
WORDPLAYS

“Alma . . . was a young man” (Mosiah 17:2)

The Book of Mormon has 337 proper names, 188 of which are unique.¹ Many of the names unique to the Book of Mormon have Hebrew qualities or Hebraic features that demonstrate what researcher Paul Y. Hoskisson calls an “affinity with Semitic languages.” He notes the following examples: “Abish and Abinadi resemble *ab*, father, names in Hebrew; Alma appears in a Bar Kokhba letter (c. A.D. 130) found in the Judean desert; Mulek could be a diminutive of West Semitic *mlk*, king; Omni and Limhi appear to have the same morphology as Old Testament Omri and Zimri.”²

One feature of the Hebrew Bible is a kind of wordplay in which a proper name is juxtaposed with phrasing that corresponds with the meaning of the name. Although the Hebrew Bible has many instances of wordplay, once the text is translated into another language, such as English, the wordplay is lost on the average reader unless noted by the translators. When Leah bore her first son, she named him *Reuben*, which literally means “Look, a son!” Genesis 29:32 explains the wordplay: Leah “bare a son, and she called his name *Reuben*: for she said, Surely the Lord hath looked upon my affliction.” Leah named her fourth son *Judah*, meaning

“praise.” Genesis 29:35 explains the wordplay: Leah “bare a son: and she said, Now will I *praise* the Lord: therefore she called his name *Judah*.” Asher’s name means “happy”; he was so named because Leah said, “*Happy* am I, . . . and she called his name *Asher*” (Genesis 30:13). Rachel, too, named Naphtali (which means “wrestling”) because, as she explains, “With great *wrestlings* have I *wrestled* with my sister, and I have prevailed” (Genesis 30:8).

The Book of Mormon narrative begins squarely in the world of the Bible. When Lehi’s clan traveled from the Old World to the New, they took with them the Hebrew language as well as Hebraic features in their writings that included wordplays using both human names and place-names. Once again, such wordplays were generally lost in translation. In recent decades Hebrew scholars have identified several wordplays in the Book of Mormon. “Book of Mormon writers not only understood the meaning of the names,” one scholar has written, “but abundantly employed wordplay—including thematic wordplay revolving around particular names.”³

Briefly examined below are three representative examples of wordplay in the Book of Mormon.⁴

Jershon

When the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi sought refuge from those who were seeking to destroy them, a group of Nephites gave them the land of Jershon “for an inheritance” (Alma 27:22). The name *Jershon* is not found in the Bible, but it “has an authentic Hebrew origin, the root YRŠ, meaning ‘to inherit.’”⁵ English transliterates *Y* with *J*; thus the Hebrew *Yershon* becomes *Jershon* in English. Three different passages in the book of Alma present wordplays linking *Jershon* with *inherit* or *inheritance*: “This land *Jershon* is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an *inheritance*” (27:22); “This will we do unto our brethren, that they may *inherit* the land *Jershon*” (27:24); and “They have lands for their *inheritance* in the land of *Jershon* (35:14).

If YRŠ (JRŠ) denotes *inherit* or *inheritance*, what about the *-on* suffix: *Jersh-on*? It also has a Hebrew connection. There are several dozen ancient place-names in the Bible and other ancient sources that feature the

SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT: LUDWIG KOEHLER



Ludwig Koehler (1880–1956) was a notable theologian and Biblical Hebrew lexicographer. One of his prominent works, published as *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* in 1953, was translated as *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* and published in five volumes in 1994. This important lexicon, which deals with thousands of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic words, is still widely utilized by Bible students and scholars alike. I accessed Koehler's lexicon as I researched proper names and place-names in the Book of Mormon.

-on suffix.⁶ These include *Dishon* (Genesis 36:21), *Dibon* (Numbers 21:30), *Heshbon* (Numbers 21:30), *Ziphron* (Numbers 34:9), *Gibeon* (Joshua 9:3), *Hebron* (Joshua 10:36), *Eltekon* (Joshua 15:58), *Elon* (Joshua 19:42), *Hannathon* (Joshua 19:14), *Hammon* (Joshua 19:28), *Gibbethon* (Joshua 19:44), *Holon* (Joshua 21:15), *Ashkelon* (Judges 1:18), and *Helbon* (Ezekiel 27:18).

Alma

The name *Alma* gives us “one of the most transparent examples of onomastic wordplay [or wordplay dealing with a proper name] in the Book of Mormon.”⁷ The name is related to the Hebrew *‘alm* (or *‘elem*), meaning “youth” or “young man.”⁸ In Mosiah 17:2, the name *Alma* is juxtaposed with “young man”: “There was one among them whose name was *Alma* [*‘almā*], he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a *young man* [*‘alm*].” Hugh Nibley was the first scholar to associate *Alma* with “young

man”;⁹ subsequently, his proposal has been accepted by several Hebrew scholars.¹⁰

Zarahemla

Some Latter-day Saint scholars¹¹ have proposed that the name *Zarahemla* is based on two Hebrew words, *zera* (“seed”) and *hemlah* (from a Hebrew verbal root meaning “to have compassion, to spare”).¹² Both meanings of *hemlah* are contextually linked to the name *Zarahemla* in Book of Mormon passages.

Alma 27:4–5 states that Ammon and his brothers were “moved with *compassion*, and they said unto the king: Let us gather together this people of the Lord, and let us go down to the land of *Zarahemla*” (Alma 27:4–5; see also 53:10–13). Two passages provide a similar linkage using *spare*: “We returned, those of us that were *spared*, to the land of *Zarahemla*” (Mosiah 9:2) and “Then would our brethren have been *spared*, and they would not have been burned in that great city *Zarahemla*” (3 Nephi 8:24).¹³

Bible scholar Matthew Bowen has observed that allusion and wordplay involving personal names “saturate the narratives and poetry of the Hebrew Bible.” He states further that “identifying this wordplay and how it functions in biblical narrative constitutes an important key to understanding those narratives and the messages intended therein by their ancient authors.”¹⁴ Bowen’s point also pertains to wordplay in the Book of Mormon, reminding us that such literary devices serve rhetorical purposes that may afford insights into a passage’s fuller context and meaning.

Notes

1. See Hoskisson, “Book of Mormon Names,” 1:186, where he qualifies his count and explains his methodology.
2. Hoskisson, “Book of Mormon Names,” 1:186–87.
3. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*, lxviii.
4. See the studies of various scholars who have investigated other names, including *Sariah*, *Josh*, *Sam*, *Laman*, *Lemuel*, *Irreantum*, and *Nahom*, in Chadwick, “Names Lehi and Sariah—Language and Meaning”; Ricks, “Origin of

- Book of Mormon Names”; Ricks, “Some Notes on Book of Mormon Names”; and Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*.
5. Ricks and Tvedtnes, “Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names,” 257. See Brown, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 439–40, which defines *yrš* as “take possession of; inherit; dispossess”; and Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 441–42, which defines *yrš* as “to take possession of.”
 6. See Ricks and Tvedtnes, “Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names,” 258n15.
 7. Bowen, “And He Was a Young Man,” 343. See the discussions on Alma’s name in Ricks, “Some Notes on Book of Mormon Names,” 159–60; and Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*, 91–98.
 8. See Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 835.
 9. See Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 59.
 10. See Hoskisson, “Textual Evidences for the Book of Mormon,” 288–89; Bowen, “And He Was a Young Man,” 343; Ricks, “Some Notes on Book of Mormon Names,” 159–60; and Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*, 91–98.
 11. See Bokovoy and Olavarria, “Zarahemla: Revisiting the ‘Seed of Compassion’”; Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*, 98–100; Bowen, “Toponymic Wordplay on *Zarahemla* and *Jershon*”; Ricks, “Notes on the Book of Mormon Names *Zeezrom* and *Jershon*”; Ricks and Tvedtnes, “Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names,” 258–59; Tvedtnes, “Since the Book of Mormon Is Largely the Record of a Hebrew People [. . .],” 65; and Tvedtnes, “What’s in a Name?,” 42.
 12. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 328.
 13. See Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*, 119–33.
 14. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*, xlv.

