

not] a mindless shifting of our personal responsibility," Elder Maxwell declared. "Instead, it is tying ourselves to a living God who will introduce us—as soon as we are ready—to new and heavier responsibilities involving situations of high adventure. Obedience, therefore, is not evasion; it is an invasion—one that takes us deep into the realm of our possibilities."<sup>vvv7</sup>

#### Notes

1. Harold B. Lee, *Improvement Era*, Oct. 1962, 742.
2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 256.
3. James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75), 3:145.
4. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851-86), 13:158.
5. *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 65.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, *Notwithstanding My Weakness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1981), 59-60.
7. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980), 127.

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### The Personal Name 'Alma' at Ebla

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Critics of the Book of Mormon have often claimed that the personal name Alma is a cultural anachronism. Some have contended that Alma is a feminine, Latin-based name and that its appearance in the Book of Mormon demonstrates that the book is not what Joseph Smith claimed it to be. This challenge was answered in 1973 when Hugh Nibley pointed out that in one of the Bar-Kokhba documents, dated to the second century A.D., a lease written in Hebrew contains the name "Alma ben Judah."<sup>iiii1</sup> Recently, Paul Hoskisson, professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, examined this document and concluded that 'Im' or 'Imh, (as it is also spelled in the document) is a common Hebrew masculine name with a possible meaning of "lad of God."<sup>iiii2</sup> Additionally, in the archive of Ebla, the personal name "Alma" is found at least eight times in six separate documents dated to the end of the third millennium B.C. (On two of the tablets the name occurs twice.) In cuneiform the name is written al<sub>6</sub>-ma. Initially there was uncertainty on the part of some scholars about the reading of the first sign al<sub>6</sub> (this is reflected by the sign being rendered AL<sub>6</sub> in the transliterations of texts 1, 2 and 7 below). However, the reading al<sub>6</sub> has now been established at Ebla.<sup>iiii3</sup> Furthermore, scholars have understood and transliterated this name as Semitic (indicated by the name being written in italics in the transliteration), meaning that it is in the same basic language family as Hebrew. At the end of this article I have included a transliteration and translation of each of the passages in which the name is found.

These documents are all administrative in nature with the person Alma involved in various types of transactions. In several of the texts (5, 6 and 8), the name Alma is associated with the ancient city of Mari. In text 8, Alma is referred to as a "merchant" (lu-

kar) from Mari. It is not certain whether one individual is being referred to a number of times or if there are different people, each named Alma.

Of course, the occurrence of the name "Alma" in sources outside of the Book of Mormon does not necessarily prove that the book is true, especially since the time separating the texts in which the name is found is very great. However, the fact that Alma at Ebla and Alma in the Bar-Kokhba letters brackets the time Lehi left Jerusalem certainly allows the possibility that the name could have been part of the cultural tradition that Lehi and his family took with them to the new promised land. At the very least the claim by Book of Mormon critics that Alma is a feminine, Latin-based name which Joseph borrowed is greatly weakened. If Joseph was familiar with the name, he most likely knew it as a feminine name. That being the case, why would he have used the name for a male character? The fact that we now know that Alma is a good Semitic masculine name, which Joseph could not have possibly known, is further evidence that the Book of Mormon is exactly what Joseph Smith claimed it was.

### Occurrences of Alma at Ebla

- 1) *Archivi Reali di Ebla, Testi VII* 16 (TM.75.G.1368) r. V-5 tar bar<sub>6</sub>:ku / AL<sub>6</sub>-ma -  
*"Alma received thirty shekels of silver."*
- 2) *Archivi Reali di Ebla, Testi VII* 16 (TM.75.G. 1368) r. VIII 3 -10 gin DILMUN bar<sub>6</sub>  
:ku / AL<sub>6</sub>-ma - *"Alma received 10 'Dilmun' shekels of silver."*
- 3) *Studi Eblaiti IV* p. 155 (TM.75.G.1559) r. I 6 - 10 gin DILMUN bar<sub>6</sub>:ku / al-ma -  
*"Alma received 10 Dilmun shekels of silver." [p.55]*
- 4) *Studi Eblaiti IV* p. 155 (TM.75.G.1559) v. IV 4 1 - GIS-su bar<sub>6</sub>:ku / 5 ma-na bar<sub>6</sub>:ku /  
2 ku<sub>6</sub> zabar /1 aktum-TUG 1 ib-sa<sub>6</sub>-TUG 1 nig-la-gaba /1 nig-la-sag /1 gir mar-tu KA/  
alma I nig-AN.AN.AN.AN / ga-suf1 - *"Alma offers (a variety of objects) to the gods  
of Gasur."*
- 5) *Mari Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires 4* p. 76 (TM.75.G.2277) v. IX 18 -  
(2+2 garments) NE-NE a/<sub>6</sub>-ma su-du<sub>8</sub> ma-r/\*1 - *"PN and Alma deposit 2+2 garments as  
a pledge at Mari."*
- 6) *Mari Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires 4* p. 78 (TM.75.G.2507) r. XIX \*-19 -  
20 gin DILMUN bar<sub>6</sub>:ku nig-ba en-na-dda-gan ma-/\*1 10 gin DILMUN bar<sub>6</sub>:ku nig-ba  
a/<sub>6</sub>-ma ma-/\*1 - *"20 Dilmun shekels of silver are the gift of PN, 10 Dilmun shekels of  
silver are the gift of Alma of Mari."*
- 7) *Orientalia 54* p. 13 (TM.75.G.2542) r. II6-14 - sa-pi bar<sub>6</sub>:ku nig-ba a-zi AL<sub>6</sub>-ma -  
*"2/3 of a mina of silver are the gift of PN and Alma."*
- 8) *Mari Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires 4* p. 78 (TM.75.G.2644) r. VIII 10 -  
(4+4+4 garments.) PUZUR<sub>4</sub>.RA-dUTU ma-as-da-su a/<sub>6</sub>-ma bu-da-dda-gan lu-kar ma-r<sup>^</sup>  
*"(4+4+4 garments) for PN, PN, Alma, and PN, merchants of Mari"*

### Notes

1. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John Welch, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co. and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 281-82.  
A photograph of the first part of this document and a partial translation can be found in Yigal Yadin, *Bar Kokhba* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 176.

2. Paul Hoskisson, "Alma as a Hebrew Name," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, 72-73. This article includes a fine color photograph of the entire document.
3. On the reading  $al_6$  see Joachim Krecher, "Sumerogramme und Syllabische Orthographic in den Texten aus Ebla," *La Lingua di Ebla*, Series Minor XXII, ed. Luigi Cagni (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, 1981), 142.

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## The Message of Nicodemus

*Keith J. Wilson*

A common error of New Testament readers is to approach the four Gospels as a historical text. While it is true that these books contain much history, they were not written with that as their primary purpose. Instead, the four Gospels were written to persuade various audiences that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah and the literal Son of God, and each author endeavored through his perspective to present the case for the divine Jesus. The Gospel of John is a straightforward example of persuasive writing. John the Beloved writes with the express purpose, "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31), which is certainly a statement of strong predisposition or mindset. Additionally, the Prophet Joseph Smith changed the very title of the "Gospel of John" to read the "Testimony of John." A testimony seems to have a much smaller circumference than a gospel. For most people a testimony is bearing witness of a specific experience or truth. The same holds true for the apostle John. As he writes, he presents his prophetic witness of selected truths about the Savior, which he desires to impress upon all who will listen to his words. With the idea in mind that John is intentionally selecting certain historical facts to support his prophetic account, it is intriguing to examine a prominent individual who is exclusive to the New Testament record of John. Nicodemus, whose name means "conqueror of the people" in Greek, surfaces three times in the Gospel of John. The first mention of Nicodemus comes in the well-known exchange with Jesus about the doctrine of spiritual rebirth. The other two appearances are relatively brief, yet nonetheless, significant. Considering his stature, it seems odd that the other evangelists would fail to mention Nicodemus. Yet perhaps Nicodemus was not so much a synoptic omission as he was a Johannine inclusion. Apparently John sees a message in the man that the others overlook, one which allows him to testify, to instruct, and to lead all believers through his account of the man Nicodemus.

The fact that Nicodemus surfaces in just one account out of four is strong evidence that John may have caught and preserved some things which others did not. But this isolated testimony also presents a challenge within its very singularity. Is John's purpose for his presentation of Nicodemus abundantly clear or is there room for ambiguity in the Nicodemus message? I suggest that the answer is that John's presentation of Nicodemus' motives and actions yields considerable ambiguity.

Contemporary interpretations of Nicodemus generally separate into two areas of thought. One camp views Nicodemus as a cautious convert who grows more courageous as time passes and eventually shows himself as a devoted disciple. The second interpretation of Nicodemus posits that Nicodemus represents a reluctant witness who feels drawn to