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## On the Etymology of *Deseret*

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**Abstract:** Hugh Nibley's suggestion that the Book of Mormon word "deseret", defined as "honey bee", was related the Egyptian DSRT, meaning "red crown" but sometimes replaced with the glyph for "bee", has long been the default etymology among Book of Mormon scholars. This proposal does have some weaknesses, though, so scholars should remain open to other possibilities. One alternative may be an archaic form of the Hebrew term for "bee", DBRH.

ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF *DESERET*

Kevin L. Barney

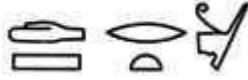
One can forgive a newcomer to the State of Utah for being puzzled by the ubiquitous use of the word "Deseret." One of the two daily newspapers in Salt Lake City is the *Deseret News*; instead of Goodwill Industries, one finds Deseret Industries; a chain of bookstores goes by the name Deseret Book; and the list goes on and on. Upon reading a little history, one soon finds that these names derive from the name Brigham Young proposed for the state in 1849, the State of Deseret (although that proposal encompassed substantially more territory than the current State of Utah). Congress rejected this proposal, and when Utah finally became a State in 1896 it bore the name of the federally-sanctioned Utah Territory (which had been created by an act of Congress as part of the Compromise of 1850), named for the Ute Indians native to the area.<sup>1</sup>

The source for the name "Deseret" is a single passage in the Book of Mormon: "And they did also carry with them deseret, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee, and thus they did carry with them swarms of bees. . . ." (Ether 2:3). Brigham liked the imagery of cooperative labor and industry brought to mind by honeybees and their hives, and to this day one may tour his personal residence, which is called the Beehive House. The beehive is the official symbol of the State of Utah.

What is the etymology of the word *deseret*? How one approaches this question is to some extent a function of what one makes of the Book of Mormon. If one takes the view that that book is authentically ancient, then the word must have some sort of an

ancient origin. (Whether we have the capacity to divine that origin is a separate question.) If one takes the view that that book is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century pseudepigraphon, then the source of the word, whether ancient or modern, must have been accessible in some fashion by Joseph Smith, unless Joseph simply coined it as a neologism out of the ether.

I am unaware of any serious proposal for a modern etymology of the word (unless one were to posit it as a simple variant of English "desert," a suggestion I have seen no one actually make). There is, however, a proposed ancient etymology, which was first put forward by R.C. Webb [J.E. Homans],<sup>2</sup> but has been most prominently articulated and popularized by Hugh Nibley,<sup>3</sup> and which has been widely accepted by contemporary Mormon scholars.<sup>4</sup> I have found, however, that Nibley's argument is almost universally misunderstood by rank and file Mormons, who take him to be saying that *deseret* is the Egyptian word for "bee." It is not. The argument is much more subtle than that. Although Nibley's own explanations of this matter tend to be obscure and pedantic, Stephen Parker has helpfully summarized the argument in a comprehensible way in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*:

Hugh Nibley has suggested that the etymology of the word Deseret is related to the ancient Egyptian word  *dšrt*, read by Egyptologists as desheret. In Egyptian, *dšrt* means the red crown (of the king of Lower Egypt). The Egyptian word for bee is  *bt*. In the discussion of the sign  *dšrt*, Alan Gardiner, in *Egyptian Grammar*, states that  was used to replace  in two Egyptian titles where  was used to mean the *bt*y King of Lower Egypt. Thus, the title  *n-sw-bt* was sometimes written as  *n-sw-bt*, which literally means "He who

belongs to the sedge plant (of Upper Egypt) and to the bee (of Lower Egypt)," normally translated "The King of Upper and Lower Egypt." This

substitution of  for  has led Nibley to associate the Egyptian word *dšrt* and the Book of Mormon word *deseret*.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the Egyptian word for "bee" is actually *bit*. The word *dšr* means "(to be) red." With the feminine ending, *dšr.t* (pronounced something like "desheret" or "deshret" [the vowels are hypothetical but short]), one of its meanings is the red crown of the king of Lower Egypt. This crown (S3 in Gardiner's sign list)<sup>6</sup> was sometimes substituted for the word *bit* "bee," possibly, as Gardiner conjectures, for superstitious reasons,<sup>7</sup> in the expressions *n-sw-bit* "king of Upper and Lower Egypt" (literally "he who belongs to the sedge plant [representing Upper Egypt] and to the bee [representing Lower Egypt]") and *sd3wty bity* "treasurer of the king of Lower Egypt."<sup>8</sup> When so substituted, it would actually be pronounced *bit*. So, in sum, there was an association, the reason for which remains obscure, between the bee and Lower Egypt, and so also was there an association between the red crown of the king of Lower Egypt (*dšr.t*) and the bee (*bit*).

This argument is not only very subtle but, quite frankly, brilliant. As I have indicated, it is considered the standard etymology of the word among LDS scholars, and this paper by itself is not going to change that. But I have long felt a certain ambivalence about this suggestion. It is almost *too* brilliant, by half. The obscurity and cleverness of the connection to some extent interfere with its believability. Had the Book of Mormon word been simply *bit*, that would be one thing. But for the Jaredites to use a word for the red crown of the king of Lower Egypt with an obscure connection to the bee, in precisely the opposite of the way the Egyptians used the word (the Egyptians would write the red crown symbol in lieu of the bee symbol and pronounce *bit* "bee"; the Jaredites apparently

when thinking of "bee" used the word for the red crown, *dšr.t*, something the Egyptians never did), gives me pause. I cannot help but wonder whether this explanation is more of a testament to the brilliance of the men who came up with it as opposed to an actual etymology of the Book of Mormon term.

For the foreseeable future, the Webb-Nibley theory will continue to be the received etymology of "deseret." But the point of this paper is that, notwithstanding the near-canonization of that etymology by its publication in the pages of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, LDS scholars should not simply assume that the question has been successfully resolved, but rather should continue to press the search for more and better information to illumine our understanding.

As Paul Hoskisson has cautioned: "Unless and until it can be determined from which cultural background the Jaredites departed, it will be impossible to do anything but guess about etymologies for Jaredite names."<sup>9</sup> Our lack of knowledge concerning who the Jaredites were, from whence they came and when, and what language they spoke is a tremendous challenge in trying to plumb the etymology of the few Jaredite words preserved in the Book of Mormon. As Ronan James Head observes, "The Jaredite onomastica is so varied, that one can find similarities with any number of languages, from Hebrew to Sumerian. . . ." <sup>10</sup>

In both his Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham studies, Nibley had a pronounced tendency to prefer Egyptian arcana over sometimes more straightforward (often Semitic) avenues of investigation.<sup>11</sup> Since, as Hoskisson notes, at this stage we are still limited to etymological guesswork, I would like to put my own guess on the table. My guess is not currently as tidy and wrapped up in a bow as the Webb-Nibley theory,

and so it certainly will not supplant that theory in the near term.<sup>12</sup> But my hope is that by making these thoughts available it might lead other scholars to advance the ball further than I have so far been able to do.

What I would like to propose is that before wedding ourselves inextricably to an obscure Egyptian etymology we consider the possibility of a more straightforward Semitic etymology of the term *deseret*.<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew word for bee is דְּבוֹרָה *deborah*. This word occurs in the Hebrew Bible at Isaiah 7:18, Deut. 1:44, Judges 14:8, and Psalms 118:12, and as a variant reading at 1 Sam. 14:26. It also appears as a proper name for the nurse of Rebekah in Gen. 35:8 and the prophetess of Judges 4-5, and of course is common as a proper name in our own culture to this day.

Ignoring the *mater*, this word has four consonants: DBRH, only the first and third of which match DSRT (*deseret*). To be able to see this as a plausible etymology of Jaredite *deseret*, we have to be able to explain the two consonants that do not match.

An explanation for the last consonant is indeed available. The final H ending of DBRH is a feminine ending in Hebrew. We know that there was a more archaic feminine ending, -T, which is preserved in Semitic cognate languages (such as Aramaic, where the word for "bee" is *debartā*, or Syriac, where it is *deborithā*).<sup>14</sup> Not only is the general linguistic development of -t to -h feminine endings known, but it is attested with respect to this very word in the Hebrew Bible. There was a Levitical city called Daberath at the foot of Mt. Tabor, mentioned at Joshua 19:12, possibly 19:20 (if we follow the conjectural emendation of MT *Rabbith* here) and 21:28, as well as 1 Chr. 6:57 (= Engl 6:72), which means "bee." Note that Joshua 19:12 uses the more ancient form "Daberath," whereas 21:28 uses the later form "Dabareh," with a final -h replacing the

more archaic final *-t* ending. So we can see this linguistic development unfolding in Hebrew with respect to this very word as a place name (where the archaic *-t* ending survived longer than elsewhere due to the conservatism of toponyms). We therefore may posit that the more ancient Semitic form of the word "bee" was DBRT, which is just one consonant different than DSRT.

I wish I could say that I have a similar solution for the second consonant; I do not at present. One possible avenue of investigation to this end might be the potential for semantic confusion between DBRT "bee" and Semitic words for "honey," such as Hebrew *debash* and Akkadian *dishpu*, which combine an S consonant with a D and a B/P. Consider, for example, the case of 1 Samuel 14:26, which in the KJV reads as follows:

And when the people were come into the wood, behold, the honey dropped; but no man put his hand to his mouth: for the people feared the oath.

The Masoretic Text (MT) here has **הֵלֶךְ דְּבַשׁ הַלֵּךְ** *helek debash* "a stream of honey." But the Septuagint for this passage reads as follows (following Brenton's English translation):

And the people went into the place of the bees, and, behold, they continued speaking; and, behold, there was none that put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath of the Lord.

The Greek for "place of bees" is *μελισσώνα melissōna*, which is a variant (in the accusative case) of the Greek word for "bee," *melissa* (also a popular name in our culture to this day). The Septuagint reading has led a number of scholars to propose that the word "honey" in the MT (**דְּבַשׁ debash**) was originally, or at least in the textual tradition

underlying the Septuagint, דברו *deboru* "its bees."<sup>15</sup> The possible confusion between the words for "bee" and "honey" in this passage of scripture suggests a potential avenue for further investigation regarding a potential Semitic etymology underlying DSRT.

My inability to account fully at present for the variant second consonant, however, does not necessarily entail that this is not a fruitful avenue for further investigation. Expecting to always be able to perfectly match Book of Mormon onomastics with known precedents in the Old World is not always reasonable, for at least three reasons:

1. *Linguistic Evolution.* The Book of Mormon itself frankly acknowledges that profound linguistic evolution took place over the long history recounted therein, as reflected for instance in the sobriquet *reformed* Egyptian. Since the Small Plates were not edited or redacted and were composed within a generation of Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, if we had them we almost certainly would be able to read them. But the rest of the plates represent a redacted account in the language of Mormon and Moroni, a thousand years after Lehi. Languages inevitably evolve over so long a period of time--witness what has happened to English over the last millennium, for example.

2. *Creolization with New World Languages.* The sad fact is that we do not know for sure what languages the Book of Mormon was written in, and we do not possess the original text, with the exception of the Anthon transcription. The text mentions Hebrew and Egyptian, but if we assume with the vast majority of LDS scholars that there were others in the land with whom the Book of Mormon peoples interacted, there undoubtedly would have been substantial creolization with New World languages. LDS scholars have tended to approach the text of the Book of Mormon from the perspective of the languages

they know (Hebrew and Egyptian) without adequately accounting for the possible influence of New World languages.

3. *The Limitations of Inspired Translation.* The source for the Jaredite record in the Book of Ether was the 24 gold plates found by the people of Limhi and delivered to Mosiah. Mosiah translated this record in seeric fashion using the Nephite interpreters (see Mosiah 28:11-19). Moroni produced the Book of Ether; whether he redacted Mosiah's translation or retranslated the material on his own is not known. And of course, Joseph translated the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God using a process similar to what Mosiah describes.

LDS scholars have different views concerning how close the linguistic relationship is between the source text and the translation using such a process, which differs from modern academic translation. Some are of the view that the translation is in whole or in part largely conceptual in nature, *sensus de sensu* rather than *verbum pro verbo*, dependent on spiritual feelings and receptivity. If this is the case, we need to face the possibility that proper names may not have always been perfectly transmitted to a modern scholarly level of precision.

In conclusion, the Webb-Nibley proposal will remain the most commonly accepted conjecture given its strength, which is the relative precision of the linguistic match with *deseret*. But that conjecture also has weaknesses, namely, the obscurity of the connection to bees and the fact that it posits an unattested usage precisely backwards from that of the Egyptians themselves (who, as indicated above, never pronounced *dšrt* with the meaning "bee"). My Semitic-based proposal in this paper is not a precise linguistic match, which is its glaring weakness, but it is a word that directly means "bee,"

and a well attested linguistic process accounts for the development of the feminine ending. Given the problems with analyzing the Book of Mormon onomasticon briefly described above, I suggest that a Semitic DBRT is close enough to Jaredite DSRT to warrant continued research and effort.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey Ogden Johnson, "Deseret, State of," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 1:371-73; "State of Deseret" in *Wikipedia*, accessed October 28, 2006. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State\\_of\\_Deseret](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_of_Deseret)

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Webb [J.E. Homans], *Joseph Smith as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936), 42-45. On R. C. Webb, see Kevin L. Barney, "Robert C. Webb," *By Common Consent* (October 18, 2006). <http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2006/10/robert-c-webb/>

<sup>3</sup> Nibley has articulated this proposed etymology in several of his writings. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 319-22; *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 199 [where he speculates that the peculiar wire loop in the red crown of Lower Egypt may represent a bee's antenna]; and, most extensively, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 225-45, in a chapter entitled "The Deseret Connection," which is something of a complete history of bees and apiculture among the Egyptians. The material of the most specific relevance to the etymology of the word "deseret" is under the caption "The Word Deseret" at pp. 240-45.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Cynthia L. Hallen, "What's in a Word?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 65.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Parker, "Deseret," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:370-71.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1979), 504.

<sup>7</sup> If Gardiner's conjecture that the substitution was for superstitious reasons is correct, this would be rather like a visual analog to when a Jewish reader of the Hebrew Bible comes upon the divine tetragrammaton יהוה [YHWH], but rather than pronouncing something like "Yahweh" reverentially substitutes "Adonai" instead.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Hoskisson, "An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon," in *By Study and Also By Faith, Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, Vol. 2, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 132.

<sup>10</sup> Ronan James Head, "The Deseret Honeybee and Near Eastern Apiculture," prepublication draft, copy in the author's possession.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, while to my perception the majority view among contemporary LDS scholars is that the peculiar wording of 1 Nephi 1:1-3 suggests that Nephi began his record by writing Hebrew in an Egyptian script, Nibley always insisted that the Book of Mormon was written in pure Egyptian, scoffing "at the darling illusion that anyone who has had elementary Hebrew knows the original language of the Book of Mormon," in *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 17. For the mainstream view, see John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156-63, and Kevin L. Barney, "Enallage in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (Spring 1994): 114-15 at n. 4. Such a process is not nearly so esoteric as it sounds at first blush. What we recognize today as Hebrew is actually Hebrew language written in Aramaic characters (before the Exile Hebrew was written in a different alphabet, called paleo-Hebrew), and Coptic is Egyptian language written in Greek characters (with seven additional characters borrowed from Demotic for sounds found in Egyptian but not in Greek). For the historic over reliance on

Egyptian arcana in Book of Abraham studies (which Nibley began to remedy in *Abraham in Egypt*), see Kevin L. Barney, "The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, eds. (Provo: FARMS, 2005), 107-30.

<sup>12</sup> It is for this reason that I am publishing this suggestion for further research in *BCC Papers* and not in a print journal.

<sup>13</sup> I will pose this possibility in terms of Hebrew, which will serve as a proxy for more ancient western Semitic languages if the Jaredites should predate the origins of Hebrew as such as a language around 1200 B.C.

<sup>14</sup> The Semitic root \*DBR is very common and it is difficult to discern where individual usages come from. For instance, Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baumgartner *et al.*, eds. *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1:208, associates Hebrew *deborah* with roots in Syriac, Mandaic, Arabic and Ethiopian that feature an assimilated *nun*, making the original root something like \*DNBR or \*ZNBR. There does not, however, appear to be any evidence for doubling of the B in Hebrew, so the Hebrew root may be unrelated.

<sup>15</sup> *The New Brown - Driver - Briggs - Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 184 [this is a reprint of the Oxford edition], citing with approval Wellhausen and Driver.