

BOOK OF MORMON COMPARISONS

Names and Maya Glyphs

*"...and Kish reigned in his stead. And it came to pass that Kish passed away also, and Lib reigned in his stead."
(Ether 10:17-18)*

Many unique names appear in the Book of Mormon throughout the long histories of several cultures, however, we are only given a tiny selection from what must have been thousands of personal names. Some appear only within its pages and others have precedents from the Bible and other ancient documents. What was a common Nephite or Jaredite name? Did they adopt new local names from surrounding cultures in the New World? And most importantly, can any trace of these names be found in surviving records from ancient American peoples?

According to some LDS authors, the answer to the last question is yes. In *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, Joseph Allen cites the work of LDS archaeologist Bruce Warren to show that the name and birth date of a Jaredite king named Kish could be found in Maya glyphs on the Temple of the Cross in Palenque.¹ This seemed like a rather bold statement and since there have been concerns about the accuracy of Allen's assertions in the past, we decided to look into the matter. After all, why would an ancient Jaredite king be mentioned in a Classic Maya text dealing with royal lineage in Palenque? We are pleased to report that Allen is basically correct, but his description is rather brief and what he leaves out is quite interesting and adds considerably to our understanding.

The Temple of the Cross was built by Kan Balam, son of the great king Pakal. The famous central image of Kan Balam receiving divine authority from his deceased father, centered around the Maya cross or sacred tree of life, is flanked on either side by hieroglyphic texts. These writings proclaim his divine right to rule through his lineage. The right side traces his immediate ancestry through his father and up to the founder of Palenque's dynasty, a king named Kuk Balam I who acceded to the throne in AD 431. The left side goes back even further, recording the births of deities from the previous cycle of creation.² The name Allen refers to appears twice on the left panel and once on the right. It is made up of three different glyphs that are read U-Kix-Kan. In transliterated Mayan phonetics, the sound "SH" is written as "X." The crucial part of the name, *Kix*, is actually a Mayan word meaning "stingray spine." The three phonetic components are really words in this case, but they fit together to form a compound name, much as letters fit together to form words.

Kix's birth date is given in the Maya Long Count and would be rendered as 11 March 993 BC. According to the text, he was crowned as a divine king of



Could U-Kix-Kan be the Jaredite king Kish?

All glyphs adapted from John Montgomery, Dictionary of Maya Hieroglyphs



Palenque at the age of 26. Even though his name first appears on the legendary or divine textual panel, he is understood to be human and not a god because of his realistic age at the time he became king.³ Archaeologists are unsure if he was a real person or not. Although Palenque was inhabited during Preclassic times, nothing has survived from the time of Kix. If he was real,

there was a gap of almost 1,400 years between his coronation and that of the acknowledged founder of Palenque's dynasty. In fact, when Kix became a king, Palenque as we would recognize it did not even exist. There may have been a settlement there, but what it was called or who lived there is unknown.

But if this is the same Jaredite king, should not his name in the Book of Mormon be something like Ukishkan? Not necessarily. Many Maya kings had lengthy royal titles that shared many common elements with each other. Most kingly names included a long sequence of glyphs that represented the names of gods or important animals.⁴ Kinich Hanaab Pakal is the actual name of Pakal, the well known king of Palenque. Another Palenque king is named U-Pakal-Kinich-Hanaab-Pakal.⁵ In the case of U-Kix-Kan, *U* can be a third person pronoun or simply a phonetic sound and *Kan* means "serpent" and can refer to a kingdom often associated with the site of Calakmul. These are common elements found in the names of many Maya kings. The distinguishing part of his name appears to be the stingray spine, or *Kix*. But why would Kan Balam refer to this possibly semi-mythical person, even describing him as a king of Palenque? By writing down Kix's birth date, he is making a direct connection to a king we now identify as Olmec. The Maya inherited or borrowed many aspects of their society from this mother culture of Mexico. For Kan Balam, linking his lineage to the Olmecs legitimized his claim to the throne. Since many LDS scholars identify the Jaredites as connected to the Olmecs, this may be the Kish from the Book of Mormon.

However, the reading of *kix* for the stingray spine glyph has come into question in recent years. The glyph does represent a stingray spine, but since these items were used for sacrificial bloodletting, it may also signify a needle, fang, or other sharp implement used for the same purpose. In a wider sense, it also represents creation and conception, so the same glyph can refer to parentage. Cross-referencing these words in Mayan dictionaries suggests that the reading of this glyph should be *kokan*.⁶ If this is correct, the name of the king in questions would be U-Kokan-Kan. But a Yucatec Mayan word, *kóoh-kan*, means "fang of the serpent" and there is the suggestion that the stingray spine glyph may have originated as a snake's tooth. If this is the case, the name of the mythical Palenque ruler in question would mean, "He is the snake tooth of snake," which does not make much sense. Apparently for this reason alone, that definition is rejected in favor of "stingray spine" for *kokan*.⁷

It appears now that the case for finding the Jaredite king Kish is not so iron clad. The Classic-era Maya who wrote about this ancient Olmec king wrote his name as "He is the Bloodletter of the Snake" or "His Snake Spine," but would they have called him U-Kokan-Kan instead of U-Kix-Kan? We may never know for sure. Even in recent scholarly literature, he is sometimes referred to as U-Kix-Kan. The name Kix-Chan (or variant spellings of it) is still found among the Maya in areas of the Petén in Guatemala.⁸ The stingray spine or bloodletter glyph, whether read as *kokan*, *kix*, or some other word, can represent fatherhood when used as part of a name. According to some Mayan dictionaries, the serpent glyph can also mean guardian or captor.

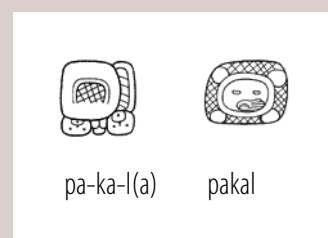
It is even possible that this name could suggest these connotations as well. The book of Ether does not give any details of Kish's reign, but some Jaredite kings rose to power by imprisoning the current king, sometimes a relative. Other Jaredite kings apparently spent their entire lives in captivity.

All things considered, it is likely that the Classic Maya at Palenque would not have known about Kish, the Jaredite king, but evidence does seem to exist in support of Kish as an ancient Maya name. It may be asked if any other Book of Mormon names appear in Maya texts. Currently, we know of no others, but how many of the countless personal names got written down? Maya texts deal primarily with kings and nobles, so millions of people left no written record of their names. We then began to wonder if it were possible to render other Jaredite, Nephite, or Lamanite names with Maya glyphs. In looking through the scriptural record, we discovered that the overwhelming majority of names are Nephite or from groups associated with the Nephites. This is to be expected, since the Book of Mormon was written by Nephite record keepers. The next largest number of names comes from the Jaredites, primarily through Ether's record. Finally, other than the original Laman and Lemuel, only a handful of Lamanite names appear at all.

Of the many personal names contained in the Book of Mormon, some are Biblical or directly linked to the Levant. Even Kish is found in the Old Testament as the name of several individuals, including the father of Saul, first king of Israel. Also, a quick glance at a dictionary of Maya glyphs shows that they lack several letters found in Hebrew. Mayan has no counterpart for D, F, G, R, or V. We excluded Book of Mormon names with these sounds and ones that were obviously brought from the Middle East. Our experiment was to find names that might be indigenous to Mesoamerica or could easily be rendered with Maya glyphs.

At this point, a brief explanation of how Maya writing works is in order. Maya hieroglyphs comprise a complex and fully functional system of writing using a combination of logographs and syllabic symbols, similar in some aspects to modern Japanese. Words and names can be written in a seemingly endless variety of arrangements using pictures, syllables, or a combination of both.

Also, the same sound can be written using different glyphs that all have the same value. Some glyphs function as words in and of themselves, and some have no meaning other than as syllabic signs. With this in mind, we see that the name Pakal, which means "shield," can be written with a graphic depiction of a shield or with "letters" that work together to form the word phonetically. Most Mayan syllables include both a consonant and vowel sound, but the vowel is usually not pronounced when at the end of a word. Thus, Pakal is written out as *pa-ka-la*, but the last A is silent. This feature and another where the last consonant is spoken but not written are very similar to some ancient syllabic scripts from the eastern Mediterranean.⁹ This explanation is admittedly simplified, but it does give a basic introduction to Maya writing. We are not epigraphers or experts in ancient languages, but we have studied many Maya texts and have some good resources from which to draw.



The following diagram shows a sample of Jaredite names rendered in Classic Maya glyphs. The orthography has been simplified somewhat for readability. Because of the redundancy in some of the glyphs, these names could have been written using other combinations, but this should suffice. A few of these actually may have meanings in Mayan. *Ah-ha* means "he of the water" and is similar in meaning to the title *ah-naab*, which refers to artists. Similarly, *ah-kish* means "he of the stingray spine." *Kib* is the sixteenth day of one of the Maya

Jaredite names

Aha



ah-ha

Ak'ish



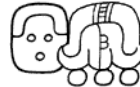
ah-kix

Com



ko-m(a)

Ethem



e-te-m(a)

Josh



yo-x(a)

Kib



kib'

K'ish



kix

Lib



li-b'(i)

Mahah



ma-ha

Shiz



xi-tz(a)

Shule



xul

calendars. *Ma-ha* can mean “no water,” and *xul* is the sixth month of a Maya calendar.

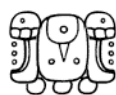
Many Nephite names have their origins in the Old World; some are exactly the same as Biblical names. Even names like Abinadi and Mosiah that are not found in the Bible appear to have Hebrew etymologies. LDS scholars and linguists have published insightful and thought-provoking studies showing that some names found exclusively in the Book of Mormon have unexpected Hebrew and Egyptian origins.¹⁰ Of particular interest is the name Alma. For many years, it was not recognized as a masculine name outside of the Book of Mormon and has been criticized as being a feminine form in both Hebrew and Latin. Even though it is easily rendered with Maya glyphs, it has not been included in our list of Nephite names because recent discoveries show that it is actually an ancient Hebrew name. It appears in the Bar Kokhba letters, dated to AD 130, referring to someone named Alma ben-Yehuda (Alma, son of Judah).¹¹ This find, certainly unknown to Joseph Smith, seems to validate the masculine name Alma as authentic, but critics may point out that since these writings did not exist until centuries after Lehi's departure, they cannot be the source of the name. Notwithstanding that Joseph still somehow came up with an actual ancient Hebrew male name that was

unknown at the time, this is true, but the same name has also been found on clay tablets from an ancient Syrian site called Tell Mardikh. They contain writings in a Semitic language similar to Akkadian, rendered in cuneiform that predates the Hebrew alphabet. The name al₆-ma is found eight times in the texts.¹² These writings by far predate the time of Lehi, so the name Alma may

אלמא

from the Bar
Kokhba Letters

Alma



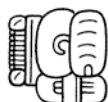
two different renderings of
a(h)-l(a)-ma-(h)a in Mayan glyphs

be much older than previously suspected.

We found over 30 Nephite names unique to the Book of Mormon that were compatible phonetically with Mayan. The table below shows some of the names that seemed to work well. A few of these names could

Nephite names

Amulek Chemish Helam Helaman Lamah Limhah



ah-mu-le-k(i)



che-mi-x(a)



he-la-m(a)



he-la ma-n(a)



la-ma-h(a)



li-m(a)-ha

Manti



ma-n(a)-ti-y(a)

Muloki



mu-lo-ki-y(a)

Seantum



se-a-n(a) tu-m(u)

Shiblom



xib'lo-m(u)

Teancum



te-a-n(a) ku-m(a)

also have Hebrew or Semitic origins, but it is interesting to see how they might look rendered as Maya glyphs. According to Mayan dictionaries, *ah-mulek* means “he of Mulek” and *xib-lom* could mean “man of the staff.” While not a perfect match to Teancum, a king named Tecum is mentioned by the Spanish historian Juarros in his records of the dynasties of the Quiché empire in the Guatemalan Highlands.¹³

For Lamanite names, there is a much smaller number to examine. Of all the Lamanites depicted in the scriptural record, both wicked and righteous, only a few are named. For some reason, Nephite record keepers did not think it necessary to give us many of their names. There is consequently a much smaller sample upon which to draw, but some surprising results can be seen. The first is the predominance of male names beginning with the letter L. The second is that discarding names that are carryovers or cognates from

Lamanite names

Abish



ab'-(b'i)-ix

Antiomno



a-n(a)-ti-y(a) o-m(o)-no(h)

Laman



la-ma-n(a)

Lamoni



la-mo-ni-y(a)

Lehonti



le-ho-n(a)-ti-y(a)

Tubaloth



tu-b'a-lo-t(a)

Tub'al



tu-b'a-l(a)

Lama'an Ayin



emblem glyph

Hebrew, like Aaron and Samuel, practically all unique Lamanite names are composed only of phonemes found in Mayan languages. The one exception is Zarahemna, a name that seems obviously derived from Zarahemla. *Ab-ix* may mean “year of the jaguar” in Mayan. Tubaloth seems to be a word taken directly from Hebrew. Tubal is a name found several times in the Old Testament; the first is Tubal-cain in Genesis 4:22. The second is in Genesis 10:2 as Tubal, grandson of Noah through Japheth. This name was eventually applied to an entire nation or group of people. *-oth* can be a feminine plural ending in Hebrew. Even though it has a Hebrew etymology, Tubaloth was included because a Classic Maya site in the Guatemalan lowlands is named Tub’al,¹⁴ so this appears to be a name that could have been passed down in one form or another among the Lamanites for millennia.

Laman has been included in this list, because even though this name obviously has its roots in the Middle East, it was still in use in the Americas 1000 years later to describe a numerous group of people, so it may have had more of an impact on the surrounding cultures. It is also a Mayan word meaning “submerged.” A site in Belize is known as Lamanai, but that is actually a corruption of its true name, *Lama’an Ayin*, which means “submerged crocodile.”¹⁵ It is truly ancient, with habitation going back as far as 2000 BC. *Lama’an Ayin* is one of the few examples of a site that has retained its pre-Columbian name. That name has survived since at least the Classic time period, but it is not known how much older it may be.

Many LDS scholars have suggested a connection between the Lamanite/Terminal Nephite cultures and the early Classic Maya.¹⁶ It is perhaps not coincidental that while Lamanites were emerging as the dominant and victorious culture at the end of the Book of Mormon, Maya civilization began flourishing and progressing to its greatest extent. According to the archaeological and written record that has survived, many great dynasties of Classic-era polities like Palenque, Yaxchilán, Piedras Negras, Calakmul, Caracol, Quiriguá, Copán, and others were founded between the latter half of the 4th and the first half of the 5th centuries AD.¹⁷ Perhaps the disappearance of the righteous Nephite culture created a vacuum that was filled in by the people known to archaeologists today as the Classic Maya.

The last category to look at is geographical placenames, usually of lands or cities. In some cases, we know the origin of these names, but many are listed in the Book of Mormon without any provenance, so it is not known if they are of Nephite, Lamanite, Jaredite, or some other origin. As LDS scholars have shown, some like Zarahemla, Jershon, and Cumorah have very close ties to Hebrew.¹⁸ But some may have Mesoamerican origins, especially if they can easily be rendered with Maya glyphs. It is likely that some of these names were still in use centuries after the close of the Book of Mormon. Names that were of local origin or did not use sounds foreign to the indigenous languages of the Americas are the best candidates for enduring.

The problem is that we do not currently know of any such examples. The names of locations found in modern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras are completely different, but they are much more contemporary in nature. Obviously, any Spanish names were given after the Conquest. Many of the names we see on Maya sites were given by later peoples after the cities were abandoned or much later by modern archaeologists. Only in recent decades have some original ancient names come to light. During the height of Maya culture, cities and regions had names like Lakam-Ha, Toktan, Tubal, Naaman, Motul, Yash-Ha, Laman-Ayin, Shukpi, Kan, and Zama. The Book of Mormon placenames shown below would fit right in.

Geographical placenames

Ablom



ab'-(b'i)-lo-m(u)

Amníhu



am-ni-hu

Antum



a-n(a) tu-m(a)

Bashan



ba-xa-n(a)

Elam



e-la-m(a)

Heshlon



he-x(a)-lo-n(a)

Laish



la-ix

Límnah



li-m(a)-nah

Oníha



o-ni-ha

Ontí



o-n(a)-ti-y(a)

Shíblum



xib'-lu-m(i)

Shíloah



xi-lo-a(h)

Shím



xi-m(a)

Shímnílon



xi-m(a)-ni lo-n(a)

Shum



xu-m(a)

But Classic-era Maya names for regions, polities, and cities only go back as far as the written record of Maya hieroglyphs. No names exist that can be confirmed to be earlier than the 4th or 5th centuries AD. Both supporters and critics of the Book of Mormon should realize that for many reasons, it would be virtually impossible to find names like Nephi or Zarahemla in the archaeological record of Mesoamerica. Names that would go back that far have probably not survived to this day.

What insights, if any, can be gained from this study? The first suggestion is that a close examination of personal names may shed some light on the language and culture of the people who had them (or at least, their parents). If Book of Mormon peoples had names with vowels, consonants, and phonetic combinations not found in languages indigenous to the Americas, then we must look elsewhere for their spoken tongue. We know that Lehi's group arrived with a knowledge of Hebrew and Egyptian. Mulek's group arrived with the same background in Hebrew. We do not know what language the Jaredites spoke. Our comparisons rest on the assumption that Joseph Smith gave us correct renderings of these ancient names. There is always the possibility of error here and our English pronunciation of these names differs from other languages. However, since he spelled out unfamiliar names during the translation process and was under the personal tutelage of the last Nephite record keeper, it is probably a safe assumption that the transfer of these names into English was as accurate as possible. Known Biblical names were translated into their English counterparts: Jacob, Joseph, Isaiah, Benjamin, and so on. Most Hebrew consonants can be satisfactorily rendered in English, so we are assuming a fairly correct transliteration of names unknown to Joseph Smith or his scribes.

The second suggestion is that the longer these immigrants from the Old World lived in the Americas, the more they adopted the local indigenous cultures into their own, perhaps evidenced to some degree by the names they chose for their children. It is likely that righteous Nephites were the slowest to assimilate, perhaps preferring to remain a “peculiar people” like the Old Testament Israelites. Names that can be easily rendered in ancient Mesoamerican languages like Mayan may be an indication of this assimilation. Conversely, names that are difficult or impossible to render satisfactorily in Mesoamerican languages may indicate a lingering connection to the original Semitic cultures. For example, the names Mormon and Moroni appear at the very end of Nephite history. Trying to write Moroni in Mayan results in *mo-lo-ni-y(a)*. Mormon is perhaps more problematic: *mo-l(o)-mo-n(a)*. Names like Gid or Gidgiddonah would be impossible without major alterations. Whatever the *lingua franca* of the region may have been, Mormon and Moroni must also have spoken a language in which it would have been easy to pronounce and write their own names. The best candidates are Hebrew and Reformed Egyptian, both altered by the Nephites. Even if the Nephites eventually adopted a local language, their prophets and record keepers kept a form of these original languages alive. It is interesting to note that of the 22 listed Nephite record keepers, 17 had names with strong Semitic influences or that are difficult, if not impossible, to render satisfactorily in Mayan. It is possible that this particular class of Nephites (likely direct descendants of Lehi) deliberately chose names from their original cultural heritage for their children as a reminder of their position before God. This may also be an indication of a lesser amount of assimilation into the surrounding Mesoamerican cultures.

The preceding examples constitute but a limited treatment of the possibilities for a Mesoamerican origin of some Book of Mormon names. There remains much more that could be done on this topic. We invite those that are trained in ancient Mayan languages and hieroglyphs to examine the comparisons we have made and offer any improvements, comments, or suggestions regarding the meanings and renderings of the names depicted here. Much has already been done to correlate these names with Old World languages, but there appears to be a great unexplored area of study in connecting them to the New World. A few interesting comparisons shown here suggest that some Book of Mormon names could have Mesoamerican origins. The large number of placenames that can be written in Mayan is especially intriguing. It suggests that Book of Mormon peoples may have used indigenous names for some of their own locations.

The results presented here are merely tentative and should serve more as suggestions or opportunities for further study than definitive conclusions. Given the challenging nature of tracing the original pronunciations of ancient names transmitted through diverse and unrelated languages, much time and effort needs to be dedicated to this endeavor. It is hoped that this paper will be viewed as an introduction to research on the topic of Mesoamerican connections to Book of Mormon names.

The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Cal Tolman in the areas of linguistics terminology and ancient languages in the preparation of this paper.

Notes

1 Joseph L. Allen and Blake J. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon, Second Edition* (Orem: Book of Mormon Tours and Research Institute, LLC, 2008), pp. 132-133.

2 See Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990),

pp. 252-254.

3 Ibid.

4 Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens* (London:Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 15.

5 Ibid., p. 172.

6 See Albert Davletshin, "Glyph for Stingray Spine," (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2003).

7 Ibid., p. 3.

8 Floyd G. Lounsbury, "The Identities of the Mythological Figures in the Cross Group Inscriptions of Palenque," *Fourth Palenque Round Table, 1980* (San Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 1985), p. 57.

9 Stephen D. Houston, *Reading the Past - Maya Glyphs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 39-40.

10 See John A. Tvedtnes, "Hebrew Names in the Book of Mormon," *13th Congress of Jewish Studies*, (Jerusalem: 2001)

11 Paul Y. Hoskisson, "What's in a Name?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Volume - 7, Issue - 1, (1998), pp. 72-73.

12 Terrence L. Szink, "New Light: Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Volume - 8, Issue - 1, (1999), p. 70.

13 See Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft: The Native Races*, vol. V (San Francisco: L. Bancroft & Company, 1883), pp. 594-595.

14 Nikolai and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, pg. 76.

15 <<http://www.famsi.org/reports/98037/section05a.htm>>

16 See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1985), pp. 130-135, 247 and Allen and Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon, Second Edition*, pp. 135-137.

17 See Nikolai and Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, pp. 22-23.

18 See Tvedtnes, "Hebrew Names in the Book of Mormon."