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## A Study of Book of Mormon Texts V

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**Abstract:** In this series, internal evidences of the Book of Mormon's authenticity are argued using analysis of words and names used in the book that reflect ancient Hebrew customs, and parallels between the Book of Mormon and American Indian languages. The fifth part covers the name "Nephi."

# A STUDY OF BOOK OF MORMON TEXTS

BY J. M. SJODAHL

*Nephi*. This word, with certain endings, appears in Ezra 2:50 and Nehemiah 7:52, as *Nephusim* and *Nephishesim*, and the meaning in Hebrew is given as "expansions."

George Reynolds (*Story of the Book of Mormon*, p. 296) shows that "Nephi" is derived from an Egyptian root, "N-ph," meaning "good," and transcribed into Hebrew as "Noph" (Is. 19:13; Jer. 2:16; 46:14; Ezek. 13:13). The modern name for the city of Noph is Memphis. Mr. Reynolds points out that one of the names given to Osiris, the great god of the realm of the dead, was "Dnephi," or "Nephi"—the "d" being silent as in the names of the rivers "Dniester," "Dnieper," etc.—and that the city dedicated to him was called "Noph." The word occurs in Egyptian names, such as Amoneph, Amuneph, and Me-Nephta.

According to the Book of Mormon, one of the most conspicuous characters in the history of ancient America was Nephi, the fourth son of Lehi and the father of the main body of the Nephite people. A son of Helaman, one of the great prophets and statesmen of this part of the world, was also called Nephi, as was one of the twelve apostles chosen by our Savior as his messengers to the ancient Americans. The latter also had a son called Nephi (4 Nephi 1:19). Then there was a city of Nephi, or Lehi-Nephi, and a land of Nephi, and the people who were faithful to his teachings and honored his memory were called Nephites. There was a judge called Nephiah, and a city and a country district bore the same name, and there were, finally, the plains of Nephiah.

Owing to the tragic history of the Nephites, we may not expect to find their name perpetuated in more modern American proper nouns to the same extent as that of the Lamanites, but there is, in the upper valley of the Amazon, an extended and numerous nation of Indians called Zaporos. At present their main body, says Dr. Brinton, dwells between the river Pastaza and *Napo* and along the *Maranon* between the rivers Zamora and *Morona* (*The American Race*, pp. 280-1). The Zaporos are by Osculati described as tall and fine-looking, while other explorers find them less attractive, the difference in views depending probably, on which tribe of the nation they happened to come in contact with. Their language is said to be agreeable to the ear, partaking of the phonetic character of the Brazilian idioms. One of the tribes of this nation still bears the name of Nepa. This name, as well as the name of the river *Napo*,

near the locality where the Nepa Indians live, may safely be assumed to be derived from the same root as Nephi.

In Mexico, the influential *Nahua* nations once flourished, one branch of which the Spaniards under Cortez encountered on their arrival in the New World. Bancroft devotes the larger part of the second volume of his *Native Races* to the civilization of this interesting people, linguistic relatives of whom are found all the way from the Isthmus of Panama to the banks of the Columbia River. Dr. Brinton classes them all as one group, the *Uto-Aztecan*, and he says: "The principal members of this stock are the Utes, Shoshones and Comanches in the north, various tribes in Sonora, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Durango in the center, and the Nahuas or Aztecs in the south. It is not to be understood that one of these derived its idioms from the other, but rather that at some remote epoch all three were offshoots from some one ancestral stem." Dr. Brinton is of the opinion that the relationship of all these numerous bands is "unquestionable," though many of them have adopted words from other stocks. (*The American Race*, pp. 118-164).

Concerning the origin of the word *Nahua* it may not be possible to speak with certainty. The authorities tell us it means "something of fine, or clear, or loud sound," and that one form of it, *nahuatlato* means "interpreter." It is also said to mean to "instruct," and some think it refers to instruction in the occult subjects more particularly. Brasseur de Bourbourg considers it a Quiche word, derived from *naw* or *naw*, meaning to "know," to "think."

This points directly to the Hebrew *naba*, which means to "pour forth," and then to "speak as moved by the divine impulse," to "prophecy." From that root we have *nebi*, a "prophet," an "interpreter" of the divine will, one who speaks clearly, or instructs. But *nephi* and *nebi* are practically the same word.\*

Considering, therefore, the literal form of the word *nahua*, and its meaning, and also the religious and civic institutions and traditions of the Nahuas, it seems to be clear that that people in their very name proclaim themselves to be the Nephites of the Book of Mormon—that is, their descendants. On that supposition *Anahuac*, the name of the valley where the Aztecs established a central government, would mean the land of Nephi, or Nephites, by the water, to distinguish it, possibly, from some other Land of Nephi.

\*Among the Assyrians the god who presided over the unction of kings was known as *Nabo*. The Egyptian god Set was also called *Nub* or *Noph*, and *Neb*; meaning Lord. The Hebrews retained the word in *nebi*, a prophet.—S.