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Title Notes and Communications: A Note on the Name *Nephi*

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Abstract The name *Nephi* is attested as a Syro-Palestinian Semitic form of an Egyptian man's name dating from the Late Period in Egypt.

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 *ḤRNPY*, 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 frühdemotischer 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 “nēfē” 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-ḥtp* 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.