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## **Toward a Deeper Understanding: How Onomastic Wordplay Aids Understanding Scripture**

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# TOWARD A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING: HOW ONOMASTIC WORDPLAY AIDS UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

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**Amanda Colleen Brown**

**Abstract:** *Matthew L. Bowen's book compels readers to consider both the Book of Mormon's construction and the significance of names in the text. Bowen and his coauthors invite readers to contemplate not only scripture but its stages of construction to completion, be they first draft, editing, final abridgement, or translation. Bowen's work reveals how, in the endeavor to sacralize the act of scripture reading, specific details like names and their meanings can invigorate one's understanding of the narrative and its theology, preventing such reading from becoming a rote endeavor.*

Review of Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2018). 408 pp., \$24.95.

There is a rich and complex tradition for names and their etymologies in both biblical texts and subsequent scholarly tradition, collectively referred to as *onomastics*. In *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture*, Matthew L. Bowen not only builds from this tradition but catapults into broader territory. His understanding of the linguistic aspects of his material is as comprehensive as it is attentive to data and grammar. In addition, he includes in his narrative an exposition of the more technical aspects of his selected text. Through careful, intentional analysis of Book of Mormon names and their meanings in selected passages, Bowen highlights the internal awareness of these texts that are independent units, and yet he is mindful of the traditions from which they are built. This book succeeds in narrowly examining how onomastic wordplay

informs the text while simultaneously maintaining a firm perspective on the larger narrative and explaining its relevance for modern readers.

The premise of this book is to explore the meaning that a study of onomastics provides to selected texts. The introduction states that “[a]n awareness of the meaning of names in their narratological context often leads to a deeper understanding of the messages intended by ancient authors and editors and enhances our appreciation of the meaning of the temple and its ordinances which are, among many things, very name-centric” (lviii). Each of the book’s 16 chapters expands on this through well-researched etymological exposition that is both grounded in the grammar of ancient Semitic languages and previous work done by Nibley, Tvedtnes, and others. This is no easy feat, as there is often no primary text available for comparison, a fact that severely limits definitive linguistic answers. Despite this limitation, Bowen conscientiously extrapolates an astounding amount of data from what is recorded in the translated text.

For example, in chapter 13, “Place of Crushing: Heshlon,” co-written with Pedro Olavarria, the authors discuss the possibility that the name of the plains in which Coriantumr and Shared battle (Ether 13:28) is a toponym originally translated by Mosiah from the Jaredite record. In his abridgement of the text, Moroni later augments the name through a chiasmic construction of the passage. The authors demonstrate that Joseph Smith left the toponym untranslated, as opposed to those of Desolation and Bountiful, which emphasize place meaning over name (Alma 63:5, 3 Nephi 3:23; see also 237). They further show how, “...the untranslated toponym ‘Heshlon,’ serves as a kind of literary cenotaph for what eventually happened to both the Jaredites and Nephites due to their failure to heed prophetic warnings: they were crushed and ultimately destroyed” (238). This discussion of the etymological background of Ether establishes an additional layer in the Book of Mormon translation process, yet the authors navigate the potential historical and linguistic implications with a studied grasp of the text.

Linguistic extrapolation aside, the book reveals its true strength in Bowen’s dedication to broadening onomastic wordplay from literary device into theological commentary. He utilizes onomastic analysis as a springboard to discuss the larger theological composition of the text and the meaning it provides. “‘See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up’: Zoram and the Rameumptom” (141) is an exemplary model of the type of multi-layer onomastic wordplay central to Bowen’s proposed readings. In this chapter, the wordplay begins with Zoram himself (1 Nephi 4 and 2 Nephi 1) and continues with “several of Zoram’s descendants

(e.g., Zoram<sup>3</sup>, Jacob<sup>2</sup>, Amalickiah, Ammoron, and Tubaloth) [as they become] some of the most infamous and notorious figures in the long Lamanite-Nephite history as Mormon recounts it. The name Zoram (one who is high/exalted) receives distinctly pejorative treatment from the time of the great Zoramite apostasy and the rise of Amalickiah” (141).

Using the momentum gained from the proposed etymology of Zoram, Bowen proceeds to connect both the texts that deal with the thematic element of being high/lifted up (1 Nephi 11:34–36 and Jacob 2:13, Alma 31:8–14, 21, etc.) and the figures who are specifically named as having Zoramite heritage. Bowen then presents a new analysis of the history of those who identify as Zoramites throughout Book of Mormon, questioning whether their status as a clan/tribe was similar to that of the Nephites and their subsumed tribes (148). By drawing out Zoram’s silent character through analysis of wordplay on his name and establishing him as a founding figure whose people are then individualized outside the foremost tribal dichotomy, the identity attached to Lamanite and Nephite tribes is recast into a more complex societal structure.

Herein Bowen’s holistic approach to the narrative is highlighted. Reaching across history and authors, he analyzes the text’s construction with the abridger in mind, seeking out that which was intended by the original author(s) and connecting it to the abridger’s discourse. By coupling this viewpoint with precise analysis of the narrative’s poetic structure, emphasis on thematic words/phrases, and more, expanded patterns emerge and provide new insight into the nuanced nature of the text in question. That nuance is then applied to the narrative’s argument, showing that “The Zoramites and their apostasy represent a type of Latter-day Gentile pride and apostasy, of which Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni warned repeatedly” (liv). A greater relevance for narratological structure is achieved by connecting the text to the author’s intent toward the reader.

If Bowen’s intention was to convince his readers that no scripture is written in a vacuum, he has greatly succeeded. Across the 306 pages of this work, he unravels the intricacies that name-based literary constructions produce. He expands the texts in question to match the rendered data, thereby elucidating greater connection and meaning for the entire work. Each suggestion is tendered with impeccable linguistic and grammatical analysis and is appropriately attentive to the detail such an examination requires. Even while tackling more challenging passages, the nuanced arguments admit limitation while simultaneously pushing the envelope regarding meaning and intent. On a personal note, I found that *Name as Key-Word* provided new perspective and gave me

the framework to approach Mormon scripture with fresh eyes, bridging previously isolated pockets of information into a new, more connected viewpoint on the narrative I love. The book achieves its intended goal. Through study of the meaning and placement of names in Mormon scripture's narrative, Bowen provides readers with internal theological perspective as well as an expanded commentary on the utility of the text in answering today's religious questions.

**Amanda Colleen Brown** is a graduate student in Bible and the Ancient Near East at The Hebrew University at Jerusalem, where she focuses on Akkadian literature, Israelite popular religion, and women in the Hebrew Bible. She previously graduated from Brigham Young University with a bachelor's degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies. She is also passionate about percussive dance styles, literature, and travel.