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“POSSESS THE LAND IN PEACE”: ZENIFF’S IRONIC WORDPLAY ON *SHILOM*

Matthew L. Bowen

ABSTRACT: The toponym Shilom likely derives from the Semitic/Hebrew root š-l-m, whence also the similar-sounding word šālôm, “peace,” derives. The first mention of the toponym Shilom in Zeniff’s record — an older account than the surrounding material and an autobiography — occurs in Mosiah 9:6 in parallel with Zeniff’s mention of his intention to “possess the land in peace” (Mosiah 9:5). The language and text structure of Mosiah 9:5–6 thus suggest a deliberate wordplay on Shilom in terms of šālôm. Zeniff uses the name Shilom as a point of irony throughout his brief royal record to emphasize a tenuous and often absent peace between his people and the Lamanites.

Regarding the narratological wordplay on the name Absalom (“[my] father is peace”) in terms of *šālôm* (“peace”) and the verbal root *š-l-m* throughout 2 Samuel 13–20, Moshe Garsiel observes that “the entire story deals in a manner of the most pronounced irony with the absence of ‘peace’ between ‘father’ and son.”¹ It is, he notes, an example of the “ironic inconsistency of names to events” being deliberately highlighted by the biblical writer.²

This observation brings to mind word usage in the brief royal autobiography of Zeniff recorded in Mosiah 9–10. During his life and

1. Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hackett (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), 226. For the full discussion, see pp. 226–27.

2. *Ibid.* Capitalization altered.

reign, Zeniff fights multiple wars with the Lamanites and therefore appears to use the toponym *Shilom* in a similar, ironic³ way:

Mosiah 9:5

A. And it came to pass that **I went again** with four of my men into the city, **in unto the king**

B. **that I might know** the disposition of the king,

C. **that I might know if I might go in** with *my people*

D. and **possess the land in peace** [*šālôm*]

Mosiah 9:6

A' And **I went in unto the king**

B' and **he covenanted with me**

C' **that I might possess the land** of Lehi-Nephi,

D' and [possess] **the land of Shilom**

Zeniff's use of parallelistic language in Mosiah 9:5-6 strongly suggests his correlation of the *šlm*-derived⁴ name *Shilom* with "peace" — Hebrew *šālôm*. Since the Nephites were a Hebrew-speaking/writing people,⁵ this correlation makes good sense. We further note Zeniff's covenant use of the verb *know* (cf. Hebrew *yāda'*)⁶ in correlation with "he covenanted with me." Zeniff seeks a *bērīt šālôm* — a "covenant of

3. Zeniff uses ironic wordplay involving the Lamanites having "that which was good among them," like the Nephites ("good[ly] ones," "fair ones") his autobiographical introduction (Mosiah 9:1). See Matthew L. Bowen, "O Ye Fair Ones — Revisited," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 326-27. Zeniff may also have used an additional wordplay on the name *Zarahemla* in terms of the "sparing" of some of the original party of colonists. See David E. Bokovoy and Pedro Olavarria, "Zarahemla: Revisiting the 'Seed of Compassion,'" *Insights* 30/5 (2010): 2-3.

4. *Shilom* most likely derives from the Semitic/Hebrew root *š-l-m*, "to be whole, or complete." See Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Shilom," *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/SHILOM>.

5. See, e.g., Mormon 9:33. See also John Tvedtnes, "'I Have a Question: Since the Book of Mormon is largely the record of a Hebrew people, is the writing characteristic of the Hebrew language?'" *Ensign* (October 1986): 65.

6. On the use of "know" as a covenant term in the Book of Mormon, see RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, "Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 48-61, 128-29.

peace,"⁷ or what we would today call a "peace treaty" — on terms of equality with the king of the Lamanites.

Unfortunately for Zeniff and his people, the Lamanites do not view the resultant "peace" treaty in the same way. The Lamanite king, for his part, views Zeniff as his vassal "servant,"⁸ and war swiftly ensues. Zeniff notes that the "peace" is first violated by the Lamanites in the land of Shilom:

Now they were a lazy and an idolatrous people; therefore they were **desirous to bring us into bondage**, that they might glut themselves with the labors of our hands; yea, that they might feast themselves upon the flocks of our fields. Therefore it came to pass that **king Laman began to stir up his people that they should contend with my people; therefore there began to be wars and contentions in the land**. For, in the thirteenth year of my reign in the land of Nephi, away **on the south of the land of Shilom**, when my people were watering and feeding their flocks, and tilling their lands, **a numerous host of Lamanites came upon them and began to slay them**, and to take off their flocks, and the corn of their fields.
(Mosiah 9:12-14)

Following breaking of the "peace" and peace treaty at Shilom, Zeniff reports that he and his people "did go forth in [the Lord's] might; yea, we did go forth against the Lamanites, and in one day and a night we did slay three thousand and forty-three; we did slay them even until we had driven them out of our land. And I, myself, with mine own hands, did help to bury their dead. And behold, to our great sorrow and lamentation, two hundred and seventy-nine of our brethren were slain" (Mosiah 9:17-19). Thus ended the first of many subsequent bloody wars between the Zeniffites and the Lamanites.⁹

7. In the Hebrew Bible (OT), this expression occurs in such passages as Numbers 25:12; Isaiah 54:10; Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26. We recall that Zeniff mentions that he had wanted the leader of the previous, failed Nephite expedition to re-inherit the land of Nephi to "make a treaty" (Hebrew *kārat bērit*, "cut a covenant") with the Lamanites (Mosiah 9:2). Having assumed the leadership of this group of Nephites, Zeniff obtains his initial stated purpose.

8. See especially Mosiah 9:10.

9. Following the initial war chronicled in Mosiah 9, subsequent wars between the Zeniffites and Lamanites occur in Mosiah 10:6-20; 11:16-19; 20:7-26; 21:1-8; 11-12; cf. Mosiah 7:18.

In the very next verse Zeniff states that “peace” (*šālôm*) was restored: “And it came to pass that we again began to establish the kingdom and we again began to **possess the land in peace**. And I caused that there should be weapons of war made of every kind, that thereby I might have weapons for my people **against the time the Lamanites should come up again to war against my people**” (Mosiah 10:1). Yet even in chronicling his people’s “peace,” Zeniff already directs his audience to the inevitable and imminent breaking of that peace.

As it happens, the Zeniffites enjoy a more-than-two-decade respite from war: “thus we did have continual **peace** [*šālôm*] in the land for the space of twenty and two years” (Mosiah 10:5). Inevitably, however, the threat of war resumes when a new king ascends to the throne (see Mosiah 10:6–7). Zeniff, at this later point in time, seems to view his own kingship as sovereign or superior to that of the Lamanite king — i.e., he describes the Lamanites as coming out “in rebellion” against him and his people (Mosiah 10:6). The Lamanites violate the peace treaty (*bērît šālôm*) and the “peace” again at Shilom: “And it came to pass that they came up upon the north of the land of **Shilom, with their numerous hosts, men armed with bows, and with arrows, and with swords, and with cimeters, and with stones, and with slings**; and they had their heads shaved that they were naked; and they were girded with a leathern girdle about their loins” (Mosiah 10:8). Some of the final scenes of Zeniff’s life (“in [his] old age”) have him “stimulat[ing]” his people “to go to battle” against the Lamanites and “contending with them face to face” (Mosiah 10:10, 19).

Just as the name *Absalom* (“father is peace”) and *šālôm/š-l-m* dramatically and ironically emphasize the absence of “peace” between father and son in the David-Absalom cycle (2 Samuel 13–20), Zeniff’s juxtaposition of the name Shilom alternatively with “peace” (*šālôm*) and with “war” terminology serves the same function throughout his autobiography. For Zeniff, the name *Shilom* served as the bittersweet symbol of a mostly tenuous “peace” with the Lamanites in whom he had once seen “Nephite”-like “good” (Mosiah 9:1)¹⁰ and an ironic reminder of the ever-looming reality of war and bloodshed in the lives of his people.

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10. Bowen, “O Ye Fair Ones’ — Revisited,” 326–27.

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