Meaning of the Word "Mormon"

Abstract: This article quotes Joseph Smith's statement that "Mormon" means "more good," or, in other words, "better." The first syllable is English, the second is Egyptian. The "good" in the name is related to the gospel as good news. Several native American languages have superlatives that translate "more good."

MEANING OF THE WORD "MORMON"

By J. M. Sjodahl

The prophet Joseph, in a letter published in the *Times and Seasons*, Nauvoo, May 15, 1843,* furnished the following explanation concerning the meaning of this word:

"It has been stated that this word was derived from the Greek word *mormo*. This is not the case. There was no Greek or Latin upon the plates from which I, through the grace of the Lord, translated the Book of Mormon."

Then he quotes from the Book of Mormon (Morm. 9:32-34), where we are told that the characters used were the "reformed Egyptian." He continues:

"Here, then, the subject is put to silence, for 'none other people knoweth our language;' therefore, the Lord, and not man, had to interpret, after the people were all dead. And as Paul said, 'The world by wisdom know not God;' so the world by speculation are destitute of revelation; and as God, in his superior wisdom, has always given his Saints, whenever he had any on the earth, the same spirit, and that spirit, as John says, is the true spirit of prophecy, which is the testimony of Jesus, I may safely say that the word *Mormon* stands independent of the learning and wisdom of this generation.

"Before I give a definition, however, of the word, let me say that the Bible, in its widest sense, means *good*; for the Savior says, according to the Gospel of John, 'I am the Good Shepherd;' and it will not be beyond the common use of terms to say that Good is among the most important in use, and, though known by various names in different languages, still its meaning is the same, and is ever in opposition to *bad*."

The Prophet, further says:

"We say, from the Saxon, *good*; from the Dane, *god*; the Goth, *goda*; the German, *gut*; the Dutch, *goed*; the Latin, *bonus*; the Greek, *kalos*; the Hebrew, *tob*, and the Egyptian, *mon*. Hence, with the addition of *more*, or the contraction, *mor*, we have the word *Mormon*, which means literally, *more good*."

Here we have the interesting information that the first part of the word is an abbreviation of the English adverb "more," and that the second part is the Egyptian adjective "mon." In other words, the Prophet found, on the plates, as a proper noun, a compound word meaning, literally, "better," and, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, he solved the problem of transliterating it, by translating the first part into English and copying the second part, and making one word of the two, half English and half Egyptian. This, I admit, is an unusual literary procedure, but we have an instance of it in our Bible, where a place called Maaleh-acrabbim (Josh. 15:3) is also called,

*The letter was revised by the Prophet, May 20, 1843. See the documentary *History of the Church*, under that date.

"The Ascent of Akrabbim," (Numb. 34:4). Here half of the name is translated into English and the other half is a foreign word. See also Gen. 23:2 and 35:27, where Hebron is called, in the first passage, Kirjath-Arba, and in the second, "The City of Arbah," the first half of the name being translated into English and the second being left untranslated.* This, then, is how the word Mormon originated.

And it means "more good;" that is, "Better."

The reference of the Prophet, in this connection, to the Bible would indicate that the good expressed in the word is the same as that which we call "good news," or "gospel," and that "Mormon," therefore, means one who is the bearer of "good tidings."

It is a very interesting fact that many American languages, perhaps most of them, form their comparatives and superlatives by the use of the adverbs "more" and "most." In the Aztec, "better" is *ocachiqualli,* which means, literally, "more good." In the Otomi language "better" is *nra nho,* which means "more good." In the Maya, the comparative is formed by affixing the last vowel of the adjective with an "l" added, or by simply affixing the particle *il.* For instance, from *tibil,* a "good thing," *u tibil-il,* a "better thing" is formed.†

May we not ask, "What is the explanation of the singular fact that the prophet Joseph seems to have had knowledge of how comparatives are formed in some of the principal American languages?

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*The familiar word Iroquois may, possibly, be another instance of this kind of word-building. The orators of that stock of Indians used to close their speeches by saying, *Hiro,* "I have spoken," very much as the Romans said, *Dixi.* Their sentinels had a cry of warning which sounded, to the French, something like *quai.* Out of these two words and a French ending, *ois,* the name Iroquois was composed.

It is probable that the *mon* in "Mormon" is akin to the *mon* or *men* in the Egyptian *Amon* or *Amen.* Dr E. A. Wallis Budge, (*The Gods of the Egyptians, Vol. 2, p.* 2) says that Amen is from a root *men* "to abide, to be permanent, eternal." *Mon* or *men* (the vowel is different) would, then, mean "good" in the sense of "permanency," just as *nefer* means "good" in the sense of physical beauty. I gather this from what Champollion (*Precis du Systeme Hieroglyphique des Anciens Egyptiens,* p 91) on the authority of Eusebius says, viz., that the divinity which takes the name Amen and Kneph or Noub, alternatively, was by the Greeks called *Agathodaimon,* and that Nero, when assuming a divine title, called himself *Neo-agathodaimon.* *Agathos* is, of course, the Greek word for "good," and it must have been suggested by the Egyptian *men* or *mon.*

†See Bancroft, *Native Races,* Vol. 3, pp. 733, 739. In the Egyptian, it seems, adjectives are without degrees of comparison, but the particle *er,* meaning "to," "with," "between," etc., in various combinations, was used to express degrees of superiority, very much as the Hebrew "min." For instance, "She was fair (good) in her body, more than (*er*) other women," means, of course, that she was fairer—more good—than the rest. "Good is hearkening, more than anything," or, hearkening is more good, means "To obey is best of all." *Good* in these sentences is the word *nefer,* but there is a verb, *mench,* "to do good," "to abide," and that may be akin to the "mon" in the name *Mormon.*