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What's in a name?: Nephi

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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.
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 Lehites 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: npy, np, n’p, nvp, n’p, or np, where in the case of the name Nephi either the [y], the [t], or the [?] has elided as a consonant. ([?] ayin and [?] aleph are consonants that are represented in the Semitic languages but have no corresponding character in the English alphabet.) Present and apparently earlier LDS pronunciation of the name Nephi (i.e., nê-hî) would, however, preclude the root nph+/ , which would require a pronunciation approximating nep-hî.

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. 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, npy and npc are attested in Ugaritic. Ugaritic npy appears to mean “to expel, to drive away.” 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 npy found on inscriptions in the Arabian peninsula.3

The Ugaritic root npc could also yield Nephi. This root means “to flourish”4 and is probably related to the Arabic nf, “to flourish,” and possibly to Arabic yf, 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.

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