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NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

A Note on the Name *Nephi*¹

John Gee

Over forty years ago, Hugh Nibley raised the issue of Book of Mormon onomastica: Are the “personal names contained in the story . . . satisfactory for that period and region”?² While an answer to the larger issue of all the names in the Book of Mormon still awaits investigation,³ we seem to be in a position to comment on the authenticity of the name Nephi, the first name to occur in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 1:1).

A Phoenician inscription discovered at Elephantine contains the name of a certain *KNPY*.⁴ This, by itself, is mere trivia., but the scholarly discussion of the name is of interest in connection with the Book of Mormon. F. L. Benz has compiled a list of the personal names in Phoenician inscriptions and their derivations. He sees the name *KNPY* as the Phoenician form of *Kꜣ-nfr.w*, an attested Egyptian name.⁵ This equation was later

¹ I would like to thank Theron Stanford for assisting me in obtaining a key source on short notice, and Matt Roper for his insistent prodding.

² Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 1, citing W. F. Albright.

³ On the methodology of this subject, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, “An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon,” in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:126–35.

⁴ Mark Lidzbarski, *Phönizische und aramäische Krugaufschriften aus Elephantine* (Berlin: Reimer, 1912), 24.

⁵ Frank L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions: A Catalog, Grammatical Study and Glossary of Elements* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1972), 192. Hermann Ranke, *Die ägyptische Personennamen*, 3 vols. (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1935–77), 1:390. For an

confirmed by G. Vittmann, who added that the Aramaic spellings *KNWP*⁷ and *QNPY* were also attested.⁶ Further, the Aramaic *KNWPY* is attested in the Elephantine inscriptions.⁷ Vittmann also noted that the name *HRNPY*, attested in Aramaic inscriptions, was probably Egyptian *ḥḥ-ḥr-nfr*.⁸ The name element *NPY* seems to be the Semitic (i.e., Aramaic, Phoenician) transcription of the Egyptian *nfr*, a common element of Egyptian personal names.⁹ The medial *p* in the Semitic form would have been taken as a */f/*, so the vocalization of *NPY* as Nephi poses no problem.¹⁰

While both *Kḥ-nfr.w* and *ḥḥ-ḥr-nfr* are attested Egyptian names containing the element *nfr*, *Nfr* itself is an attested Egyptian name.¹¹ At this time (fifth century B.C.) in Egypt, the final *r* had fallen out of the pronunciation of *nfr*,¹² and this remained the case in Coptic, where the form was *noufi*.¹³

early Demotic attestation dating from the reign of Amasis, see Wolja Erichsen, *Auswahl fröhdemotischer Texte*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1950), 1:21, line 11.

⁶ G. Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," *Göttinger Miszellen* 113 (1989): 95.

⁷ See A. E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), inscriptions 26:9, 21; and 50:7, pp. 89–90, 155.

⁸ Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," 94. The name is found in Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, inscription 72:23, p. 183.

⁹ There are three-hundred ninety listed in Ranke, *Die ägyptische Personennamen*, 3:73–76.

¹⁰ E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §§6n, 13b, 21, pp. 33–34, 56, 75–76.

¹¹ It is attested as a man's name from Dynasty 1 through the late period (which Ranke takes as ending at the Alexandrian conquest of Egypt), and as a woman's name in the Old Kingdom through the New Kingdom, and the Greek period; Ranke, *Ägyptische Personennamen*, 1:194.

¹² Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," 93. The Egyptian *-r* was weak from the beginning; see Elmar Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, 2 vols., vols. 34/39 of *Analecta Orientalia* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1955), §§127–28, 1:56; Walter Till, *Koptische Grammatik* (Leipzig: VEB, 1970) §39, p. 48.

¹³ The southern dialects have *noufe*, the northern *noufi*; Jaroslav Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), 116; Walter E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon,

Though the name *Kṣ-nfr.w* has an /u/ vowel following the *n*, the verbal form of *nfr.w* is a stative (also known as a qualitative or old perfective), whereas *Nfr* is probably a participle; thus, the vowel was likely not the same. Demoticists indicate that the vowel following the *n* in the participial form of *nfr* as well as in the verbal form transcribed as *nṣ-nfr* is an /ε/ (Coptic/Greek epsilon).¹⁴

With this we can make a guess at the pronunciation of the name *Nephi*. Most European and Latin American Latter-day Saints are already pronouncing the name more or less correctly as /nefi/ or /nefi/, since originally it was most likely pronounced “něfē” or “nāfē” (rhyming with “heh fee/hay fee”) rather than the current “nēfi.” Nevertheless, the standard English pronunciation has a venerable history,¹⁵ and even this writer will probably continue to use it.

To sum up, *Nephi* is an attested Syro-Palestinian Semitic form of an attested Egyptian man’s name dating from the Late Period in Egypt. It is appropriate that *Nephi* notes early the connections between Egypt and Israel at his time (1 *Nephi* 1:3), for his own name is Egyptian. It is the proper form of a proper name of the proper gender from the proper place and proper time.

1939), 240; Wolfhart Westendorf, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1977), 133.

¹⁴ See Erichsen, *Auswahl frühdemotischer Texte*, 2:71. For examples of late period names with *nṣ-nfr* see Ranke, *Ägyptische Personennamen*, 1:169; and Miriam Lichtheim, *Demotic Ostraca from Medinet Habu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), plate 28, text 144, line 2; for the Greek transcription of the Egyptian name *Nfr-htp* as *Nephōtēs*, see Heinz J. Thissen, “Ägyptologische Beiträge zu den griechischen magischen Papyri,” in Ursula Verhoeven and Erhart Graefe, eds., *Religion und Philosophie im alten Ägypten* (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 295.

¹⁵ Note the spelling of “Lehi” as “Lehigh” in M. J. Hubble’s interview of David Whitmer, 13 November 1886, in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Provo, UT: Grandin, 1992), 210. Hubble was a non-Mormon and apparently had never seen the name spelled and thus spelled what he heard. As David Whitmer had “cut loose from [Joseph Smith and the Church] in 1837” (Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 6) likely his pronunciation of the names had not altered from the initial period and thus the present American pronunciations of the names *Nephi* and *Lehi* were set within the first decade of the Church.