Notes and Communications - A Note on the Name Nephi

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A Note on the Name *Nephi*¹

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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 *Kṣ-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.


confirmed by G. Vittmann, who added that the Aramaic spellings KNWP\(^3\) and QNPY were also attested.\(^6\) Further, the Aramaic KNWPY is attested in the Elephantine inscriptions.\(^7\) Vittmann also noted that the name ʿHRNPY, attested in Aramaic inscriptions, was probably Egyptian ʿnh-hr-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 lfl, so the vocalization of NPY as Nephi poses no problem.\(^10\)

While both Kṣ-nfr.w and ʿnh-hr-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.\(^13\)

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early Demotic attestation dating from the reign of Amasis, see Wolja Erichsen, Auswahl frühdemotischer Texte, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1950), 1:21, line 11.


9 There are three-hundred ninety listed in Ranke, Die ägyptische Personennamen, 3:73–76.


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.


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 Kfr.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 nfr is an /ε/ (Coptic/Greek epsilon).  

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 “nēfe” or “nēfē” (rhyming with “heh fee/hay fee”) rather than the current “nēfi.” Nevertheless, the standard English pronunciation has a venerable history, 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.

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1939), 240; Wolfhart Westendorf, Koptisches Handwörterbuch (Heidelberg: Winter, 1977), 133.


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.