What Was a "Mosiah"?

WHAT WAS A "MOSIAH"?

Omni 1:12 "I will speak unto you somewhat concerning Mosiah."

In 1965, John Sawyer published an article titled "What was a Môšia͑?"[1] He argues that the term *mosiah* was an ancient Hebrew term, like *gō'ēl* ("redeemer, or avenger of blood"), or *ṣedeq* ("victor, savior"). Such terms originally had meaning in Hebrew daily life and culture but came to be used among their titles for God. The word *môšia͑* (pronounced moe-**shee**-ah) is a word peculiar to Hebrew, a "word invariably implying a champion of justice in a situation of controversy, battle or oppression."[2]

Sawyer's analysis sheds interesting light on the name Mosiah in the Book of Mormon. Several subtle reasons show why Nephites, who continued to speak Hebrew in the New World, would have been attracted to the use of such a name or title.

Apparently the form of the word Mosiah is a "hiphil participle" in Hebrew. It occurs in the Hebrew in Deuteronomy 22:27; 28:29; Judges 12:3; Psalms 18:41; and Isaiah 5:29 — texts that in all probability were on the Plates of Brass. This word, however, was not transliterated into the English by the King James translators, and thus the Hebrew would not have been known to Joseph Smith. It was, however, known and used as a personal name in the Book of Mormon, as well as by people in the Jewish colony at Elephantine in the fifth century B.C.

The key meaning of the word *môšia͑* was "savior." People in danger cry out, "But there is no *môšia͑*" (Deuteronomy 22:27). After examining all occurrences of this term in the Hebrew Bible, Sawyer concludes that the term applied to a particular kind of

person or role and was sometimes a title designating "a definite office or position."[3] Typical of this office are the following traits:

1. The *môšiaᶜ* is a victorious hero appointed by God.

2. He liberates a chosen people from oppression, controversy, and unjustice after they cry out for help.

3. Their deliverance is usually accomplished by means of a nonviolent escape or negotiation.

4. The immediate result of the coming of a *môšiaᶜ* was "escape from unjustice, and a return to a state of justice where each man possesses his rightful property."[4]

5. On a larger scale, "final victory means the coming of *môšiᶜim* [plural, pronounced moe-shee-**eem**] to rule like Judges over Israel."[5]

Thus the term also had judicial, legal, or forensic connotations, similar to the word *advocate.*" A *môšiaᶜ* gives refuge to those on his "right hand" from their accusers in court (Psalm 17:7).

The exact derivation of the Book of Mormon name Mosiah is unknown, but it appears the same as *môšiaᶜ*, which derives from the Hebrew *yašaᶜ* ("to be wide open, free, deliver, rescue, preserve, save"). It is thus quite different from the Hebrew word *mašiah* (anointed, "messiah," Greek *christós*). The Nephite word *mosiah* might also contain a theophoric element (-iah), thus meaning "the Lord is a *môšiaᶜ*."

Interestingly, the term *môšiaᶜ* applies perfectly to the Mosiahs in the Book of Mormon. King Mosiah I was a God-appointed hero who delivered the chosen people of Nephi from serious wars and contentions by leading them in an escape from the land of Nephi (see Omni 1:12–14). It is unknown whether he was called Mosiah before he functioned as a *môšiaᶜ* of his people or whether he gained this well-earned title afterward, perhaps as a royal title, but either is possible.

Indeed, the themes of God's salvation and the deliverance of his people are strong in the book of Mosiah. It tells of one *môšiaᶜ* after another. Alma was a God-inspired *môšiaᶜ* who peaceably saved his people from king Noah and the Lamanites. Zeniff tried to return to the land of Nephi to repossess the rightful

property of the Nephites. His efforts failed, however, and his grandson Limhi eventually functioned as a *môšiaᶜ* by leading his people in their escape back to Zarahemla. At the end of the book of Mosiah, the reign of judges was established, a fitting development for a people that had been well served by *môšiᶜim* for over a century. Thus, the book of Mosiah, like the book of Judges in the Old Testament, appears to have been meaningfully named.

Finally, the Hebrew term *môšiaᶜ* also was used as a divine title. God was and is such a savior, who would come down and bring salvation (see Mosiah 3:9). The Book of Mormon adds support to Sawyer's idea that the divine title *môšiaᶜ* was also at home in a cultural context. It seems to preserve traces of a broader usage when it says that "the knowledge of *a* Savior shall spread throughout every nation" (Mosiah 3:20; italics added), "in other words *a* Savior of the world" (1 Nephi 10:4; italics added).

Ultimately this term, as a divine title, was applied exclusively to God. As Isaiah 43:11 states, "I . . . am the Lord; and beside me there is no *môšiaᶜ*." Likewise, the angel to Benjamin affirmed the unique work of the Savior, the only way and means whereby salvation comes to mankind (see Mosiah 3:17). Thus, in several respects, the Book of Mormon usage of this term is quite remarkable, meaningful, and wholly consistent with Hebrew usage.

Based on research by John W. Welch, April 1989. The Sawyer article from the Old Testament journal Vetus Testamentum *became available as a F.A.R.M.S. reprint in 1989.*

Notes

1. John Sawyer, "What Was a Môšiaᶜ?" *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 475–86.

2. Ibid., 476.

3. Ibid., 477.

4. Ibid., 480.

5. Ibid., 482.