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SHAZER: AN ETYMOLOGICAL PROPOSAL IN NARRATIVE CONTEXT

Matthew L. Bowen

ABSTRACT: *In 1 Nephi 16:13–14, Nephi mentions the name Shazer as a toponym the Lehite clan bestowed on a site in western Arabia “four days” journey south-southeast of the valley of Laman. The Lehtes used this site as a base camp for a major hunting expedition. A footnote to the first mention of the name Shazer in the 1981 and 2013 Latter-day Saint editions of the Book of Mormon has virtually enshrined “twisting, intertwining” as the presumed meaning of this toponym. However, the structure of Nephi’s text in 1 Nephi 16:12–13 suggests that the name Shazer serves as the bracketing for a chiastic description of the Lehtes’ hunting expedition from the site. This chiasm recommends hunting as a possible starting point for seeking a more precise etymology for Shazer, one related to food supply. Consequently, I briefly argue for Shazer as a Semitic word (possibly also a loanword from an Old Arabic dialect) and a close cognate with both Hismaic šašar (“young gazelle,” plural šašr) and Arabic šašara (a type of “gazelle”).*

The name *Shazer* represents one of only a handful of toponyms (place names) Nephi mentions in his small plates account of his family’s journey through the Arabian wilderness. Nephi reports that after the family finally broke camp and left the Valley of Lemuel, “we did take our tents and departed into the wilderness across the river Laman. And it came to pass that we traveled for the space of four days nearly a south-southeast direction. And we did pitch our tents again” (1 Nephi 16:12–13).¹ At this point, Nephi notes that the Lehite clan gave the site of their camp the name “Shazer”:

1. All Book of Mormon passages cited herein follow Royal Skousen, ed. *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

A [A]nd we did call the name of **the place Shazer**.

B And it came to pass that we did take our bows
and our arrows and **go forth into the wilderness**

C to **slay food for our families**.

C' And after that we had **slain food for
our families**,

B' we did **return again** to our families **in the
wilderness**

A' to **the place of Shazer**.² (1 Nephi 16:13–14; emphasis
in all scriptural citations added)

Lehi's family undoubtedly relied on hunting for food, including the hunting of gazelles, during the early stages of their journey, though he does not mention such until 1 Nephi 16:13–14. In that passage, Nephi explicitly describes Shazer as a base camp for a major hunting expedition undertaken (presumably) by the adult men in the clan.³ Nephi frames his description of this wilderness hunting expedition using the name *Shazer*, which he mentions twice. Although Nephi does not give an explicit etiological explanation for their naming of Shazer (“and we did call the name of the place Shazer,” v. 13), the chiasmic structure of Nephi's mention of Shazer suggests that its naming may be connected with the party's hunting activities around that location.

Once this major hunting expedition was complete, Nephi states that the Lehite clan “did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction [i.e., south-southeast], keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness which was in the borders near the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 16:14). He further mentions that they “did travel for the space of many days,

2. Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2007), 35–36.

3. The younger Lehite men — Nephi's “brethren,” probably including brothers-in-law — as hunters occupy a conspicuous place within Nephi's 1 Nephi 16 narrative. In 1 Nephi 16:21, Nephi mentions that sometime after the Shazer hunting expedition, misfortune befell the Lehite group when they lost the use of several or all the bows they relied upon for hunting food: “Now it came to pass that I Nephi having been afflicted with my brethren because of the loss of my bow and their bows having lost their springs, it began to be exceeding difficult, yea, insomuch that we could obtain no food.” From this comment, it seems that Laman, Lemuel, and probably Sam, Zoram, and the sons of Ishmael — all Nephi's “brethren” by blood or marriage — used bows. Nephi says they made use of slings: “we did travel for the space of many days, slaying food by the way with our bows and our arrows and our stones and our slings” (1 Nephi 16:15).

slaying food by the way with our bows and our arrows and our stones and our slings” (1 Nephi 16:15). However, Nephi’s twofold mention of Shazer and the hunting of “food” that took place in the wilderness near that place raises the question: what, if anything, might the name Shazer have to do with the food they hunted? In fact, “food” is mentioned thirteen times in connection with the key events detailed in 1 Nephi 16, and it becomes a key word in the pericope. Nephi’s long sequence of “food” mentions in 1 Nephi 16 begins with the naming of Shazer and the hunting done near that location.

The Meaning of Shazer

A footnote to the first mention of the name Shazer in 1 Nephi 16:13 in the 1981 and 2013 editions reads: “HEB twisting, intertwining.” This footnote follows Sidney B. Sperry’s suggestion that the name derives from the Hebrew root *šzr.⁴ Paul Hoskisson cites the foregoing in the Book of Mormon Onomasticon as “[t]he most likely suggestion” but rightly cautions that this root “only appears in the *hophal* participle [form] in the Hebrew Bible.”⁵ In other words, Sperry was arguing for an active form of the root *šzr that is thus far unattested in Biblical Hebrew. Nevertheless, Sperry’s suggestion is not without merit.

Another widely cited explanation for Shazer is Hugh Nibley’s suggestion that it derives from Arabic *shajer*:

The combination *shajer* is quite common in Palestinian place names; it is a collective meaning “trees,” and many Arabs (especially in Egypt) pronounce it as *shazher*. It appears in *Thogret-as-sajur* (the Pass of Trees), which is the ancient *Shaghur*, written *Segor* in the sixth century. It may be confused with *Saghur* “seepage,” which is held to be identical with *Shihor*, the “block river” of Joshua 19:36. This last takes, in western Palestine, the form of *Sozura*, suggesting the name of a famous waterhole in South Arabia, called *Shisur* ... So we have *Shihor*, *Shagur*, *Sajur*, *Saghir*, *Segor* (even *Zoar*), *Shajar*, *Sozura*, *Shisur*, and *Shisar*, all connected somehow or other

4. Sidney B. Sperry, *The Book of Mormon Testifies* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 59.

5. Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. “Shazer,” last modified November 21, 2015, 17:20, <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/SHAZER>.

and denoting either seepage — a weak but reliable water supply — or a clump of trees.⁶

Although Nibley's numerous suggestions are all appropriate for a desert and Near Eastern/Arabic context in general, none closely approximates *Shazer* as a Judahite of the sixth century BCE would have pronounced it (shah-zer, shah-tzer, or shah-dzer). Moreover, Lehi and his family were traveling south-southeast through the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula rather than through modern Palestine or Egypt; they were not traveling at this particular stage of their journey through South Arabia. Because they are removed from the Lehites' journey in time and space, Nibley's suggestions are less compelling.

While the Lehites' creation of a toponym based on the presence of trees or a water supply would certainly make sense, other possibilities are equally plausible. For instance, it is possible that the Lehites created a toponym based on the supply of food at the site. In another instance of Lehite toponymy on the Arabian Peninsula, Nephi reports that the Lehites named "Bountiful" on the basis of the abundance of food that they found there:

And we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness. And we did come to **the land which we called Bountiful because of its much fruit and also wild honey**. And all these things were prepared of the Lord that we might not perish. And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, which being interpreted is many waters. And it came to pass that we did pitch our tents by the seashore. And notwithstanding we had suffered **many** afflictions and **much** difficulty, yea, even **so much** that we cannot write them all, we was **exceedingly rejoiced** when we came to the seashore. **And we called the place Bountiful because of its much fruit.**
(1 Nephi 17:4–6)

Here the Lehites name a particular land Bountiful because of its abundance of fruit and honey. Nephi subtly connects this abundance of food with the abundance of difficulties they faced on their journey to arrive there as well as their overwhelming joy upon arrival. The placement of the name Bountiful in this passage suggests that it may be an emphatic bracketing device (albeit bracketing a less chiasmic text) describing a Lehite food gathering expedition — similar to the dual use

6. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 5 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 78-79.

of the name Shazer in 1 Nephi 16:13-14 quoted above. There is a firm basis in the text structure in 1 Nephi 16:13-14 and in the foregoing Bountiful analog (1 Nephi 17:5-6; cf. 18:6) for such a suggestion.

There is also a strong, if not compelling, philological basis to suggest connecting Shazer with food. Surprisingly, amid all the discussion of Shazer as a derivation from a Hebrew *š-z-r* root, few if any have given consideration of the *-z-* as transliteration of the phoneme *-š-* (*tz* — i.e., a *tzaddi*), which is also frequently transliterated into English and other western languages as a ‘z.’ Here Hismaic (or Hišmaic), a dialect of pre-Islamic Old Arabic spoken in the very area of the Arabian peninsula through which Lehi and his family traveled, offers a more promising possibility. Geraldine Margaret Harmsworth King points out that Hismaic inscriptions abundantly attest the term *ššr/šašar* (or *s²šr*, pl. *šašr* or *’aššār*), which she glosses as “young gazelle.”⁷ King lists the plural form of *ššr/šašar* (or *s²šr*) as *šašr* or *’aššār* (“young gazelles”).⁸ Hans Wehr glosses the Arabic cognate *šašara* as “a kind of gazelle.”⁹ If not a part of their own Hebrew lexical resources, the Lehites may have borrowed a form of *ššr* from neighboring northern Old Arabic-speaking nomads, either before or during the early part of their journey into Arabia. Notably, *ššr* (*s²šr*) is further attested as a personal name in Safaitic¹⁰ inscriptions held in the Al-Mafraq Museum (Al-Mafraq, Jordan), inscriptions 47-48:

7. Geraldine Margaret Harmsworth King, “Early North Arabian Hismaic: A Preliminary Description Based on a New Corpus of Inscriptions from the Hišmā Desert of Southern Jordan and Published Material, Volume I” (PhD diss., University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, 1990), http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/aalc/images/documents/mcam/early_north_arabian_hismaic.pdf.

s²šr See *s²šr*, pl. *šašr*, *’aššār* “young gazelles”: Hismaic KJA 16, KJA 53, KJA 207, KJB 151, KJB 155, KJC 248, KJC 278*, KJC 287, KJC 565, KJC 661.

s²šr šašara “sew a garment with stitches widely spaced”, *šašar* “young gazelle”; HIn 348 Saf.; Hismaic KJA 242, KJB 58, KJB 59, KJC 654, TIJ 82, TIJ 199 + TIJ 201, TIJ 238, TIJ 290, TIJ 452, TIJ 463. -fa. of ḥrzt TIJ 82, TIJ 290

8. Ibid.

9. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 550.

10. “Safaitic” refers to a Semitic alphabet/script used by Old Arabic-speaking nomads in inscriptions attested throughout southern Syria, northeastern Jordan, and the northern part of the Arabian peninsula.

No. 47: *l s²šr bn qtl bn s¹hly bn mr bn 'ft*
 “By S²šr son of Qtl son of S¹hly son of Mr son of 'ft”

No. 48: *l mty bn s²šr*
 “By Mty son of S²šr.”¹¹

At a minimum, it is clear that Shazer as ššr (*s²šr*) shows up as a proper noun in the near vicinity of northern Arabia.¹² Perhaps it is also worth mentioning that other possible cognates of this lexeme show up in other Semitic contexts.¹³

Additionally, note that the modern English noun “gazelle” ultimately derives from Arabic *ġazāl*. This term and its cognates have a venerable history within the family of Semitic languages. Cognate with this Arabic noun is the Akkadian noun *huzālu/uzalu* (“a gazelle kid,” which is also attested as a personal name).¹⁴ The vacillation between *h* and *u* (\emptyset) in the Akkadian (Old Babylonian) lexeme suggests that Western Semitic (“Amorite”) personal names “*ha-za-la* and *a-za-lu-um*” were pronounced “/ġazāl-/ ‘gazelle” and “*hu-za-lum* and *ú-za-lum*” were pronounced “/ġuzālum/ ‘little gazelle.”¹⁵ Similarly, Ugaritic attests the personal name *ġzl(y)*,¹⁶ a name similar or identical to the former in form and meaning to the “Amorite” manifestation of this name. Thus, both ššr (*s²šr*) and *ġzl(y)/ġuzālum* constitute attested proper names with the probable meaning “gazelle.”

11. A.Q. Al-Housan, “A Selection of Safaitic Inscriptions from the Mafraq Antiquities Office and Museum” *Arabic Epigraphic Notes 1* (2015): 92. Transcription and translation as in the original publication.

12. While the inscriptions appear to be authentic, their ultimate provenance and place of origin are unfortunately unknown. See Al-Housan’s comments (*ibid.*, 77). They are currently housed in Al-Mafraq, Jordan.

13. For example, Wolf Leslau (*Concise Dictionary of Ge’ez* [Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010], 55) lists the Ethiopic noun *šašr* — of uncertain, if any, relationship to ššr — as referring to a “cloven hoof,” deriving from the verbal root *šašara*, to “split (wood), cut up, tear, cleave, lacerate.”

14. *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, ed. Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 123.

15. Gary A. Rendsburg, Aaron D. Rubin, and John A. Huehnergard, “A Proper View of Arabic, Semitic, and More,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 128, no. 3 (2008): 535.

16. Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, trans. and ed. Wilfred G. Watson, 3rd rev. ed. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 324.

If *Shazer*, *ššr*, and *šašara* as “(young) gazelle” can be connected with Hismaic verb *šašara*, to “sew a garment with stitches widely spaced,”¹⁷ perhaps these terms connect back on some level to Sperry’s initial suggestion (“to spin, to twist”)¹⁸ from the verb *šzr, “to twist, to intertwine [threads]” (cf. Arabic *šazara* “to spin threads together, twist”).¹⁹ Indeed, Sperry’s derivation of *Shazer* from Hebrew *šzr may have an archaic etymological relationship to Old Syrian *yzl (to “spin”) and yzl (“[small] gazelle”) (cf. Proto-Semitic yVzāl, “gazelle”). Arabic *ġazāl* (“gazelle”)²⁰ and *ġazāla* (“female gazelle, doe”)²¹ both derive from the Arabic verb *ġazala*, “to spin”²² (cf. Ugaritic *ġzl*, “spinner,”²³ and Syriac ʿzl, “to spin, weave”).²⁴ The analogical relationship here — between the Hismaic *ššr/šašara* (noun = “[young] gazelle”) and *šašar/šazara* (verb = “sew,” “spin”) on the one hand, and between the Arabic *ġazāl/yzl* (noun = “[small] gazelle”) and *ġazala/yzl* (verb = “spin”) on the other should be clear. This relationship further raises the issue of whether gazelles — *ġazāl* and *ššr* — were so named because of their ability to traverse or “thread” difficult wilderness terrain, such as is often found in the ancient Near East, like a “spinner” or one who “sews” and “weaves.”²⁵ Whatever the case, there appears to be a strong philological case for identifying *Shazer* with a close cognate of *ššr/šašar* and *šašara*, as well as a loanword form a local northern Old Arabian dialect. And such a name, connected with the gazelle, is appropriate for both the time and place described in Nephi’s narrative.

17. See King, “Early North Arabian Hismaic.”

18. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Testifies*, 59.

19. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1456. Hereafter cited as HALOT.

20. Wehr, *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 788.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 787-88.

23. Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín, *Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language*, 324.

24. Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 1090.

25. In this vein, note Jacob’s interesting blessing upon Naphtali, whose name is etiologized in terms of *ptl (“twist”) in Genesis 30:8. Jacob declares: “Naphtali is a hind [doe, ʿayyālā] let loose” (Genesis 49:21). The Samaritan term *šzyr* (“twisted” from *šzr) is used to translate Hebrew *ptyl*, the presumed source of Naphtali, in at least one translation of Numbers 19:15 (see HALOT, 1456). This may hint at the connection between “sewer/spinner/twister” and “animal” contemplated here.

Gazelles as a Lehi Food Staple in Arabia

Mohammed Maraqtan states that “the gazelle ... was the favoured and most attested hunted animal in Central and North Arabia.”²⁶ It is highly likely that gazelle meat constituted a main dietary staple for Lehi and his family while in the Arabian wilderness. Deuteronomy 14:5 lists one term for gazelle (*šēbî*, KJV “roebuck”), a genus to which the *ššr* or *šāšar* (“young gazelle”) would belong or share a close relationship, as among the “clean” animals permitted for food. This “Kosher” consideration, to use an anachronistic term, makes the case even more likely. Not every animal would have been fit for consumption under the dietary statutes of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, but indigenous Arabian gazelles would not have presented that problem since all species of gazelle have cloven hooves and chew the cud as indeed all ruminants²⁷ do (see again the *šēbî* [“roebuck” = gazelle] as one of ten cud-chewing, cloven-hoofed “clean” animals listed in Deuteronomy 14:4-6).²⁸

Types of Gazelles Near Shazer

David Eisenberg-Degen and Steven A. Rosen observe that “the osteological evidence points toward gazelle being the most hunted animal from the Chalcolithic/Early Bronze age”²⁹ (and onward) in the Negev, or southern Judean wilderness, through which the Lehites passed on the initial stage of their journey into Arabia. The practice of hunting gazelles (among other animals like the ibex and the oryx) would have continued as the journey into Arabia progressed. Maraqtan further remarks that the

26. Mohammed Maraqtan, “Hunting in Pre-Islamic Arabia in Light of the Epigraphic Evidence,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 26 (2013): 215.

27. From Latin *ruminare*, “to chew again,” “to chew the cud.” See, e.g., John C. Traupman, *The New College Latin and English Dictionary* (New York: Bantam, 1995), s.v. *rūminō*. Compare the derived English term *ruminant*, “to think or reflect deeply over and over about something.” Cf. *ruminatio*, “chewing of the cud, (fig.) rumination, thinking over” (ibid., s.v. *rūminō*). The *Ruminantia* suborder includes all cattle (domesticated and wild), sheep, goats, deer, antelopes, gazelles (as a genus of the broader antelope group), and even giraffes. Cf., e.g., <https://www.britannica.com/animal/ruminant>.

28. Oded Borowski (*Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* [Walnut Creek, CA: AltMira, 1998], 189) observes that gazelle bones have been found at many sites throughout the Holy Land, including Beersheba, Lachish, Tell el-Hesi, Tel Michal, and Tell Halif. Borowski concludes, “These finds indicate that, during the biblical period, the gazelle served as a supplementary meat source at least in the central and southern parts of the country.”

29. David Eisenberg-Degen and Steven A. Rosen, “Chronological Trends in Negev Rock Art: The Har Michia Petroglyphs as a Test Case,” *Arts* 2 (2013): 245.

hunting of gazelles in the Arabian Peninsula “was practiced and remained a dominant economic activity, perhaps from Neolithic to the Bronze age and continued to be practiced until recent times.”³⁰



A *gazella marica* found in ancient rock art.³¹

Once Lehi’s party had entered the Arabian peninsula, the most common types of gazelle they inevitably encountered, either “by the way”³² or during more protracted hunting expeditions, would have been the *gazella marica* (the Arabian sand gazelle), the *gazella Arabica* (the Arabian gazelle, including the mountain gazelle and *gazella erlangeri* subspecies), and now-extinct native forms of the *gazella dorcas* (gazelle dorcas, including the *gazella dorcas saudiya* or *gazella saudiya*).³³ The

30. Maraqtan, “Hunting in Pre-Islamic Arabia,” 215.

31. *Gazelle at Eagle’s Nest, Jubbah*, photograph, 1200x1011 cm, Arabian Rock Art Heritage, <http://saudi-archaeology.com/subjects/gazelles/>. Image reprinted with permission of the Layan Cultural Foundation.

32. 1 Nephi 16:15.

33. See, e.g., Hannes Lerp, *The Phylogeny of the Genus Gazella and the Phylogeography and Population Genetics of Arabian Species* (Dissertation; Frankfurt

noun *ššr* (*s²šr*), as a “young gazelle” would plausibly describe any of these, unless it had a more specific reference.



A gazella dorcas saudiya found in ancient rock art.³⁴

Of these, populations of *gazella marica* — based on current population patterns³⁵ — would have been closest to Shazer in northwest Arabia, and thus perhaps the most plentiful as a food source for the Lehites.

Conclusion

Nibley is certainly correct that “the name [Shazer] is intriguing.”³⁶ I have briefly attempted to make the case here that *Shazer* constitutes a Semitic term, possibly borrowed from Old Arabian, and closely related to Hismaic *ššr* or *šašar* (*s²šr*), “young gazelle” and Arabic *šašara*, “a kind of gazelle.” Such a derivation fits an Arabian wilderness context at least as well as Nibley’s *shajer* suggestion and better fits the immediate circumstances of the family as described by Nephi in his small plates record (though

am Main: Goethe Universität, 2013), 5, figure 1.

34. *Gazelle and Dog at Jubbah*, photograph, 1000x667 cm, Arabian Rock Art Heritage, <http://saudi-archaeology.com/subjects/gazelles/>. Image reprinted with permission of the Layan Cultural Foundation.

35. Lerp, *The Phylogeny of the Genus Gazella and the Phylogeography and Population Genetics of Arabian Species*, 5, figure 1.

36. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 178.



Sand gazelle³⁷

Nibley's suggestion cannot be entirely ruled out). In any case, there is strong philological evidence to connect the Lehite toponym *Shazer* with the gazelles of the Arabian peninsula — the gazelles that would have surely constituted an important staple of the party's diet as they travelled south-southeast down that peninsula, and after they turned east at Nahom (see especially 1 Nephi 17:1–2).

[Author's Note: I would like to thank the Layan Cultural Foundation for their generosity and kindness in allowing the use of their superb photography. I would also like to thank Suzy Bowen, Allen Wyatt, Daniel C. Peterson, and Victor Worth.]

37. AhmedAlAwadhi7, *Sand Gazelle*, photograph, 2,073x2,073 pixels, January 12, 2018, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sand_Gazelle_2.jpg.

Matthew L. Bowen was raised in Orem, Utah, and graduated from Brigham Young University. He holds a PhD in Biblical Studies from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and is currently an assistant professor in religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He is also the author of *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2018). He and his wife (the former Suzanne Blattberg) are the parents of three children: Zachariah, Nathan, and Adele.