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Matthew L. Bowen

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# FATHER IS A MAN: THE REMARKABLE MENTION OF THE NAME ABISH IN ALMA 19:16 AND ITS NARRATIVE CONTEXT

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Matthew L. Bowen

*Abstract: The mention of “Abish” and a “remarkable vision of her father” (Alma 19:16) is itself remarkable, since women and servants are rarely named in the Book of Mormon text. As a Hebrew/Lehite name, “Abish” suggests the meaning “Father is a man,” the midrashic components ’ab- (“father”) and ’iš (“man”) being phonologically evident. Thus, the immediate juxtaposition of the name “Abish” with the terms “her father” and “women” raises the possibility of wordplay on her name in the underlying text. Since ’ab-names were frequently theophoric — i.e., they had reference to a divine Father (or could be so understood) — the mention of “Abish” (“Father is a man”) takes on additional theological significance in the context of Lamoni’s vision of the Redeemer being “born of a woman and ... redeem[ing] all mankind” (Alma 19:13). The wordplay on “Abish” thus contributes thematically to the narrative’s presentation of Ammon’s typological ministrations among the Lamanites as a “man” endowed with great power, which helped the Lamanites understand the concept of “the Great Spirit” (Yahweh) becoming “man.” Moreover, this wordplay accords with the consistent Book of Mormon doctrine that the “very Eternal Father” would (and did) condescend to become “man” and Suffering Servant.*

The mention of a “Lamanitish wom[a]n” named “Abish” in Alma 19:16 places her in the company of only a few women whose personal names are given in the Book of Mormon text.<sup>1</sup> If the entirety of the text is any indication, Mormon and his source(s) for the material comprising Alma 17–27 belonged to a culture that exhibited at least some reluctance to mention women by name. As Brant Gardner observes, “The preservation

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1 Sariah (wife of Lehi; 1 Nephi 2:5; 5:1, 6; 8:14), Eve (the “mother of all living” [Genesis 3:20]; see 1 Nephi 5:11; 2 Nephi 2:18–19), Sarah (wife of Abraham; 2 Nephi 8:2), Mary (mother of Jesus; Mosiah 3:8; Alma 7:10), Abish the Lamanitess (Alma 19:16), and the “harlot” Isabel (Alma 39:3).

of her name is even more remarkable ... not only [because she was] a woman, but she was a servant. Both factors would virtually guarantee her anonymity. Even the queen [i.e., Lamoni's wife] is not named."<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Jacob mentions "the difficulty of engraving ... words upon plates" (Jacob 4:1) that he, Nephi, and their successors experienced in writing on metal plates. This would have been particularly true of proper names, which were apparently spelled out in some fashion upon the plates.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the fact that record-keepers took pains to write and preserve the name "Abish" in the text suggests that the mention of her name is an important narrative detail. (Admittedly, the reader will be the final judge as to whether the ideas advanced here about the name "Abish" and its literary importance are plausible and ultimately helpful).

Abish is mentioned at a pivotal moment in the Lamanite conversion narratives: the theophanic visions of King Lamoni, Lamoni's wife, and members of their royal court and its aftermath (Alma 17–27). On account of the "remarkable vision of her father," Abish is prepared to play her key role in the mass Lamanite conversions, "making ... known" what she had previously been unable to make known (19:17) and gathering the Lamanites to the royal palace to witness the effects of these visions (Alma 19:16–19). Her actions (e.g., raising the queen from the ground) not only reflect her correct understanding of the nature and meaning of these events but also ensure that these events are not misinterpreted by the other Lamanites, thus helping to preserve the lives of Lamoni, Lamoni's wife, et al., who saw visions of the Redeemer and angels (Alma 19:24–36), as well as facilitating the conversion of many Lamanites.

In this short study, I propose that the narrator's use of the name "Abish" ("Father is a man," see below) involves wordplay that accentuates the importance of this woman (*'iššâ*) and knowledge that came from "her father" (whether in his lifetime or afterward). Additionally, the mention of "Abish" and the attendant wordplay on her name have significance in the context of the broader Lamanite conversion narratives — i.e., the Lamanites being "converted unto the Lord" by coming to the knowledge

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2 Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Textual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume 4: Alma* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 303.

3 Joseph's careful spelling out of the names during the dictation of the text suggests that they were spelled out in the text. On Joseph's dictation of the names and other matters, see Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22–31.

that “the very Eternal **Father** [ʾ *āb*],”<sup>4</sup> would be “born of a **woman** [ʾ *iššā*]” (Alma 19:13) and would “come forth” (19:13), i.e., or “go forth” as a “**man** [ʾ *iš*].”<sup>5</sup>

I will additionally suggest that the narrative, using the *Leitwort* (“lead-word”) “man,” creates terminological links between the “Great Spirit” and the Redeemer, who becomes human (“born of a woman”); Abish (converted “on account of a remarkable vision of her father”); and Ammon (Abish’s “fellow-servant” in Lamoni’s court), who prepared the Lamanites to come to a knowledge of the divine Father of heaven and earth through their own visions of Jesus. Just as Abish as a “woman-servant” fulfilled her divinely appointed role, Ammon, as a “man” endowed with divine power, “served” as a living type of the incarnate Christ, the “Divine Warrior” who condescended to become the “Suffering Servant.”

### Hebrew *ʾab*-names and the Name “Abish”

Many Israelite names have the word *ʾab*- (“Father”) as a theophoric<sup>6</sup> element. Israelites not only understood but apparently relished the *double entendre*-potential in these names — that the “father” element could be understood as not only referring to a deity but also the birth father of the name-bearer. The literary treatment of the name “Abimelech” in Judges 6–9 illustrates this phenomenon. The first part of the pericope (Judges 6–8) chronicles Gideon’s “salvation” of Israel including his defeat of the Midianites and their kings (8:21). In response to this great victory, Israel requests that Gideon and his “sons” rule dynastically over them, i.e., as kings: “Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son’s son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. And Gideon said unto them, **I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you**” (Judges 8:22–23).

However, Gideon immediately proceeds to *act like a king*,<sup>7</sup> multiplying gold (Judg 8:24–26) and wives (8:30) in violation of Deuteronomy

4 Mosiah 15:4, Mosiah 16:15, Alma 11:38–39. See especially the original text of 1 Nephi 11:21 (see further below).

5 Isaiah 42:13; Hosea 2:16 [MT 2:18]; Mosiah 7:27; 13:34 read in light of Isaiah 53:1–3 (52:13–53:12, see further below).

6 I.e., containing a divine name or title. Theophoric names contain divine name or title elements.

7 Katie Heffelfinger (“My Father is King’: Chiefly Politics and the Rise and Fall of Abimelech,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33/3 [2009]:

17:17. From the captured Midianite gold, he fashions an idolatrous “ephod” and exerts royal authority over the cult at Ophrah. Moreover, Gideon sires a “son” whom he names “My Father is King,” i.e., Abimelech (*’ābī*, “my father” + *melek*, “king”). One can interpret this name to mean the “My Father [Yahweh] is king” (see especially Judges 8:23: “the Lord [Yahweh] **shall rule over you**”) or “My Father [Gideon/ Jerubbaal] is King.” The second part of the pericope (Judges 9) infers that Abimelech interprets his own names as the latter and uses this interpretation as a basis for his attempts to make himself king over Israel (see especially Judges 9:2–3, 8–22).

Later Israelite monarchic history contains other examples. Saul’s uncle Ner (“light”) has a son named Abner.<sup>8</sup> The name “Abner” can mean “Father is a light” (i.e., “[the divine] Father is a light” or “[earthly] Father is a light”), but it is also a pun: “Father is *Ner*.” The name of David’s infamous son Absalom means “Father is peace” (*’ab* + *šālôm*), referring on one hand to deity (“Father”) as the source of “peace” for David, his son, and his family. On the other hand, as Moshe Garsiel observes, “the entire story witnesses to the absence of peace between father [David] and son [Absalom].”<sup>9</sup> This is the point of the ironic wordplay in David’s repeated question as he learns of Absalom’s death: “Is the young man Absalom [*l’ē’absālôm*] safe [*(ha)šālôm*]?” (Literally, “Does the young man Absalom have peace?” 2 Samuel 18:29, 32). In this narrative cycle, the death of Absalom is only a part of the irony of David’s self-pronounced punishment “restoring” (*yēšallēm*) fourfold (2 Samuel 12:6).<sup>10</sup> The Lord himself, the divine “Father,” also “repays” David in fulfillment of Deuteronomy 7:10 (“[He] repayeth [*mēšallēm*] them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay [*yēšallem*] him to his face.”): “the sword shall never depart from thine house; because thou hast despised me” (2 Samuel 12:10). By the time Solomon has secured the throne, four of David’s sons will be dead.

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277–292) argues that Gideon, in fact, accepts kingship even in the act of turning it down. Nephi seems to have done something similar in 2 Nephi 5:18: “And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power.”

8 See 1 Samuel 14:50–51; 26:5, 14; 2 Sam 2:8, 12; 3:23, 25, 28, 37; 1 Kgs 2:5, 32; 1 Chronicles 26:28.

9 Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hackett (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), 191.

10 On the principle of fourfold restoration, see Exodus 22:1; Luke 19:8; D&C 98:26, 44, 47; 124:71. The Lucianic recension of the Septuagint has “sevenfold.”

Women in ancient Israel also bore *'ab*-names, including two of David's wives: Abigail and Abishag. "Abigail probably means something like 'My Father is joy'<sup>11</sup> or 'my Father was delighted.'<sup>12</sup> Abishag, a woman famous for her beauty (1 Kings 1:3), was given to David in his old age to resuscitate his vitality and virility (1:4, 15). Etymologically, the first element in her name is clear; the second element, however, is of uncertain meaning.<sup>13</sup> This did not stop the Deuteronomistic historian/narrator from playing on her name. Moshe Garsiel suggests that, from a purely literary (not etymological) perspective, "her name ['Abishag'] contains two optional midrashic components, *'by* ["my father"] and *šgl* ["concubine"]."<sup>14</sup> Although in the pericope of 1 Kings 1–2 "neither the term *šgl* nor any of its synonyms is mentioned, [still] Abishag's duty of lying in David's bed to keep him warm indicates that she may be considered as his concubine. Adonijah's petition to marry her is therefore construed as a renewed attempt upon the throne, and he pays with his life for it."<sup>15</sup> In other words, a Hebrew-speaking audience would have heard the implied pun on "Abishag" in the plot of the narrative: Adonijah's death on account of his ill-fated play for the throne through his father's concubine.

The name "Abish" as a Hebrew name<sup>16</sup> suggests the meaning "Father is a man" or "My father is a man" (*'ab*[*i*] "[my] father" + *'iš* "a man"),<sup>17</sup> or at least an ancient Israelite would have heard these midrashic

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11 See Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 4, hereafter *BDB*.

12 Hans Bauer, "Die hebraischen Eigennamen als sprachliche Erkenntnisquelle," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 48 (1930): 75f; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:4.

13 *BDB* (p. 4) suggests "my father is a wanderer" based on the verbal root \*šgg.

14 Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 117.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Absolute proof of the scientific etymology of "Abish" is beyond reach, but this is also true of many biblical names, the scientific etymologies of which remain open to conjecture.

17 Paul Y. Hoskisson (personal communication, 2002). The etymology "Father is a man" or "Father of a man" is cited as the preferred etymology for "Abish" in the online Book of Mormon Onomasticon: <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/ABISH>. Should one object to the idea that "Abish" is a Hebrew name, the Lamanites (like the Nephites) continued to use numerous Israelite (Hebrew and Egyptian) names in their culture (e.g., Lemuel [Alma 23:12], Ishmael, Aaron, etc.)

components<sup>18</sup> in this name. “Abish” would have suggested a similar meaning to the Nephite ear,<sup>19</sup> and perhaps it would have held this meaning for Lamanites who had learned the language of Nephi via the priests of Noah (Mosiah 24:4). Although only attested once as a Lehite personal name,<sup>20</sup> the name “Abish” contributes to the “literary texture”<sup>21</sup> of the story precisely because the elements “father” and “man” can be heard in the name. Precise scientific etymology was not, in any case, a primary concern of ancient authors in their literary inclusion and exploitation of names.<sup>22</sup>

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18 *Midrashic* components = the basic phonetic elements used to *interpret* or build meaning.

19 Compare Omni 1:17, which seems to suggest that the Nephite language remained comparatively uncorrupted (*vis-à-vis* the language of the Mulekites) during the time of Mosiah, although even here we have to realistically allow for substantial changes in both the spoken and written Nephite languages. Although religious and liturgical language tends to be conservative (cf. Qur’anic Arabic [Classical Arabic]), the fact remains that languages exhibit substantial change, particularly after 500 years (compare early modern English to 21st century American English. And yet, they remain — at their roots — the same language. The events of Alma would have transpired about three generations later. Moroni records that the Nephites were still using a form of Hebrew during his time (see Mormon 9:33).

20 The fact that the name “Abish” is mentioned only once is not evidence that the narrator does not consider it important. For example, the name “Eve” is mentioned only twice (Genesis 3:20; 4:1) in the biblical account of the Creation, the Fall, and its aftermath (Genesis 1–11). Nobody would argue that Eve is an unimportant figure in this narrative or that her name is unimportant.

21 As Michael P. O’Connor (“The Human Characters’ Names in the Ugaritic Poems: Onomastic Eccentricity in Bronze-Age West Semitic and the Name Daniel in Particular,” in *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006], 270) notes, “The word play on the name ‘Moses’ has generally been evaluated as part of the literary texture of the Exodus story in which it is introduced, perhaps because of the distance between the Biblical Hebrew and the apparent real source [of the name ‘Moses’], Egyptian.” In other words, the originally Egyptian name Moses — *mōseh* — functioning as a “pseudo-active” participle of Hebrew *\*mšy* suggests the idea of “puller,” even though story suggests the meaning “pulled” (see Exodus 2:10). The form and sound of Moses as presented in the texts conveys the overarching idea of the Exodus story: that Moses — once pulled and saved from the water — is the Lord’s instrument in “pulling” and saving Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea. I am suggesting that the name “Abish” serves an analogous, multivalent function in the Lamanite conversion narratives.

22 J. Gerald Janzen (“What’s in a Name? ‘Yahweh’ in Exodus 3 and the Wider Biblical Context,” *Interpretation* 33 [1979]: 229) observes: “So far as a proper

We note the mention of Abish's name and her introduction into the Lamanite conversion narrative:

And it came to pass that they did call on the name of the Lord, in their might, even until they had all fallen to the earth, save it were one of the Lamanitish **women** [cf. Heb. \**nāšîm*], whose name was **Abish** [\**'ab(i)'iš*], she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account a remarkable vision of **her father** [cf. *'ābîhâ*] — (Alma 19:16)

The wordplay on the *'ab-* (“father”) element is readily recognizable. As Michael O’Connor notes, onomastic wordplay can be “incomplete, as puns, casual rhymes, and verbal echoes often are, in all literary texts of all types and times.”<sup>23</sup> However, the *'iš* (“man”) element, too, is present, albeit “tacitly”<sup>24</sup> in the term “women” (cf. Heb. *nāšîm*). The singular form of Hebrew *nāšîm* is *'iššâ*, the masculine counterparts of which are *'iš* and the poetic form *'ēnôš* (both of which share the Hebrew plural *'ānāšîm*). In other words, the proposed elements of “Abish” are juxtaposed with the name “Abish” in the text.

The mention of “Abish” and the repetition of terms that match the evident verbal components of her name emphasizes her important role in the unfolding Lamanite conversions, a role that, in its own way, is like that of Ammon, who, like Abish herself (Alma 19:28, “woman-servant”), is described as a “servant” (Alma 17:25, 29; 18:17; 19:33). Their role as “servants” enables them to be instruments in the Lord’s hand in helping the work of salvation go forward among the Lamanites (cf. Alma 17:11). Moreover, the proposed wordplay links Abish to “her father,” in a manner not dissimilar to the wordplay that links “Nephi” (Egyptian *nfr* [later pronounced *nfi*] = “good,” “goodly,” “fair”) to his “goodly parents”

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understanding of the biblical narrative is concerned, it is as irrelevant as it is correct to observe that ‘Babel’ in Genesis 11 does not come from a root meaning ‘to confound’; or to observe that the name ‘Moses’ in Exodus 2 is not formed from a root meaning to draw out.”

23 O’Connor, “Human Characters’ Names,” 271.

24 Garsiel (*Biblical Names*, 98–126) devotes an entire chapter to the study of “tacit” wordplays involving biblical names that are accomplished with substitute words (synonyms, antonyms, metonyms, etc.) that bear little or no resemblance in sound to the name itself. The similarity in sound between *'iš* and *nāšîm* is, however, not entirely absent.

and the “goodness of God” (1 Nephi 1:1)<sup>25</sup> and “Enos” (Hebrew, “man”) to his father who was a “just man” (Enos 1:1).<sup>26</sup>

The narrator’s use of wordplay on Abish here emphasizes that the converting knowledge of the Lord (the divine *’āb*) that Abish received from “her father” was like the knowledge of the God of Israel’s fathers that Nephi and Enos received from their own “fathers.” It further emphasizes that this knowledge of the Lord stands in stark contrast to the incomplete “tradition of Lamoni, which he had received from **his father**” (Alma 18:5). Lamoni and the other Lamanites should have received the knowledge of God possessed by “their **father**, Lehi” (Alma 18:36)<sup>27</sup> but had *not* on account of “the tradition of their **fathers**.”<sup>28</sup>

The appropriateness of Abish’s name in the context of “her father” becomes even more apparent as the midrashic components of her name as divine referents are considered. The connection between “man,” “woman,” and the vision of the incarnation of the divine Redeemer (the divine *’ab*, “Father”) as a “man” is at the heart of the conversion of the Lamanites and the literary way in which Mormon narrates their conversion.

### “A Remarkable Vision of Her Father”: Whose Vision and of Whom?

Alma 19:16 informs us that “Abish,” on account of “a remarkable vision of her father” had been “converted unto the Lord for many years.” The phrase “remarkable vision of her father” is ambiguous, as others have noted,<sup>29</sup> perhaps deliberately so. The phrase “vision of her father” allows

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25 Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2. On “Nephi” as the Egyptian word *nfr* and its late pronunciation, see John Gee, “A Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189–91; John Gee, “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 1–5.

26 Matthew L. Bowen, “Wordplay on the Name Enos,” *Insights* 26/3 (2006): 2; Matthew L. Bowen, “‘And There Wrestled a Man with Him’ (Genesis 32:24): Enos’s Adaptations of the Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 151–160.

27 Alma 18:30–36 records how Ammon restored Lamoni and his household to this knowledge.

28 See, e.g., Mosiah 10:12; Alma 37:9; 60:32; Helaman 5:51; 15:4; cf. especially D&C 93:39.

29 See Daniel A. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book 1976), 207; see also Gardner, *Second Witness*,

not only multiple possibilities for the content of the vision but also two possibilities for the one who had the vision. Although others may be educated, we have at least three interpretive possibilities for “understanding the phrase ‘remarkable vision of her father.’”

1. The text refers to a vision seen by Abish’s father. This interpretation takes the genitival construction “vision of her father” as a *subjective* genitive — i.e., that the subject (Abish’s father) is the seer of the vision, whatever its content.
2. The text refers to Abish’s own vision, the content of which was a special or “remarkable” appearance of her own father to her. This interpretation takes the genitival construction “vision of her father” as an *objective* genitive — i.e., that Abish’s father himself is the object or content of the vision.<sup>30</sup> Abish’s own status as a servant in the royal court (a royal dependent) may suggest that her father had died sometime previously and perhaps that he had appeared to her.
3. The text refers to Abish’s own vision, the content of which may have included a theophany (Greek *theos* “god” + *phaneia* “manifestation” = a manifestation or appearance of God) beyond the personal appearance of her earthly father. In other words, did the Savior himself (the divine “Father” mentioned throughout the Book of Mormon) also appear to her? This interpretation, while not explicitly supported by the language of Alma 19:16, is perhaps partially inferred by the content of Lamoni’s previously-mentioned vision (“I have seen my Redeemer; and he shall come forth, and be born of a woman, and he shall redeem all mankind,” Alma 19:13). Is the “remarkable vision of her father” (19:16) still “remarkable” by the (very high) standard of Lamoni’s vision and the other Lamanite visionary experiences (Alma 17:29–30, 34; 22:18)? This interpretation would not wholly preclude possibility #2.

Additional possibilities are perhaps suggested by the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. As Royal Skousen<sup>31</sup> and Brant

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4:302.

30 Cf. the vision of “just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:23; D&C 76:69; 129:3).

31 Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Three: Mosiah 17 — Alma 20* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 2010.

Gardner<sup>32</sup> have noted, Oliver Cowdery initially copied the word as “fathers” in the printer’s manuscript but then quickly changed the word to “father.” However, Skousen states that “the original manuscript undoubtedly had the more difficult nonpossessive form *father* in ‘a remarkable vision of her father’” and that “in the manuscripts Oliver Cowdery often added a possessive *s* to nouns, especially names, in constructions involving the preposition *of*, thus creating instances of the double genitive.”<sup>33</sup> “Fathers” would then represent “father’s,” suggesting that Cowdery’s initial impression of the construction fit interpretation #1, which corresponds to how many Latter-day Saints read this verse. Nevertheless, interpretation #2 cannot be ruled out.

In every interpretive scenario, the result was that “Abish” was “converted unto the Lord” on account of the “vision,” either hers or her father’s and the vision was probably theophanic if it was “remarkable,” as Mormon states (Alma 19:16). Moreover, the fact that Abish correctly comprehended the theophanic character of the visions that Lamoni and his wife saw suggest that the vision that converted her was similar in character. Here I would add that the double emphasis on — *’ab* — in the name Abish and in the word “father” is perhaps intended to emphasize this very idea. If we allow for deliberate ambiguity in the phrase “vision of her father” — understood as both a subjective and objective genitive — we begin to sense the literary importance (and beauty) of mentioning a name that denotes or connotes “Father is a Man.”

### **The Divine “Father” as a “Man”**

As noted above, the presence of the name “Abish” along with its potential *theophoric* meaning “Father is a man,” as suggested by the theophanic content of her or her father’s “vision,” has wider implications for the Lamanite conversion narratives. Clearly, this notion would have been problematic for some in ancient Israel and Judah. However, the notion that the Lord (Yahweh) is a “man” is not alien to the Hebrew Bible, despite a few texts that seem to suggest otherwise.<sup>34</sup> In addition to the Lord’s prophetic promise that Israel will one day call him “Ishi” (Heb. *’išī*, “my man,” “my husband”; Hosea 2:16 [MT 2:18]), Moses’s “Song of the

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32 Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:303.

33 Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 3:2010.

34 Texts like Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29 seem to de-anthropomorphize God and may reflect later (Deuteronomic or post-Deuteronomic) tradition. The divine warrior/redeemer texts do the opposite. The Hebrew *gō’ēl* (“kinsman redeemer”) was “kin” with the redeemed.

Sea” declares “The Lord is a **man** [’iš] of war” (Exodus 15:3). Similarly, Isaiah 42:13 states: “The Lord **shall go forth** [yēšē] as a **mighty man** [gibbôr], he shall stir up jealousy like a **man** [’iš] of war: he shall cry, yea, roar; he shall prevail against his enemies.”

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the image of the Divine Warrior<sup>35</sup>/Redeemer (a favorite title of Isaiah)<sup>36</sup> “going forth” (Isaiah 42:13) is juxtaposed with the image of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Nephi writes: “the God of our fathers,<sup>37</sup> who were led out of Egypt, out of bondage, and also were preserved in the wilderness by him, yea, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself, according to the words of the angel, as a **man** [cf. ’iš], into the hands of wicked men” (1 Nephi 19:10).

Such texts seem to know Isaiah’s description of Suffering Servant — i.e., the “**man** [’iš] of sorrows [pains] ... acquainted with grief [sickness],” “smitten of God and afflicted [mē’unneh],” Isaiah 53:3–4; “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted [na’āneh]” (53:7).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Isaiah 63 describes the Lord acting as Divine Warrior/Redeemer on behalf of Israel (Isaiah 63:1–6) while emphasizing that he is also Israel’s “father”: “Doubtless **thou art our father** [’ābînû], though **Abraham** [’abrāhām]<sup>39</sup> be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not: **thou, O Lord, art our father** [’ābînû], **our redeemer** [gō’ālēnû]; thy name is **from everlasting**

35 See Daniel Belnap, “‘I Will Contend with Them that Contend with Thee’: The Divine Warrior in Jacob’s Speech of 2 Nephi 6–10,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 17/1–2 (2008) 20–39.

36 The title “Redeemer” (gō’ēl), which itself implies a kinship relationship between the redeemer and the redeemed, is a favorite title of Isaiah for the Divine Warrior (Isaiah 41:14; 43:14; 44:6, 24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8; 59:20; 60:16; 63:16). See also especially 1 Nephi 19:18, 23.

37 “God of our fathers” [’ēlōhē ’ābōtēnû]: a title attested in the Hebrew Bible at Deuteronomy 26:7, 1 Chronicles 12:17; 2 Chronicles 20:6; Ezra 7:27; in the New Testament at Acts 3:13; 5:30; 22:14.

38 Cf. the contextually difficult Isaiah 63:9. The KJV renders the Hebrew: “in all their **affliction he was afflicted**,” a reading which follows the Qere tradition of the Masoretes (literally, in all their affliction, affliction was his). Cf. D&C 133:53: “In all their afflictions he was afflicted. And the angel of his presence saved them; and in his love, and in his pity, he redeemed them, and bore them, and carried them all the days of old.”

39 A wordplay on the ’ab-/“Father” element in “Abraham.” Similar wordplay is evident in 1 Nephi 22:9: “And it shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles; and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the house of Israel, unto the making known of the covenants of **the Father** of heaven unto **Abraham**, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.”

[*mē'ōlām*]” (63:16). Thus the Divine Warrior/Redeemer is, as Nephi saw, both “the Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:21 [Original Text])<sup>40</sup> — the “Everlasting Father” (*'ābī'ad*) of Isaiah 9:6 [MT 9:5] — and a “man,” who bore the sin and iniquity not only of Israel, but all humanity. Because of this dual nature, he is “mighty to save” (Isaiah 63:1; 2 Nephi 31:19; Alma 7:14; 34:18).<sup>41</sup>

Book of Mormon texts repeatedly describe Savior’s mortal life (as “man”), and his atonement in terms of Isaiah 42:13 (the Lord “going forth” as a “man”), 53:7, 63:1–16. In addition to 1 Nephi 19:10, we have Alma 7:11: “And **he shall go forth**, suffering pains and **afflictions** and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.” As Thomas Wayment has noted, Alma’s use of the phrase “pains and sicknesses of his people” is a quotation of Isaiah 53:4.<sup>42</sup> However, Alma also alludes to the expression “he shall go forth” (Isaiah 42:13). Alma like Nephi and Jacob (2 Nephi 6–10)<sup>43</sup> before him, envisions the Redeemer “go[ing] forth” both as Divine Warrior and the Servant who redeems humankind through his own suffering. These are but a few of the examples that could be cited.

### “Surely This Is More Than a Man”: The Narratological Juxtaposition of Ammon’s and Abish’s Roles

In the Lamanite conversion narrative, Mormon employs several *Leitworte* (“lead-words”), a term that Martin Buber coined, using it to describe biblical authors’ use of key terms which help a reader discern the main message (or messages) that authors intend to convey.<sup>44</sup> Some

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40 Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 748.

41 A key indication of the influence of Isaiah 63 on the interpretation of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is the use of the phrase “mighty to save” in 2 Nephi 31:9; Alma 7:14 and Alma 34:18.

42 Thomas Wayment, “The Hebrew Text of Alma 7:11,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 98–103, 130.

43 Belnap, “I Will Contend with Them that Contend with Thee,” 20–39.

44 Martin Buber (“Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation* [ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox; ISBL; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994] 114) coined the term *Leitwort* (“lead-word,” or “guiding word”) and defines it thus: “By *Leitwort* I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or a sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic. As

of these are “man”/“woman,” “great,” “spirit,” and “believe”/“faith.”<sup>45</sup> The mention of the name Abish (“Father is a man”) can be seen as a development of these motifs.

Part of Ammon’s task in teaching Lamoni and the Lamanites is to advance their traditional understanding beyond his father’s (and their fathers’) “belief” that “there was a Great Spirit” but yet “suppos[ing] whatsoever they did was right” (Alma 18:5), to a belief in a divine Redeemer — the very “Eternal Father”<sup>46</sup> — that would redeem man by becoming “man” — i.e., “born of a woman” (Alma 19:13). Ammon’s averred strategy is to “show forth my power unto these my fellow-servants, or the power which is in me ... that I may win the hearts of these my fellow-servants, that I may lead them to believe in my words” (Alma 17:29).

The strategy works so well, especially in his defense of the flocks of the king, as Lamoni exhibits himself to be a warrior with “great power,” that Lamoni’s servants begin to debate whether Ammon is the “Great Spirit” or a “man”: “Surely, this is **more than a man** [’iš]. Behold is this not **the Great Spirit ...?**” (Alma 18:2); “Whether he be the **Great Spirit** or a **man**, we know not; but this much we do know, that he cannot be slain by the enemies of the king ... because of his expertness and great strength ... And now, O king, we do not believe that a **man** has such **great power**, for we know he cannot be slain” (18:3). The servants quickly draw King Lamoni into the debate, “Now I know that it is **the Great Spirit**; and he **has come down at this time to preserve your lives**, that I might not slay

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noted, what is repeated need not be a single word but can be a word root; indeed the diversity of forms strengthens the overall dynamic effect.” See further Martin Buber, עיונים בדפוסים-סגנון בתנ”ך, דרכו של מקרא: (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1964), 284.

45 See Matthew L. Bowen, *Not Partaking of the Fruit: Its Generational Consequences and Its Remedy*, in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision: The 40th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Salt Lake City/Provo, UT: RSC and Deseret Book, 2011), 248–53.

46 Following Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 230–33. In 1 Nephi 11:18–32, the phrase “the Son of” is a clarifying gloss. See also Mosiah 15:4; 16:15; Alma 11:38–39. I have chosen to follow the original text because the addition of “the Son of” as an attempt to maintain doctrinal clarity (over against classical trinitarianism and the Catholic emphasis on Mary as “mother of God” in a classical Trinitarian sense) further obscures a distinct Book of Mormon Christology that can be seen from Nephi to Moroni that “Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God” (see Book of Mormon Title-page). See also Mosiah 15:4; 16:15, Alma 11:38–39, etc.

you as I did your brethren. Now **this is the Great Spirit of whom our fathers have spoken.**" (18:4). Fearing for the first time that he has done wrong in executing his servants for previous failures, Lamoni inquires: "Where is this **man** that has such **great power?**" (18:8). Mormon wishes the audience to see that Lamoni's notion of a "Great Spirit" who "come[s] down" in human form to "preserve" lives is not impossibly removed from the "condescension of God," i.e., the incarnation of the Redeemer seen by Nephi (and probably Lehi earlier; see 1 Nephi 11:16, 26).

Interestingly, Lamoni becomes convinced that Ammon is the "Great Spirit" incarnate "because of the faithfulness of Ammon" (18:10), i.e., the faithfulness of his service: "Surely there has not been any servant among all my servants that has been **so faithful**<sup>47</sup> **as this man**; for even he doth remember all my commandments to execute them. Now I surely know that this is the Great Spirit" (Alma 18:10–11). Lamoni's fear of Ammon becomes palpable (18:11), and his "countenance ... was changed toward Ammon" (18:12). The servants of Lamoni, however, ask Ammon to stay calling him by the name "Rabbanah" which is glossed as "great or powerful king," a title evidently built from the Semitic root \**rbb/rby*, which denotes "greatness" or "muchness" (*rabb* is still the word for [divine] "Lord" in modern Arabic).<sup>48</sup> The servant reiterates, "Rabbanah, the king desireth thee to stay" (18:13).

The optimum moment for teaching Lamoni about the incarnate Redeemer approaches. After Lamoni will not answer Ammon "for the space of an hour" (Alma 18:14), "Ammon, being filled with the Spirit of God [i.e., again relying on the power of the "Great Spirit"] ... perceive[s] the thoughts of the king" (18:16).<sup>49</sup> Ammon knows that the king thinks that he is divine. He emphatically declares: "**I am a man**, and am thy servant" (18:17; cf. Isaiah 53:3, 11). Nevertheless, Lamoni, recognizing that Ammon was able to discern his thoughts, asks him: "Who art thou? Art thou the Great Spirit who knows all things?" (18:18). Ammon denies again, but Lamoni is not dissuaded: "whatsoever thou desirest I

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47 On the wordplay on Ammon's name evident in this passage, see Matthew L. Bowen, "The Faithfulness of Ammon," *Religious Educator* 15/2 (2014), 64–89.

48 See entry in Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 370–371. Compare *rubūbiya* = "divinity, deity, godship"; *rabbāni* = "divine; pertaining to God; ... divine things."

49 On "knowing" or "perceiving" someone's "thoughts" as a function of the Spirit, see also 1 Chronicles 28:9; Job 42:2; Psalm 139:23; Daniel 2:30; Luke 5:22; 9:47; 11:17; Jacob 2:5; Mosiah 24:12; Alma 10:17; 43:48; Helaman 9:41; 3 Nephi 28:6; D&C 6:16; cf. Job 21:27.

will give thee; and if it were needed, I would guard thee with my armies; but I know that thou art more powerful than they” (18:21). Ammon is a living type of the incarnate Redeemer: a “man” upon whom the divine power of the Lord’s spirit rests and a warrior of royal lineage (cf. Isaiah 11:1–5) who humbles himself to be a “servant” (Alma 17:25; 18:17; cf. Isaiah 53; Mosiah 13:34–16:15). Ammon is a type of the “Redeemer” who “went forth ministering unto the people [with] power” (1 Nephi 11:28). Ammon’s service to Lamoni as a type of Christ fully prepares Lamoni to be converted to Christ through his partaking of, as it were, the tree of life.

For Lamoni to be properly converted to Christ, rather than to Ammon the missionary, Ammon must *fully* correct Lamoni’s *partly* correct views regarding himself and the Great Spirit. Lamoni is unfamiliar with the terms “God” and “the heavens,” perhaps suggesting Lamanite religion is chthonic (“I do not know the heavens.”)<sup>50</sup> Lamoni does, however, believe in a “Great Spirit,” which Ammon then defines for him as “God”: “Believest thou that there is a Great Spirit? And he said, Yea. And Ammon said: This is God” (18:26–28).

After Ammon explains “the heavens,” Lamoni states his “belief”<sup>51</sup> in Ammon’s words and asks, “Art thou sent from God?” (Alma 18:33). Ammon reiterates, “**I am a man; and man in the beginning was created after the image of God, and I am called by his Holy Spirit to teach these things unto this people, that they may be brought to a knowledge of that which is just and true**” (18:34). The divine power that attends Ammon in his service helps him to show Lamoni deeper truths about God from which the Lamanites had been “cut off” for generations: that the Great Spirit — God — is not only real, but that he is in a very real sense “with” human beings (cf. “Immanuel” in Isaiah 7–8). This prepares Lamoni to be taught just how “with us” God is, i.e., in human flesh as Ammon teaches him Alma 18:36–39.

The divine “humanness” and “faith” motifs continue to build in Alma 19 until their climax in Alma 19:13–16. The Hebrew term *’iš* denotes both “man” and “husband.” Likewise, the word *’iššâ* denotes “woman”

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50 John Gee, personal communication. *Chthonic* denotes “subterranean.” That Lamoni’s religion involved some kind of cave sanctuaries is perhaps suggested by Ammon’s statement in Alma 26:3 that the Lamanites were brought out of the “darkest abyss” into the “marvelous light of God.” Ammon’s words recall Alma the Younger’s description of his own conversion from Lamanite-like unbelief (Mosiah 27:29; cf. especially 27:8).

51 See Bowen, “Not Partaking of the Fruit,” 248–253.

and “wife.” These terms are repeated in Alma 19:4–5 (“husband,” *bis*), 19:10, 12–13, 16 (“woman”/“women,” 4 times). The climax begins in Alma 19:12–13: “he stretched forth his hand unto the **woman**, and said: Blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou. For as sure as thou livest, behold, I have seen my Redeemer; and he shall come forth, and be **born of a woman**, and he shall redeem all **mankind** who **believe** on his name.”

It is in the context of this critical statement that the narrator’s statement in Alma 19:16 is to be understood: “And it came to pass that they did call on the name of the Lord, in their might, even until they had all fallen to the earth, save it were one of the Lamanitish **women**, whose name was **Abish**, she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of **her father**.” Abish (“Father is a man”) the “woman-servant” (19:28) plays the feminine counterpart to Ammon the “man” and “servant” and completes this miracle of faith (cf. Ether 12:15).

### Conclusion

Like the “vision of her father” that converted Abish (Alma 19:16), whose name suggests the meaning “Father is a man,” the theophanies that converted Lamoni from the “tradition” of “his father” (Alma 18:5) and later his wife and father from the “traditions of their fathers”<sup>52</sup> were all indeed “remarkable” visions. Whatever the exact content of these visions, they conveyed the doctrinal truth that was revealed many years earlier in the remarkable “vision” of their father Lehi and Nephi: that Jesus Christ, the Divine Warrior and “Eternal Father” (1 Nephi 11:21, Original Text), condescended to become “man” — i.e., to “come forth, and be born of a woman” and as Suffering Servant “redeem all mankind who believe on his name” (Alma 19:13).

The mention of the name Abish and the wordplay on her name in Alma 19:16 reinforces the foregoing narrative’s strong association of the effect of ancestral tradition (sometimes negative), and the importance of the doctrinal truth that the Jesus Christ, the Eternal Father of heaven and earth would not simply remain a spirit forever (contra Zoramite belief, Alma 31:15), but would become “man,” so that we might become “divine” not only like our Savior (the Eternal Father of heaven and earth), but also like our Heavenly Father who once was “man,” as was revealed

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52 Mosiah 10:12; Alma 37:9; 60:32; Helaman 5:51; 15:4.

to and by the prophet Joseph Smith.<sup>53</sup> All of this should make us grateful for righteous fathers and mothers<sup>54</sup> who pass on correct traditions to us, and more anxious to discard ancestral traditions that could inhibit or stop our eternal progress (see especially D&C 93:19, 39).

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**Matthew L. Bowen** was raised in Orem, Utah and graduated from Brigham Young University. He holds a PhD in Biblical Studies from the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC and is currently an Assistant Professor in Religious Education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He and his wife (the former Suzanne Blattberg) are the parents of three children: Zachariah, Nathan, and Adele.

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53 See the “King Follett Discourse,” in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 342–362.

54 Alma 56:47–48; 57:21.

