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What Was a "Mosiah"?

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Abstract: The opening story contained in the Book of Mormon depicts a prophet named Lehi taking his family into the wilderness to escape impending danger. Later in the Book of Mormon, prophets compare Lehi's journey to that of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Mormon scholar S. Kent Brown draws from evidence in the Book of Mormon to argue that Lehi and his family may have been conscious that they were reenacting Israel's exodus and that they understood the pattern as well as prophets who commented on their journey hundreds of years after the fact. Other stories in the Book of Mormon also portray exodus patterns, and prophets often use the precedent of Israel's deliverance from Egypt to prove God's power. These prophets symbolically link the Exodus to Jesus Christ's forthcoming Atonement and teach that Christ's sacrifice will surpass all of God's work for his children.

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Omni 1:12 “I will speak unto you somewhat concerning Mosiah.”

In 1965, John Sawyer published an article titled “What was a *Môšia*?”¹ He argues that the term *mosiah* was an ancient Hebrew term, like *gō’ēl* (“redeemer, or avenger of blood”), or *šedeq* (“victor, savior”). Such terms originally had meaning in Hebrew daily life and culture but came to be used among their titles for God. The word *môšia*^c (pronounced *moe-shee-ah*) is a word peculiar to Hebrew, a “word invariably implying a champion of justice in a situation of controversy, battle or oppression.”²

Sawyer’s analysis sheds interesting light on the name Mosiah in the Book of Mormon. Several subtle reasons show why Nephites, who continued to speak Hebrew in the New World, would have been attracted to the use of such a name or title.

Apparently the form of the word Mosiah is a “hiphil participle” in Hebrew. It occurs in the Hebrew in Deuteronomy 22:27; 28:29; Judges 12:3; Psalms 18:41; and Isaiah 5:29 – texts that in all probability were on the Plates of Brass. This word, however, was not transliterated into the English by the King James translators, and thus the Hebrew would not have been known to Joseph Smith. It was, however, known and used as a personal name in the Book of Mormon, as well as by people in the Jewish colony at Elephantine in the fifth century B.C.

The key meaning of the word *môšia*^c was “savior.” People in danger cry out, “But there is no *môšia*^c” (Deuteronomy 22:27). After examining all occurrences of this term in the Hebrew Bible, Sawyer concludes that the term applied to a particular kind of

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person or role and was sometimes a title designating "a definite office or position."³ Typical of this office are the following traits:

1. The *môšia^c* is a victorious hero appointed by God.
2. He liberates a chosen people from oppression, controversy, and injustice after they cry out for help.
3. Their deliverance is usually accomplished by means of a nonviolent escape or negotiation.
4. The immediate result of the coming of a *môšia^c* was "escape from injustice, and a return to a state of justice where each man possesses his rightful property."⁴
5. On a larger scale, "final victory means the coming of *môšim* [plural, pronounced moe-shee-eem] to rule like Judges over Israel."⁵

Thus the term also had judicial, legal, or forensic connotations, similar to the word *advocate*." A *môšia^c* gives refuge to those on his "right hand" from their accusers in court (Psalm 17:7).

The exact derivation of the Book of Mormon name Mosiah is unknown, but it appears the same as *môšia^c*, which derives from the Hebrew *yaša^c* ("to be wide open, free, deliver, rescue, preserve, save"). It is thus quite different from the Hebrew word *mašiah* (anointed, "messiah," Greek *christós*). The Nephite word *mosiah* might also contain a theophoric element (-iah), thus meaning "the Lord is a *môšia^c*."

Interestingly, the term *môšia^c* applies perfectly to the Mosiahs in the Book of Mormon. King Mosiah I was a God-appointed hero who delivered the chosen people of Nephi from serious wars and contentions by leading them in an escape from the land of Nephi (see Omni 1:12–14). It is unknown whether he was called Mosiah before he functioned as a *môšia^c* of his people or whether he gained this well-earned title afterward, perhaps as a royal title, but either is possible.

Indeed, the themes of God's salvation and the deliverance of his people are strong in the book of Mosiah. It tells of one *môšia^c* after another. Alma was a God-inspired *môšia^c* who peaceably saved his people from king Noah and the Lamanites. Zeniff tried to return to the land of Nephi to repossess the rightful

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property of the Nephites. His efforts failed, however, and his grandson Limhi eventually functioned as a *môšia^c* by leading his people in their escape back to Zarahemla. At the end of the book of Mosiah, the reign of judges was established, a fitting development for a people that had been well served by *môšicim* for over a century. Thus, the book of Mosiah, like the book of Judges in the Old Testament, appears to have been meaningfully named.

Finally, the Hebrew term *môšia^c* also was used as a divine title. God was and is such a savior, who would come down and bring salvation (see Mosiah 3:9). The Book of Mormon adds support to Sawyer's idea that the divine title *môšia^c* was also at home in a cultural context. It seems to preserve traces of a broader usage when it says that "the knowledge of *a Savior* shall spread throughout every nation" (Mosiah 3:20; italics added), "in other words *a Savior of the world*" (1 Nephi 10:4; italics added).

Ultimately this term, as a divine title, was applied exclusively to God. As Isaiah 43:11 states, "I . . . am the Lord; and beside me there is no *môšia^c*." Likewise, the angel to Benjamin affirmed the unique work of the Savior, the only way and means whereby salvation comes to mankind (see Mosiah 3:17). Thus, in several respects, the Book of Mormon usage of this term is quite remarkable, meaningful, and wholly consistent with Hebrew usage.

*Based on research by John W. Welch, April 1989. The Sawyer article from the Old Testament journal *Vetus Testamentum* became available as a F.A.R.M.S. reprint in 1989.*

Notes

1. John Sawyer, "What Was a *Môšia^c*?" *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 475–86.
2. *Ibid.*, 476.
3. *Ibid.*, 477.
4. *Ibid.*, 480.
5. *Ibid.*, 482.