

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 24 · 2017 · Pages 11-26

Meeting Zoram

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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MEETING ZORAM

Collin Charles Russell

Abstract: Zoram, the servant of Laban, is a character from the Book of Mormon who is only mentioned a few times and on whom little information is given. This article analyzes what information is given in the Book of Mormon and contextualizes its historical background, all coupled with the observations of Latter-day Saint Church leaders and scholars. Insight is provided concerning Zoram's Hebraic descent in the tribe of Manasseh and his working duties under Laban's command, along with how all this affected his role in assisting Lehi's family. The meaning of his name in Hebrew and possible correlations to the meaning of his life's events are explained. The oath between Nephi and Zoram is discussed, and the debate regarding whether Zoram was a slave or servant is addressed, to show that he was likely a free servant.

Zoram, the servant of Laban, is a minor character introduced early in the Book of Mormon but mentioned only by name seven times in the text (1 Nephi 4:35; 4:37; 16:7; 2 Nephi 1:30; 5:6; Alma 54:23). Very little information is given about him, yet he is still an important figure. An entire nation rises from his seed. His assistance to Nephi was crucial in obtaining the brass plates, which taught the gospel to all Lehi's descendants. He also became an example of loyalty and trust. By examining what information we have about Zoram in the scriptures along with academic research dealing with his time, we can draw many additional conclusions about Zoram as an individual. This paper explores reasonable possibilities pertaining to Zoram's lineage, occupational duties, degree of servitude, and his relationship with Lehi's family.

Zoram as a Hebrew

Understanding whether or not Zoram belonged to the House of Israel is vital in determining more about his life. Zoram lived in Jerusalem, an Israelite city. He also appears to have observed the Law of Moses,¹ which conclusion can be assumed, based on the implications of the verses about his marriage. In 1 Nephi 16:7, “Zoram took the eldest daughter of Ishmael to wife.” This selection was most likely made according to the Law of Moses because it was commanded by the Lord (1 Nephi 7:2) and because the members of Lehi’s party “would have followed the Law of Moses.”² According to the law, intermarriage with non-Israelites was condemned (Deuteronomy 7:3; cf. Genesis 24:3; Judges 14:3; Malachi 2:11).³ Thus it may be assumed that this family would not allow the Hebrew daughter of Ishmael to marry Zoram unless he was an Israelite. The idea of Zoram as a convert to Judaism is improbable; there is currently no evidence of pre-exilic conversions to Judaism.⁴

1. The Law of Moses is “the whole collection of written laws given through Moses to the house of Israel.” See “Bible Dictionary: Law of Moses,” <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/law-of-moses?lang=eng>.

2. John W. Welch, “Lehi’s Last Will and Testament: A Legal Approach,” in *Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 63.

3. R. K. Bower and G. L. Knapp, “Marriage,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, fully revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 264: “Marriages with foreigners were strictly opposed.”

4. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 42. This source explains that conversion, as it is defined today, did not occur in pre-exilic times. This argument is generally supported in Biblical studies. Also see Louis H. Feldman, “The Success of Proselytism by Jews in the Hellenistic and Early Roman Periods,” in *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Novak “Proselytism in Judaism” in *Sharing the Book: Religious Perspectives on the Rights and Wrongs of Proselytism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 18–22. Although conversion did not seem to have occurred, *assimilation* did occur in the northern region of Israel (Mordecai Cogan, “Into Exile” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 356–58). Perhaps assimilation practices reached Jerusalem during this period, but these people were still separated into a lower class than native Israelites, which renders problematic the possibility of an intermarriage.

Zoram as Part of the Tribe of Manasseh

Arguments pointing toward the possibility of Zoram belonging to a particular tribe of Israel also strengthens the theory that Zoram was a Hebrew. Joseph Smith explained that the Book of Mormon specifically exhibits the presence of just three tribes in the Promised Land: Manasseh, Ephraim, and Judah.⁵

There are arguments for Zoram's belonging to each of those tribes,⁶ but the most convincing evidence leads toward Zoram being from the tribe of Manasseh.⁷ Laban, a descendant of Joseph, was likely related to Lehi, given that both their lineages are written on the plates of brass (1 Nephi 5:16).⁸ Since we know Lehi was from the tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3), some may tentatively assume that Laban was also from the tribe of Manasseh.⁹ This information may relate to Zoram: "Elder Orson Pratt thought that, from Zoram's being worthy to hold the keys of the treasury and of the sacred brass plates, he was probably of the same tribe as Laban,"¹⁰ which makes Zoram also from the tribe of

5. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:185, <http://jod.mrm.org/23/181>; this source will be explained later in this section. This quote does not appear in the Joseph Smith Papers.

6. Del DowDell, "More Comments from Readers – Part VI," NephiCode.com Blog, December 16, 2014, <http://nephicode.blogspot.com/2014/12/more-comments-from-readers-part-vi.html>; "The Stick of Ephraim," *Millennial Star* vol. 68, no. 12 (22 March 1906): 189–91, <https://archive.org/details/millennialstar6812eng>; Troy J. Smith, "The Identity of the King-Men" in *The War against Christianity: History and Geography of Ancient America in the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2016), 121.

7. There are arguments that Zoram belonged to other tribes or was even a non-Israelite, but I do not discuss them in detail here. For example, Hugh Nibley suggests that Zoram could even be a Phoenician or a Canaanite. See Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990*, 4 parts (Provo and American Fork, UT: FARMS and Covenant Communications, 2004), 28. But these possibilities are not strongly supported or do not align with the idea that Zoram was an Israelite.

8. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on The Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 1:36–37; K. Douglas Bassett, *Doctrinal Insights on The Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2007), 24–25.

9. Robert E. Lund, "Zoram and the Zoramites: A study of Zoram and his posterity," in *Ancient Legal Systems in the Scriptures: Student papers submitted to Prof. John W. Welch*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, 1995), 4.

10. George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1957), 33.

Manasseh. Studies have also noted that nepotism was widely practiced in the Ancient Near East, showing that preference was given to family members in appointments to political power.¹¹ To fortify this argument, it would make sense that Laban would employ relatives, perhaps close relatives, to Zoram's position, because it was a post that would require considerable trust and loyalty.¹²

This argument is written by Erastus Snow, which he claimed to have learned from Joseph Smith. Elder Snow taught that the marriages unifying the families of Lehi and Ishmael were a completion of a prophecy by Jacob upon Ephraim and Manasseh: "and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Genesis 48:16). Elder Snow reported that Joseph Smith taught,

thus these descendants of Manasseh and Ephraim grew together upon this American continent, with a sprinkling from the house of Judah, from Mulek descended, who left Jerusalem eleven years after Lehi, and founded the colony afterwards known as Zarahemla and found by Mosiah — thus making a combination, an intermixture of Ephraim and Manasseh with the remnants of Judah, and for aught we know, the remnants of some other tribes that might have accompanied Mulek.¹³

If Elder Snow is correct, his claim that the tribe of Judah came to the Americas only through Mulek would rule out theories that Zoram may have been from the tribe of Judah. It has already been established that

11. One of the proposed interpretations of Isaiah 22:23–25 refers to the implementation of nepotism, which, according to Ed. Reuss, "in the Ancient East it was the rule." See Adolf Kamphausen, "Isaiah's Prophecy Concerning the Major-Domo of King Hezekiah," in *The American Journal of Theology*, Volume 5 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1901), 57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3153349.pdf>. Also see Charles J. Elliott, "Isaiah 22:24" in *Ellicott's Bible Commentary: Volume 2* (Harrington, DE: Delmarva Publications, Inc., 2015).

12. Lund, "Zoram and the Zoramites," 5.

13. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 23:185. This statement holds weight only if Joseph Smith was considering Zoram when making this statement, which cannot be determined by the information provided by Erastus Snow. Also, we do not know if Joseph Smith was speaking prophetically under the inspiration of the Spirit, or simply from his own understanding after studying the Book of Mormon, including the missing 116 pages. Although both origins can still provide insight worth considering, this question should be put into account in considering the strength of this source.

Zoram's descendants would have the blood of Ephraim in them through their mother, but there is not sufficient evidence to infer that Zoram was from the tribe of Ephraim. We can at best conclude that Zoram was from the tribe of Manasseh.

Zoram's Occupation under Laban's Command

To understand more about Zoram's occupation, we should first develop Laban's character. Laban was a powerful man politically and religiously, with military background, and was possibly even "military governor of [the] whole region" or was closely associated with this position,¹⁴ since he was able to "command fifty" (1 Nephi 3:31), wore armor, had a sword (1 Nephi 4:19), and was custodian of the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:13; 3:25). He was also probably a prominent political and religious figure, since he spent his last evening with the "elders of the Jews" (1 Nephi 4:22), the religious leaders of Jerusalem, who also held the higher positions in the social and political hierarchy and were "leading community members."¹⁵ If Laban was meeting with these elders, he likely held an influential position in Jerusalem, especially when his treasury, which included the brass plates, is considered. This would be a great sign of his wealth and political power as well as his ancestry. The brass plates would be a sign of influence because the genealogy inscribed upon them may have "served several royal purposes."¹⁶ The brass plates were also current, since they contained the words of Jeremiah (1 Nephi 5:13), who was held in prison during the time of Lehi's departure (1 Nephi 7:14).

With this understanding of Laban in mind, let us consider how this aids our understanding of Zoram. Since Laban was a military leader, perhaps Zoram himself had a military background or was even a military leader under Laban's command.¹⁷ Zoram was most likely unmarried at the time he left Jerusalem, since "men became eligible for military

14. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert: The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Publishing, 1952), 111.

15. Daniel H. Ludlow *et al.*, *Unlocking the Book of Mormon: A Side-By-Side Commentary* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, Inc., 2007), 9.

16. John W. Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon" in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 431.

17. Lund, "Zoram and the Zoramites," 2.

service at age 20,”¹⁸ but men typically married many years later, typically closer to 30 years old.¹⁹

If Zoram were a military leader, one might wonder how Nephi was able to overcome him (1 Nephi 4:31). We know that Nephi was large in stature but still much younger than Zoram and had no similar military training. One possible explanation is that God bestowed sufficient “strength of the Lord” on Nephi to take control of the situation (1 Nephi 4:31). Also to consider is that to “seize upon” can also simply mean to “take hold of”; it does not necessarily signify that Nephi immobilized Zoram.²⁰ Nephi’s strength simply allowed him to keep Zoram from running away by taking hold of him. Additionally, military training does not always equate with physical strength. Nephi, although not military trained, could still be physically stronger than a military leader like Zoram. This strength, combined with Nephi’s zeal and Zoram’s surprise, could have allowed Nephi to overcome Zoram.

As Laban’s servant, Zoram may have held other potential responsibilities during his time. Having access to the brass plates in Laban’s treasury, he himself may have been the scribe that kept the brass plates current.²¹ This also coincides with how “the term [treasury] often denoted what we would today call a library.”²² Because the brass plates

18. Richard A. Gabriel, *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 88.

19. Martha T. Roth, “Age at Marriage and the Household: A Study of Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Forms,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (October 1987), 737.

20. “Webster’s Dictionary 1828,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Seize>.

21. A. Keith Thompson, “Who Was Sherem?,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 11, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/who-was-sherem/>. Karel Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 59 suggested: “Most students who had completed only the first phase of the scribal study program would find a place in the administration; there was a steady demand for clerks and scribes. Others might enter the service of private estates and merchant houses.” Zoram may have been either a scribe assigned to Laban from the administration (given Laban’s presumed role in the Jerusalem government), or a perhaps a scribe of Laban’s private estate.

22. John A. Tvedtnes. “Books in the Treasury” in *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*. (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies, 2000), 155. <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1083&index=12>

were kept current,²³ and Zoram “was responsible for the treasury and its contents,”²⁴ perhaps Laban would bring Zoram to hear Jeremiah’s teachings.²⁵ Zoram could then keep record of what that prophet taught. Laban surely kept other valuables inside his treasury; possibly all his gold and money were located in a personal financial center. If this is the case, Zoram may have held other duties along with being a scribe, such as librarian, financial clerk, or accountant.²⁶

Zoram: Slave or Servant?

Throughout the Book of Mormon, Zoram is given the title of “servant.” However, there appears to be an even divide among scholars concerning Zoram’s position: half calling him a “servant,”²⁷ the other half a “slave.”²⁸ Such a division of opinion may spark many questions pertaining to forms of servitude and whether Zoram was indeed a servant or a slave. For example, the term *ebed* in Hebrew, the language used by the Jews, can be translated as both “servant” and “slave.” Also, many people interpret 1 Nephi 4:33 to mean that Nephi was *liberating* Zoram, “that he should be a free man like unto us,” as if he were not a free man to begin with. In this section, I review these arguments.

If Zoram were a Hebrew, we can all but eliminate the idea that he was a slave. Hebrews were prohibited from holding other Hebrews as slaves. The only possible exception is that Hebrews could work as debt servants if they could not repay a debt. This servitude was only for a space of seven years unless the slave desired to stay with the master in order to remain with his own family — if the slave had formed a family during

23. The brass plates contained prophecies “even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Nephi 5:13), which is the same time Lehi’s family left Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:4).

24. Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Miracles of the Book of Mormon*, (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2015), 13.

25. Laban could have been one of the princes mentioned in Jeremiah 38:27. The term “princes” also refers to military captains and officials, like Laban. (See “Lexicon: Strong’s H8269 – sar,” *Blue Letter Bible*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=h8269>).

26. Lund, “Zoram and the Zoramites,” 1, 3.

27. Thompson, “Who Was Sherem?” 11; Hugh W. Nibley, “Lecture 59 Alma 46,” 34.

28. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up’: The Name Zoram and Its Paronomastic Pejoration,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2016): 114, 118; Robert L. Millet, *Magnifying Priesthood Power* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2008), 15.

those seven years (Exodus 21:2-6). This is unlikely if we assume that Zoram was single during his time as Laban's servant. Another option for Israelites who had "waxen poor" was to become a "hired servant ... unto the year of jubilee," but this term is specifically contrasted in these verses with the title "bondservant" (Leviticus 25:39-43).²⁹

In light of Zoram's responsibilities under Laban's command, Hugh Nibley was convinced that Zoram was "no mere slave."³⁰ No Hebrew bond-slave could attain to such a position in fewer than seven years of employment. The term *ebed*, aside from meaning "slave," has several other interpretations. "*Ebed* means 'slave' in the Bible, except where it is used to signify a servant of the king, i.e., a royal officer."³¹ *Ebed* might also mean "adjutant," a military officer who acts as an administrative assistant to a senior officer.³² These translations appear to coincide better with the positions Zoram held in Laban's employment, especially the latter, given that Laban had a military background, and Zoram likely did also.

Also, if we examine Nephi's oath, it becomes apparent that he may not have implied a previous state of bondage. Nephi promises "that he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto [Nephi and his family]" (1 Nephi 4:33). Zoram's vision would have been weakened by the nighttime darkness (1 Nephi 4:5), so he may have thought Nephi and his brothers were Babylonians or members of another foreign group. We know the Babylonians took Jerusalem captive shortly after Nephi's departure, so Zoram easily could have been concerned that he would

29. One substantial argument against this reasoning is the difference between written and practiced law at this time in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was wicked at the time of Lehi's departure (1 Nephi 1:13; 3:17), and Laban was a wicked man (1 Nephi 4:13). This wickedness included disobedience to many laws, including laws pertaining to the enslavement of Hebrews.

30. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1957), 109.

31. W. F. Albright, "The Seal of Eliakim and the Latest Preëxilic History of Judah, with Some Observations on Ezekiel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51, no. 2 (June 1932): 79-80, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3259097?seq=3#page_scan_tab_contentsrk. Also see Peter R. Ackoyd, *The Chronicler in His Age* (Sheffield, UK: JOST Press, 1991), 20; Nachman Avigad, "New Light on the Na'arSeals," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 294.

32. Alfred Bertholet, *A History of Hebrew Civilization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 247.

become enslaved to them.³³ In this light, Nephi does not promise to liberate Zoram from preexisting bondage, rather to free Zoram from entering bondage to Nephi himself.

A final and simple reason to believe that Zoram was likely a servant and not a slave pertains to the translation process of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith. If the Hebraic word can be translated to mean both “slave” and “servant,” should we assume that Joseph Smith chose at random which term to use when the word came up in translation? The term *slave* appears five times in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 2:13; 7:15; Alma 27:8; 27:9; 3 Nephi 3:7), showing that Joseph Smith could differentiate two different meanings while translating. Understanding that the Book of Mormon was translated by the power of God, we can assume that when Zoram is referred to as a “servant,” he is just that. If he were a slave, the Book of Mormon would call him a *slave*. *Slave* and *servant* had different meanings at the time of Joseph Smith,³⁴ but these two terms may not have a meaningful difference in antiquity, which is a counterargument worth taking into account.³⁵

Zoram’s Role in Lehi’s Family

Given Zoram’s occupation under Laban’s command and the skill set he likely held, Zoram must have played an important role in Nephite society. Because there were few people in Lehi’s party, they likely took advantage of all Zoram’s occupational capabilities in developing their new society. We know Nephi was skilled in working with metals and was familiar with the process of melting and forging metals,³⁶ but Zoram may have assisted him in forming the plates of Nephi and may have taught Nephi metal engraving based on his personal experience as scribe of the brass

33. There were prophecies alluding to Babylon’s destruction and invasion of Jerusalem, and Babylon’s invasion could have been discernible considering the political tension with the Babylonian empire. See Irving M. Zeitlin, “The Babylonian Empire” in *Jews: The Making of a Diaspora People* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012).

34. “Webster’s Dictionary 1828,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Servant> and “Webster’s Dictionary 1828,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/slave>.

35. This argument relies on a theory of “tight-control” translation. For more information on tight-control translation, see Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1998): 22–31.

36. Neal Rappleye, “Lehi the Smelter: New Light on Lehi’s Profession,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 223–25. Also, 1 Nephi 17:9, 2 Nephi 5:14.

plates. Brant Gardner and Neal Rappleye suggest that Nephi had been trained as a scribe in Jerusalem, an idea worth exploring.³⁷ If Zoram had a military background, he probably assisted Nephi in forming weaponry and military defenses as well. If Zoram was indeed a financial worker in the treasury of Laban, he may have been the one to teach the Nephites about the monetary system and help them establish one.³⁸

Etymology of the Name “Zoram”

All names from ancient scripture have a meaning or special interpretation. There are three possibilities as to the etymology of the name *Zoram* in Hebrew. The first interpretation is that Zoram means “flowing water or rain,” or “refreshing rain,” whereas the second interpretation suggests it could mean “rock,” “their rock,” or “rock of the people.”³⁹ The third suggested meaning is “the one who is high/exalted” or “he of the exalted one.”⁴⁰ All three interpretations are plausible and may shed greater light on Zoram’s character.

If Zoram’s name means “flowing water,” it may be a reference to Zoram’s faithfulness. When Lehi and his family first left Jerusalem, he saw a river and named the river Laman. Lehi uses this river to teach Laman that he should “be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness” (1 Nephi 2:9). Just as Lehi named the river after Laman in hopes of influencing Laman to pursue righteousness, Zoram may have been named to characterize the “running” or “flowing” of a river to represent his own righteousness.

37. Brant A. Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” *Mormon Studies Review*, 23/1 (2011): 45–55. Retrieved from <https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/MSR/article/view/35137/32963> and Neal Rappleye, “Nephi the Good: A Commentary on 1 Nephi 1:1–3,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/nephi-the-good-a-commentary-on-1-nephi-11-3/>

38. Lehi’s family was wealthy and would have a general understanding of personal accounting. Once Nephite society expanded, however, societal banking and accounting would need to be established. This could include the implementation of loans (see Exodus 22:25) as well as the establishment of account keeping for contractors (see Robert L. Hagerman, “Accounting in the Bible,” *The Accounting Historians Journal* 7/2 (Fall 1980), 71. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40697656>).

39. “Zoram,” *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson, online at <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/ZORAM>, last modified 2015.

40. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up’: The Name Zoram and Its Paronomastic Pejoration,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2016): 112–15.

With reference to the second interpretation, some⁴¹ believe that Zoram's name means "rock of the people," an allusion to the oath Zoram kept with Nephi. This is entirely plausible, because his name is not mentioned in the Book of Mormon until that oath is taken. "Since rock imagery can convey the idea of steadfastness, faithfulness, or reliability, it may be meant to convey his [Zoram's] faithful commitment to the oath he was making."⁴² Because Zoram was taken from Jerusalem with nothing, it is truly remarkable that there is no evidence of Zoram's murmuring during the journey, and he also remained faithful to the very end (2 Nephi 1:30–31). Zoram may have even received this name at the moment he accepted the oath, the same way Abraham and Israel received new names when they received new covenants and blessings in the Old Testament (Genesis 17:5; 35:10).⁴³

A new explanation regarding this interpretation may refer to Zoram's role in helping Nephi obtain the scriptures. It may have been only Zoram's help that permitted Nephi to obtain the plates. Zoram held the keys to the depository where the plates were kept, perhaps the only person other than Laban who knew the location of the plates within the treasury. Without the plates, the Nephite nation would "dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Nephi 4:13), for they "could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses save they should have the law ... [which] was engraven upon the plates of brass" (1 Nephi 4:15–16) and which contained both the law and the gospel. We are taught to "build upon my rock, which is my gospel" (D&C 11:24), which can be done only as we study the scriptures. Just as the Old Testament names of prophets and leaders signified events or blessings they had received, interpreting the name Zoram as "the rock" may signify this provision of the scriptures. Zoram was, in a way, the man who provided the "rock" to the Nephite people.

The third interpretation, "the one who is high/exalted" or "he of the exalted one," is the most recent proposal, made by Matthew Bowen. His argument focuses on the Zoramites' being "lifted up in pride" as well as the reference and parallels to the Zoramite Rameumpton. While this argument strongly connects with the Zoramites, Zoram himself shows submissive characteristics rather than pride, making this meaning

41. Neal Rappleye, "Names and Meaning: Zoram as a Case Study," FairMormon Blog, June 18, 2013, <http://blog.fairmormon.org/2013/06/18/names-and-meaning-zoram-as-a-case-study/>

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

less likely. This argument is also made difficult because the Zoramites were named after a contemporary leader of theirs named Zoram, not the Zoram who joined Lehi's family. However, Bowen does suggest, "Perhaps [Zoram's] name came to connote 'the one lifted up' out of bondage."⁴⁴ Many names and terms used in the scriptures hold such a double meaning.⁴⁵ Interestingly, this correlates with how Nephi "grants him [Zoram] his status as a free man [even 'lifted up' out of bondage], and he becomes known by his *own* name."⁴⁶

Regardless of which of the above translations is correct, each can relate to Zoram's experiences as described in 1 Nephi 4. These strong correlations may suggest the name *Zoram* was given him in the process of metonymic naming "used by Mormon, Moroni, or others" in the Book of Mormon.⁴⁷ Since the name *Zoram* is found on the small plates in the Book of Mormon, Nephi probably initiated the metonymic naming of Zoram. Mormon appears to have continued to take advantage of the rhetorical use of Zoram's name, especially if Matthew Bowen's interpretation is correct, which connects Zoram with the Zoramites throughout the rest of The Book of Mormon. Although the "rock" interpretation is the most inspiring and uplifting, Matt Bowen's interpretation is likely the most accurate etymology, given that its theme can be applied throughout the entire Book of Mormon.

The Oath between Nephi and Zoram

When Zoram followed Nephi outside the walls of Jerusalem, the moment came when Zoram realized that Nephi was not Laban. Overcome by fear, Zoram was about to run back to Jerusalem until Nephi overcame him and offered him the chance to take an oath. The oath Nephi offered, which Zoram accepted, held both temporal and eternal importance.

Here is an analysis of the promises kept on both sides through the oath. Nephi first promised Zoram he "would spare his life" (1 Nephi 4:32). Zoram could have thought Nephi and his brothers were savages or enemies, there to steal the plates at all costs. Nephi, sensing that fear,

44. Bowen, "Name Zoram and Its Paronomastic Pejoration," 114.

45. For example, *Zion* can be a reference to Jerusalem of Judah, the New Jerusalem on the American continent, or any gathering point for the Saints. Also, *Babylon* and its destruction described in Isaiah 13 can refer to Babylon itself in the time of Isaiah as well as the wicked nations at the time of the Second Coming.

46. Rappleye, "Names and Meaning."

47. Gordon C. Thomasson, "What's in a Name? Book of Mormon Language, Names, and [Metonymic] Naming," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 10.

made this promise to help Zoram understand that he and his brothers meant him no harm. For that same reason, Nephi promised that Zoram “should be a free man like unto [them]” (1 Nephi 4:33). Enslavement was another possible way to treat Zoram if he took the plates of brass to any group other than Lehi’s family. One of the most significant promises to Zoram was that Nephi’s “father shal[l] have place for [him]” (1 Nephi 4:34). Robert Lund believes that “Nephi promises Zoram full adoption as a son of Lehi.”⁴⁸ This practice of adult adoption was allowed by Near Eastern law, and “Israel certainly knew the custom” of adult adoption.⁴⁹

Zoram received an inheritance and blessing from Lehi in 2 Nephi 1:30–32, which stands as evidence that an adoption did take place.⁵⁰ Although Zoram “may have been older than all of Lehi’s sons,” he was still not considered the firstborn son after his adoption into Lehi’s family.⁵¹ That title was given to Laman (2 Nephi 4:3). Inheritance as an adopted son was both temporal and spiritual because of Zoram’s faithfulness in keeping his oath. Zoram was promised ownership of the land as long as he remained faithful, and by his obedience to the commandments, the land was promised to become “consecrated ... for the security of [Zoram’s] seed with the seed of [Nephi].”⁵² Zoram’s people lived righteously with the Nephites through most of the Book of Mormon (Jacob 1:13; 4 Nephi 1:36–37; Mormon 1:8). Lund also suggests that “the more important blessing was the eternal inheritance in the land Zoram would receive, ... [that] he would receive eternal life and have a plot of celestial land on this earth” for his obedience and faithfulness.⁵³

48. Lund, “Zoram and the Zoramites,” 7.

49. Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press: 2011), 194.

50. The idea of adoption raises a conflict with previously stated assumptions concerning Zoram’s tribal affiliation and assumptions concerning name etymology, which I address later. Zoram could have been Israelite but of a different tribe until he was adopted into Lehi’s family, who were of the tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3). Also, Zoram may have had a different name before the adoption, since Zoram is not called by this name until he accepts the oath and therefore accepts the terms of adoption (1 Nephi 4:35). It cannot be conclusively determined if these characteristics were first established and described through the adoption or previously instituted.

51. Keith J. Allred, “Who was Second Nephi?,” *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42/4, Winter 2009: 3.

52. Lund, “Zoram and the Zoramites,” 8.

53. *Ibid.*, 9.

Zoram, in return, promises Nephi that “he would go down in the wilderness with [the party]” (1 Nephi 4:33) and “tarry with [them] from that time forth” (1 Nephi 4:35), and he appears loyal to this promise, for he seems to stay with the Nephites during his lifetime. He could have escaped or left the traveling family at any time during the journey, but he chose not to. He could have stayed with Laman and Lemuel when the Nephites separated themselves from them. Instead, Zoram accepted the adoption and put forth effort to create a positive relationship with Lehi’s family. Lehi called Zoram “a true friend unto [his] son, Nephi, forever” (2 Nephi 1:30). It is evident that Zoram kept his part of the oath until Lehi’s death and likely throughout his entire life.

Oaths during this time were powerful due to their binding nature. The oath between Nephi and Zoram would have to be strong for their worries to cease so suddenly (1 Nephi 4:35,37). The vocabulary in the oath is crucial to understanding the binding nature of the oath. For an oath “to be most binding and solemn an oath should be by the *life* of something. ... The only oath more awful than that ‘by my life’ ... is the *wa hayat Allah* ‘by the life of God,’ or ‘as the Lord Liveth.’”⁵⁴ Nephi’s promise was “the one oath that no man would dream of breaking, the most solemn of all oaths to the Semite,”⁵⁵ because he swore both “as the Lord liveth, and as I live” (1 Nephi 4:32). These powerful words alone make it easier to understand why the oath was fulfilled with such loyalty and why there was no concern it would be broken from the instant it was accepted.

Zoram’s Legacy

Long after Zoram’s death, his name continues on throughout the Book of Mormon. The Zoramites become a numerous tribe counted among both the Nephites and Lamanites at different times. Zoram’s name also held deep importance to all Lehi’s descendants. Ammoron, a Nephite traitor and declared Lamanite, claims his direct lineage from Zoram as a way to show authority and power over the Nephites (Alma 54:23). For this declaration to hold weight, Zoram had to be an important figure in Nephite communities. Two other people in the Book of Mormon are named Zoram: a Nephite chief captain and a Nephite apostate (Alma 16:5; Alma 31:1). Both were influential. Perhaps these individuals also used their names to spark support from others. This pattern is similar to how Mormon named his son Moroni, following the example

54. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 110.

55. *Ibid.*, 111.

of Captain Moroni,⁵⁶ and Helaman named his children Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5:6) — a reflection of how high an honor Zoram, servant of Laban, enjoyed in the Promised Land.

However, part of his legacy was skewed by Lamanite influence. Ammoron taught that Nephi and his family “pressed and brought [Zoram] out of Jerusalem” (Alma 54:23). “Pressed” at the time of Joseph Smith meant “urged by force or weight; constrained; distressed.”⁵⁷ Ammoron taught the story of Zoram as if Zoram were given no option but was taken against his will, when in reality, he was given an option. Ammoron’s use of this variation of the legacy of Zoram in a letter to Moroni is an example of how the Lamanites may have used the story of Zoram to fuel their hatred of the Nephites.

Conclusion

When Mormon abridged all the records into the Book of Mormon, he was divinely instructed on what to include (see 3 Nephi 28:25).⁵⁸ Thus, inclusion of Zoram’s story in The Book of Mormon indicates that there is value to the reader in understanding his character. “God intended to bring Zoram to the promised land and allowed him to take part in Lehi’s inheritance.”⁵⁹ Although a minor character, we can learn much from Zoram if we take time to examine his social background, heritage, name etymology, and other aspects of his life. Even though most of Zoram’s life remains conjectural, careful analysis sheds light on his possible background. Viewing Zoram as a Hebrew and from the tribe of Manasseh, working as a free servant of Laban with a military background working in several duties to protect and maintain the treasury of Laban, can be fruitful in making sense of Zoram’s character and potential contributions. We may never know many details of Zoram’s life, but this article provides, I hope, a more comprehensive depiction of Zoram.

56. Gary Layne Hatch, “Mormon and Moroni: Father and Son,” in *Fourth Nephi, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1995), 107.

57. “Webster’s Dictionary 1828,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/pressed>.

58. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon is the Word of God,” *Ensign*, May 1975, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1975/05/the-book-of-mormon-is-the-word-of-god?lang=eng>.

59. Lund, “Zoram and the Zoramites,” 8.

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