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PROPER NAMES FROM THE SMALL PLATES: SOME NOTES ON THE PERSONAL NAMES ZORAM, JAROM, OMNI, AND MOSIAH

Stephen D. Ricks

Abstract: *With a selection of a few notable examples (Zoram, Jarom, Omni, and Mosiah) that have been analyzed by the ongoing Book of Mormon names project, Stephen Ricks argues that “proper names in the Boo of Mormon are demonstrably ancient.”*

[**Editor’s Note:** Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.]

See Stephen D. Ricks, “Proper Names from the Small Plates: Some Notes on the Personal Names Zoram, Jarom, Omni, and Mosiah,” in *“To Seek the Law of the Lord”: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 351–58. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

John W. Welch (Jack) invited me to join the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) early in the fall of 1981 when I was a brand-spanking-new faculty member at Brigham Young University (BYU), fresh from graduate studies at University of California, Berkeley, Graduate Theological Union (also in Berkeley, California), and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Among my pleasant recollections is gathering with other members of the foundation, including Paul Hoskisson and his wife Quina, eating popcorn, and stuffing envelopes

to be sent out to members of the foundation. A part of the continuing legacy of the foundation is our current work on the Book of Mormon Names Project (which we also refer to as the Onomasticon Project). This project has been continuing for the past five years and will result in a published volume as well as an ongoing presence as a website (onoma.lib.byu.edu). The participants in the project—John Gee, Paul Y. Hoskisson, Robert F. Smith, and myself—are specialists in Hebrew, Semitic philology, Egyptian language and linguistics, and Assyriology. The four proper names presented here—Zoram, Jarom, Omni, and Mosiah—are each of ancient Hebrew origin, although they are not found in the Bible. The study of each name represents the meticulous care with which the Book of Mormon Names Project has been undertaken. The work is also a tribute to the interests and vision of Jack, the founder of FARMS.

The first serious study of the origins of Book of Mormon names was made by Janne M. Sjodahl, a Swedish convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Before becoming a Latter-day Saint, Sjodahl studied Biblical Hebrew and Greek at a Baptist seminary in London, England. After joining the Church, he served as a missionary in Palestine, where he learned Arabic. In the final years of his life, Sjodahl worked on a commentary on the Book of Mormon that made use of his knowledge of Arabic and biblical Hebrew in studying Book of Mormon personal names. His commentary was only partially complete at the time of his death in 1939. Sjodahl's son-in-law, Philip C. Reynolds, combined his manuscript with materials by his father, George Reynolds,¹ a member of the Quorum of the Seventy, and published it in a seven-volume *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* in 1955.²

In his numerous contributions on the Book of Mormon, the legendary Hugh Nibley significantly moved forward the study of Book of Mormon personal names, tracing many Book of Mormon names from Egyptian and Arabic roots.³ John Tvedtnes, now an emeritus staff member at FARMS and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, has made numerous contributions to Hebrew names and Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon. He also wrote two entries, “Names of People: Book of Mormon” and “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon,”

1 Bruce A. van Orden, “George Reynolds: Loyal Friend of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (August 1986).

2 George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955).

3 For example, Nibley discusses Book of Mormon names in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988) 168–72, 464; and Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 25–42, 242–46.

to the multivolume *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, published by Brill and edited by a consortium of Israeli, European, and North American scholars.⁴ Robert F. Smith, a collaborator on the Book of Mormon Names Project, in both published and unpublished materials, has contributed significantly to an understanding of the ancient Near Eastern origins of Book of Mormon names.⁵

Zoram

Zoram is the name of the servant of Laban and friend of Nephi (1 Ne. 4:35, 37; 16:7; 2 Ne. 1:30; 5:6; Alma 54:23) and of later Nephite leaders and renegades (Alma 16:5, 7; 30:59; 31:1). This name may be composed of the element *šûr*, “rock” (as in “rock of our salvation,” Ps. 95:1) and *‘am*, “(divine) kinsman”; thus, “(my divine) kinsman is a rock.” Another reasonable possibility is *šûr ‘am*⁶ “rock of the people.”⁷

Jarom

Jarom was a Nephite scribe and historian, the son of Enos and grandson of the prophet Jacob, who continued the history of the Nephites from the end of Enos’s ministry to the beginning of Omni’s record (Jarom 1:1, 14; Omni 1:1). Jarom may well be a hypocoristic⁸ form of Jaromel or

4 John A. Tvedtnes, “Names of People: Book of Mormon,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 2:787–88; and John A. Tvedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, 2:195–96.

5 Among his publications dealing with Book of Mormon language and names are “Book of Mormon Event Structure: The Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 98–147; “New Information about Mulek, Son of the King,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 142–44; and “Old World Languages in the New World,” in Welch, *Reexploring*, 29–31; “‘It Came To Pass’ in the Bible and the Book of Mormon,” FARMS Preliminary Report SMI-80b (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1980/updated 1981, 1983); and “Table of Relative Values,” in John W. Welch, “Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8 no. 2 (1999):46.

6 I wish to thank Paul Y Hoskisson, who first proposed the etymology *šûr ‘am* “rock of the people.”

7 The derivation of Zoram from the Hebrew *šûrām* “their rock,” as in Deuteronomy 32:31 (a suggestion originally made by John A. Tvedtnes), is possible, even though the reference in Deuteronomy is to a foreign god and it would be an unusual PN. It is also possible to derive the proper name Zoram from *zōra‘ ‘am*, a possible byform of *zera‘ ‘am*, “seed, offspring, child of the people,” although it would be difficult to explain phonetically.

8 A “hypocoristic” name is one in which the name of deity (here in this name, for example, the “el,” “iah,” meaning “God; the Lord”) is suppressed or left out; thus the hypothetical Jaromel or Jaromiah becomes Jarom.

Jaromiah, “may, let [God/the Lord] be exalted,” a jussive form (translated “may, let”) of the Hebrew *rām*, “to rise; be lifted up, exalted.”⁹ In the printer’s manuscript there is a variant form Joram that Royal Skousen, in his magisterial textual study of the Book of Mormon, sees as a scribal error,¹⁰ although the *o*’s and *a*’s in the original manuscript are nearly indistinguishable. In any event, Joram would, like Jarom, be a name from the same root *rām* and with a virtually identical meaning, being equivalent to the Hebrew *yôrām* “Jehovah is exalted.”¹¹

Omni

Omni is the name of another Nephite historian and scribe, the son of Jarom and descendant of Jacob and Enos (Jarom 1:15; Omni 1:1). The personal name Omni is based on the Hebrew root *’MN, meaning “to be true, faithful,” as well as “to confirm, support,” and may be linked to the noun form *’ōmen*, “faithfulness, trust.”¹² The name Omni could be a hypocoristic form of *’omniyyāhû* or *’omnîl*, “faithfulness of [the Lord/God,]” with the so-called “*hireq compaginis*,”¹³ or, alternatively, “[the Lord/God is] (the object of) my trust,”¹⁴ with *omnî* as an objective genitive¹⁵ (“the object of my trust”) or the substantive *’ōmen* with a first common singular pronominal suffix, thus *’omnî*, “my faithfulness, trust.”

Mosiah

The personal name Mosiah, representing the names of two prophet-kings (Omni 1:12, 14–20, 23; Mosiah 1:2, 10; 2:1; 28:1), may derive from the Hebrew for *môšî’yāhû*, “the Lord delivers, saves.”¹⁶ The name can be parsed as the causative stem (hiphil) participle of the Hebrew root

9 The Hebrew *rām*, “to rise; be lifted up, exalted,” was originally proposed by JoAnn Hackett.

10 Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004–09), 2:1104; 6:3579.

11 I wish to thank John A. Tvedtnes for this suggestion.

12 I wish to thank Robert F. Smith for suggesting the link of Omni with *’ōmen*, “faithfulness, trust.”

13 For a discussion of the *hireq compaginis* see Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* ed. E. Kautsch and A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 47.

14 This was first suggested by JoAnn Hackett.

15 For example, the “love of God” could be understood as an “objective genitive” as the love of individuals for God; as a “subjective genitive,” “love of God” could be understood as God’s love for individuals

16 This suggestion was first made by Robert F. Smith and JoAnn Hackett.

YS, “to save, deliver,”¹⁷ with the “theophoric”¹⁸ element *yāhū*, “Jehovah, Lord.”¹⁹ Isaiah, *yešā’yāhū*, “the Lord is deliverance, salvation,” presents a compelling analogue. Alternatively, the name may have been the hiphil participle form “deliverer” — *môšî’a* — which occurs at least 17 times with verbal or nominal force in the Old Testament, with the suppressed name of deity,²⁰ in Judges 3:9; and the participle with suffixes: Judges 3:15; 2 Samuel 22:42; Isaiah 49:26; Jeremiah 14:18; Psalm 7:11; 17:7; 18:42; 106:21.

Conclusion

Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, in a presentation made at the Evangelical Theological Society Far West Annual Meeting in 1997, made (for Evangelicals) these sobering observations:

There are no books from an evangelical perspective that responsibly interact with contemporary LDS scholarly and apologetic writing. In a survey of twenty recent evangelical books criticizing Mormonism we found that none interact with this growing body of literature. Only a handful demonstrate any awareness of pertinent works. Many of the authors promote criticisms that have long been refuted; some are sensationalistic while others are simply ridiculous. A number of these books claim to be “the definitive” book on the matter. That they make no attempt to interact with contemporary LDS scholarship is a stain upon the authors’ integrity and causes one to wonder about their credibility.²¹

In the intervening years there has been little if any change in this pattern of somnambulant Evangelical scholarship. But this lack of engagement with Latter-day Saint scholarship is not true merely of Evangelicals. A few weeks ago one of my colleagues discussed a

17 Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, CD-Rom Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000).

18 A theophoric name is one containing the name of God (in Hebrew, an “-ēl” or “-yāhū”) in it; thus, for example, in the personal name Isaiah, in Hebrew *yešā’yāhū*, “the Lord is deliverance, salvation,” the element *yāhū*, “Lord” is a theophoric.

19 I wish to thank Paul Y. Hoskisson, who first made this suggestion.

20 The same meaning of *môšî’a* is given by John W. Welch, “What Was a ‘Mosiah’?” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 105–07, citing John Sawyer, “What was a Mosi’a?” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 475–86.

21 Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, “Mormon Apologetic Scholarship and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?” *Trinity Journal* 19 (Fall 1998): 183.

lengthy letter by a disaffected Mormon who enumerated the reasons for his withdrawal from activity in the Church. Remarkably, he simply listed his objections to Latter-day Saint doctrine without responding to, let alone citing, LDS scholarship that supports these claims. And LDS scholarship that directly or indirectly supports the scriptures, history, and faith claims of Latter-day Saints has been increasing. For instance, as I mentioned, John Tvedtnes has contributed two articles on Book of Mormon names to the multivolume *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* published by Brill.²² Though the editors of this encyclopedia do not deal with the faith implications of the Book of Mormon, they do recognize the distinctly Hebrew/Semitic features of the book that deserve examination.

Above the box outside my office door is a plaque containing a trenchant observation made by Austin Farrer, who, in discussing C. S. Lewis as an ardent and articulate defender of Christianity, states: “Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”²³ (This quotation was cited on several occasions by Neal A. Maxwell.) In the spirit of this quotation, I believe that proper names in the Book of Mormon are demonstrably ancient. Mosser and Owen, astutely writing about LDS Book of Mormon scholarship, observe that Latter-day Saints “believe the Book of Mormon to be an ancient text written by people of Jewish heritage. A number of studies which have been done attempt to reveal Hebraic literary techniques, linguistic features, cultural patterns and other markers which, it is argued, Joseph Smith would not have been capable of fabricating.”²⁴ In a modest measure, we who have been working on the Book of Mormon Names Project believe that we are fulfilling the requirements for satisfying the aims and requirements of Book of Mormon scholarship in showing that the Book of Mormon is arguably an ancient document. With regard to critics of the Book of Mormon, the question may thus be shifted to “If the Book of Mormon is not an ancient document, why are there so many features in it—including proper names—that are so demonstrably ancient?” The results of the Book of Mormon Names Project, whose names discussed here are a small but

22 See note 4 above.

23 Austin Farrer, “The Christian Apologist,” in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 26.

24 Mosser and Owen, “Losing the Battle?” 204.

representative part, reflect and promote the vision of FARMS and are a tribute to the vision of its founder, Jack Welch.

Stephen D. Ricks completed his BA in Ancient Greek and MA in the Classics at Brigham Young University, and then received his PhD in ancient Near Eastern religions from the University of California, Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union. While completing his doctoral work he spent two years studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is now professor of Hebrew and Cognate Learning at Brigham Young University where he has been a member of the faculty for nearly thirty-six years.

