BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi

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"I, Nephi . . . make a record of my
proceedings in my days." (1 Nephi 1:1)

The opening words of the Book of Mormon, "I, Nephi" (1 Nephi 1:1), raise an interesting issue: Was this name or others like it in use around Jerusalem in Lehi's day? In general one may ask: Are the "personal names contained in the story . . . satisfactory for that period and region"?[1] While an answer to that issue for all names in the Book of Mormon still awaits investigation, several suggestions have been made for the name *Nephi*.

Early in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 1:2), Nephi notes the connections between Egypt and Israel at his time. Three of the four etymologies proposed for the name *Nephi* are Egyptian; these are the Egyptian names *Nfr* "good,"[2] *Nfw* "captain," and *Nfy* "wind."[3] We can rule out *Nfy* as a possibility since so far it has not been attested as a name in Egypt at any time period.[4] Similar considerations also rule out the fourth proposed etymology deriving from Akkadian *napāḫu* "to be kindled,"[5] such as *napḫu* "kindled,"[6] *nipḫu* "rising,"[7] and *nappāḫu* "smith,"[8] none of which are used as personal names.[9] This leaves us with two suggestions: *Nfr* and *Nfw*. While it might appear that *Nfr* is disqualified for ending in an

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-*r*, by the time of Lehi (end of the seventh century B.C.), the final *r* had long since fallen out of pronunciation.[10] Although the consonants look different between the two names, in Lehi's day the only difference in pronunciation would have been in the vowels.

Unfortunately, neither Egyptians nor Hebrews wrote vowels in Lehi's day. But we can still get some ideas of how *Nfr* and *Nfw* were vocalized from foreign transcriptions of Egyptian names and from later versions of these words from times when Egyptians did write vowels (i.e., Coptic).

Transcriptions of the Coptic forms of *Nfr* and *Nfw* are *noufi* and *neef* respectively.[11] In the fifth century B.C., the Egyptian name ʿnḫ-ḥr-nfr[12] is transcribed in Aramaic ʿHRNPY,[13] while Aramaic transcriptions of the Egyptian name *K3-nfr.w*[14] are *KNPY*,[15] *QNPY, KNWPʾ*,[16] and *KNWPY*.[17] The transcriptions indicate that the vowel might be *o* or *u*, matching the initial vowel of the later Coptic word *noufi*. The problem with this proposed etymology, however, is that *K3-nfr.w* is a stative verb form. In Egyptian, as in Semitic languages, different verbal forms are indicated by a change in vowels. *K3-nfr.w* is a stative, whereas *Nfr* is probably a participle, and the vowel in the participle from Greek transcriptions seems to be an *e*, as opposed to the stative case vowels *o* or *u*.[18] On the other hand, Assyrian scribes transcribed the name *B3k-n-nfw*[19] as *Bu-uk-ku-na-an-ni-iʾ-pi* or *Bu-uk-ku-na-an-ne-eʾ-pi*.[20] These transcriptions indicate that the vowel in *Nfw* was an *e* or *i*, matching the vowel in later Coptic. So the vowel matches better with *Nfw* than with *Nfr*.

The advantage that *Nfr* has over *Nfw* is that *Nfr* is actually attested at the right time,[21] whereas *Nfw* is attested but not at the right time.[22] As previously noted, neither *Nfy* nor forms of *napāḫu* are attested as names at any time. Thus,

one may confidently conclude, whether from *Nfr* or *Nfw*, the name *Nephi* is an attested Egyptian name.

Research by John Gee, 1999; an earlier article on this topic was published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 1/1 *(1992): 189–91.*

NOTES

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 3, citing criteria put forward by William F. Albright. Interestingly, the name *Nephi* is also found as a place name in the King James translation Apocrypha in 2 Maccabees. Although the Apocrypha was part of the Smith family Bible, and it is possible that Joseph Smith may have been acquainted with the name from that source, Joseph Smith apparently did not personally own a Bible when he translated the Book of Mormon and had not read it much when he was growing up; see John Gee, "La Trahison des Clercs: On the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon," review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,* ed. Brent L. Metcalfe, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 100–101. Furthermore, that Joseph Smith may have been completely ignorant of the Apocrypha and its contents is indicated by the fact that he had to ask the Lord about them and in response received D&C 91. The issue is not whether Joseph Smith could have known the name, but whether it is suitable for the time and place from which it claims to derive. The answer to the former is perhaps; the answer to the latter is decidedly yes.

2. John Gee, "A Note on the Name *Nephi*," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189–91; see also Gee, "A Note on the Name *Nephi*," FARMS Update, *Insights* (November 1992): 2.

3. John A. Tvedtnes, review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,* ed. Brent L. Metcalfe, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 39. Tvedtnes conflates *Nfw* and *Nfy,* but they are distinct words in Egyptian.

4. The name *Nfw-iw* "the wind is come" is attested from the 22nd Dynasty (Georges Legrain, "Deux stèles trouvées à Karnak en février 1897," *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Alterthumskunde* 35 [1897]: 15, line 14, though this perhaps should be read *T3w̱-iw*) as well as other names compounded with *nfy* (see Hermann Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen* [Glückstadt: Augustin, 1935], 1:193.

5. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, ed. John A. Brinkman et al. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1980), N1:263–70; see Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972), 2:732–33.

6. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, N1:295–96; see von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 2:737–38.

7. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, N2:242–45; see von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 2:791.

8. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, N1:307–10; see von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 2:739.

9. Although *nappāḫu* is used as an epithet of the god Ea; see *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, N1:307–10.

10. See William F. Edgerton, "Stress, Vowel Quantity, and Syllable Division in Egyptian," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6/1 (1947): 5–6, 10–17; see Günther Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," *Göttinger Miszellen* 113 (1989): 93; Elmar Edel, *Altägyptische Grammatik*, Analecta Orientalia, vol. 34 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1955), 1:56 §§127–28; and Walter C. Till, *Koptische Grammatik* (Leipzig: VEB, 1970), 48 §39.

11. See Walter E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 240 and 238 respectively; see Jaroslav Černý, comp., *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 116 and 115 respectively. *Nfy* "wind" becomes Coptic *nife* (ibid., 116).

12. Not in Ranke, *Ägyptische Personennamen*, but see Vittmann in next note.

13. See Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," 94; Arthur E. Cowley,

ed. and trans., *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century* B.C. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), 183, inscription 72:23.

14. See Ranke, *Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 1:338; Erich Lüddeckens et al., *Demotisches Namenbuch* 15 Leiferungen to date (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1980–97), 1.13:1004.

15. See M. Lidzbarski, *Phönizische und aramäische Krugaufschriften aus Elephantine* (Berlin: Verlag der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1912), 24; Frank L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phonician and Punic Inscriptions* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1972), 192; Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," 95.

16. See Vittmann, "Zu den in den phönikischen Inschriften enthaltenen ägyptischen Personennamen," 95.

17. See Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, 89–90, 155, inscriptions 26:9, 21, and 50:7.

18. See Lüddeckens et al., *Demotisches Namenbuch*, 1.9:640–41; Wolja Erichsen, *Auswahl frühdemotischer Texte* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1950), 2:71; Heinz J. Thissen, "Ägyptologische Beiträge zu den griechischen magischen Papyri," in *Religion und Philosophie im alten Ägypten*, ed. Ursula Verhoeven and Erhart Graefe (Leuven: Peeters, 1991), 295. It should be noted that transcriptions of *nfr* that have an *e* vowel also tend to retain the *r* because of suffixes.

19. See Ranke, *Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 1:91.

20. See Assurbanipal prism A, col. 1, line 94, conveniently in Rykle Borger, *Babylonisch-Assyrische Lesestücke*, 2nd ed., Analecta Orientalia, vol. 54 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1979), 1:90, 2:337.

21. Ranke, *Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 1:194.

22. Ranke, *Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 1:193.