols, Harris and Hone have transformed the signs into the “Old Negev” letters “ayin,” “d,” “h,” and “y,” “l,” and “h.” The first word may mean “to testify” or “congregation” in Hebrew (unlike Harris and Hone’s “to go, pass by, pass away”); the second may mean “wailing, lamentation”; the combination of the two in Hebrew is very difficult to understand. On the Cobble Mountain petroglyph on the opposite page (see p. 118) is a sign described by the authors as an “ankh symbol,” a sign of “life in the realm of the gods.” While this may in fact be the importation of an ankh sign, it could also be a symbol with a very different meaning, or no meaning at all. We ought to be very cautious when assigning meanings to signs. Where five “letters” are described by the authors in the Cobble Mountain petroglyph, two other signs are left out. Why? Shouldn’t they all be included, with their resulting meanings, come what may of the potential sense?

In their study of the petroglyphs of the American Southwest, Harris and Hone’s method is a kind of procrustean bed, in which individual signs are selected, offending ligatures are shaved off, and other potentially problematical signs are ignored in the authors’ effort to show a Hebrew link with the ancient peoples of the Southwest. And yet there may be a kernel of truth standing behind their efforts. I am persuaded by Brian Stubbs that there is a connection in phonology, morphology, and vocabulary between the Uto-Aztec languages spoken by many Native Americans living in the American Southwest and the Semitic languages.¹ I am convinced that the name of deity in various Uto-Aztec languages of the American Southwest contains an element that looks strikingly like the Hebrew Yahweh, “Lord”; cf. Cupeño (*tema*) *Yawe*, “(earth) god,” Arizona Yaqui *ya’ut*, “leader; god” (we may compare the Hebrew *Elohim*, “judge; God” with the semantic interchange “leader; god”).² I am further persuaded that a striking resemblance between the petroglyph signs of the American Southwest and the early Semitic alphabets

1. See Brian D. Stubbs, “Looking Over vs. Overlooking Native American Languages: Let’s Void the Void,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 1–49.

2. Brian Stubbs, personal communication with author.

exists. Still, I have yet to be persuaded that the writers of the petroglyphs were full-fledged, bona fide speakers of Hebrew.

The Name of God is a tour de force of perspicacity and devotion to a subject. Harris in particular has focused his attention and channeled his energy for many years in studying this subject. Unfortunately, this book is also an example of the triumph of the *idée fixe*, where focused attention shades off into monomania and channeled energy becomes a kind of fixation that brooks no alternative explanation and dismisses those who would raise questions as academic or religious obstructionists.