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Onomasticon

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**Abstract** Review of *I Know Thee by Name: Hebrew Roots of Lehi-ite Non-Biblical Names in the Book of Mormon* (1995), by Joseph R. and Norrene V. Salonimer.

**Joseph R. and Norrene V. Salonimer. *I Know Thee by Name: Hebrew Roots of Lehi-ite Non-Biblical Names in the Book of Mormon*. Independence, Mo.: Salonimer, 1995. xii +137 pp., with appendices and bibliography. \$14.20.**

Reviewed by John A. Tvedtnes

### **What's in a Name? A Look at the Book of Mormon Onomasticon**

Since the appearance of the Book of Mormon in 1830, critics and believers alike have sought to explain the origin and meaning of the more than 200 nonbiblical names in the Nephite record. Critics have typically assumed that Joseph Smith modified either the names of people and places known to him from his northeastern United States environment or names he found in the Bible. Believers have shown that many of the names have good Hebrew and Egyptian etymologies and thus constitute evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The Salonimers, who appear to be adherents of the RLDS faith,<sup>1</sup> fall into the latter category, though they provide only Hebrew etymologies, never Egyptian. On the title page, they describe the book's contents in these words: "By reversing traditional Hebrew to English transliteration phonetics, the authors find a predominance of Hebrew roots for the names of persons, places and things given by the family of Lehi and their descendants" (capitalization changed). They claim that "of the Lehi-ite names in the Book of Mormon . . . more than 80% . . . can now be so identified that they accord with Hebrew onomastics" (p. 15).

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Mormon references used in the book are those found in the RLDS edition, though an "addendum," in the form of a printed insert, lists all RLDS references and gives the equivalents found in the LDS edition.

Despite what appears to be a large investment in time, the book is so full of errors that I cannot recommend it to the serious Book of Mormon student. The authors' knowledge of Hebrew is simply not up to the task they undertake. Indeed, the situation is summed up by the mistake made in their quotation from Mormon 9:33: "if we could have written in the Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no inperfection [*sic*] in our record" (p. 13).

The first clue that the Salonimers' grasp of Hebrew is inadequate lies in the subtitle to the book, in which they use the term *Lehi-ite*. Since the gentilic deriving from Nephi is Nephite, one would expect that the gentilic of Lehi would be Lehite. Throughout their etymologies, the Salonimers provide evidence for their minimal exposure to Hebrew grammar. For example, they give the meaning of "Blessed of Yah" to *Jeberechiah*, despite the fact that the name is a verbal form and means "Yah (Jehovah, the Lord) blesses" or "Yah will bless." In rendering *Immanuel* as "God with us," they are obviously relying on the King James rendition of Matthew 1:23 (where the name is spelled Emmanuel), taken from the Greek. The name actually means "God is with us" and is a sentence.<sup>2</sup> Had the Salonimers known Hebrew better, they would have rendered it thus.

In preparing their book, the Salonimers have made a number of incorrect assumptions. For example, they write that "the mode of transliteration from the Biblical Hebrew spelling in the Hebrew Old Testament to the English spelling in the King James Old Testament is consistent" (p. xi). But since the King James Bible was translated by a committee of nearly fifty people, there is a certain measure of inconsistency in the transliteration of names. Thus, for example, the Hebrew name usually rendered Joshua is spelled Jehoshua in Numbers 13:16 and 1 Chronicles 7:27, while the name usually rendered Samuel appears as Shemuel in Numbers 34:20 and 1 Chronicles 6:33; 7:2. Similarly, the name that appears as Isaiah fifteen times in the book of that name and in several other Old Testament passages (twelve times in 2 Kings 19–20 and in 2 Chronicles 26:22; 32:20, 32) is transliterated differently in other parts of the King James Bible. Thus, it appears as Jesaiah in

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<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew equational sentence does not use the copula ("to be" verb), the meaning being expressed by syntax alone.

1 Chronicles 3:21 and Nehemiah 11:7 and as Jeshaiiah in 1 Chronicles 25:3, 15; 26:25, and Ezra 8:7, 19. Ironically, though they state their intention to adhere to KJV spelling conventions, the Salonimers depart therefrom. For example, they use the spelling Beershebah (p. 18), which never appears in the KJV.

The authors spend a good deal of time trying to explain Hebrew phonology to the reader. Some of their statements are simply incorrect, while others provide more detail than the English reader needs in order to understand Book of Mormon names. Thus, for example, they make a point of the difference between the Hebrew letter *bet* with and without the dot (*dagesh*) in the middle, noting that the former is pronounced "B as in Boy," the latter "V as in Vine." They then transliterate the biblical name Abraham as "Ahv-raw-hawm" (p. 26). I believe that this can only confuse the reader, since the Book of Mormon spelling of the name is, in fact, the same as that of the King James Bible. Besides, the difference between the two written forms of *bet*, invented by the Masoretic scribes, is only perceived by later nonspeakers of Hebrew. To the ancient Israelite, these were mere allophones of the same phoneme and were therefore not distinguishable. Thus, when it appeared after a vowel, the native speaker of Lehi's day would automatically have aspirated the sound *b* (it later became a fricative, *v*). We have a similar situation in English, where native speakers perceive no difference between the *k* sound of *caw* and *key*, despite the fact that the former is pronounced by placing the tongue farther back than the latter (to correspond with the placement of the tongue when pronouncing the following vowel).

I find several problems with the Salonimers' identification of Book of Mormon names with Hebrew etymologies. Here are just a few of the many examples that could be cited.

1. *They fail to note that some Book of Mormon names have biblical equivalents.*

The following names are found in the Bible, a fact that the Salonimers' listing ignores: Akish, Antipas, Kish, and Timothy. It may well be that these Book of Mormon names do not have the same etymology as the biblical names, but one should note that they are found, with the same spelling, in both volumes of scripture.

2. *The derived meanings are sometimes nonsensical or illogical.*

Some of the meanings given by the Salominers just don't make sense, such as "where did he climb?" for *Antipas*, "not climbing" for *Antipus*, and "he squashed" for *Pachus*. And only Charlie Chan would name a son "five," which is the meaning they assign to *Chemish* (though, in fairness, one must note that *Chemish* was the fifth generation after *Lehi*). Johnny Five from the *Short Circuit* movies would be pleased. There are several much better etymologies for *Chemish*, one of which is "courageous," based on the Arabic cognate that Ibn Barun read into Exodus 13:18, making the Israelites go up out of Egypt "courageously" (rather than "harnessed" as in KJV or "in a rank of five" as others would have it).<sup>3</sup>

In an extreme case, the Salominers assign the Hebrew meaning "teaching/singing shining/mountain" to the name *Aaron* (p. 97), despite the fact that Bible scholars typically see an Egyptian origin for this name.

Drawing the name *Gid* from the word meaning "sinew, or tendon," they assign meanings of "sinew of Giddonah" to *Gidgiddonah* and "sinew of my Gideon" to *Gidgiddoni*, neither of which makes a lot of a sense. They have obviously never encountered reduplication or gemination in the Semitic languages.

Another etymology that makes little sense is the one given for *Jacobugath*, "Jacob with winepress." While it is true that the conjunction (normally rendered "and," but translated by the Salonimers as "with" in this example) can have the form *û*, it would do so only under specific phonological conditions that are not met in this name.<sup>4</sup> If we are really dealing with the Hebrew element for "winepress" (*gat*), the *u* is more likely the old nominative case ending and the name would mean "Jacob of the winepress." We might also consider Robert F. Smith's suggestion<sup>5</sup> that this name is a combination of the Nephite name *Jacob*

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<sup>3</sup> See his lexicon in Pinchas Wechter, *Ibn Barun's Arabic Works on Hebrew Grammar and Lexicography* (Philadelphia: Dropsie, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> The conjunction takes this form when prefixed to a word beginning with a labial consonant (*b, m, w, p*) or where the first vowel of the word is *shəwa* (ə).

<sup>5</sup> In a private communication more than two decades ago.

and the Jaredite name *Ogath* (Ether 15:10). Jacobugath was the city where the people of the rebellious King Jacob settled (3 Nephi 9:9); they may have taken over the earlier Jaredite site and added Jacob's name to it.

Stranger still is the fact that the Salonimers take names that have already been translated into English and give a Hebrew equivalent, then translate the Hebrew. Thus *Bountiful* comes out meaning "land of plenty, etc.," while *Desolation* is rendered "land of devastation, etc." They also transliterate *God* (and even *Lord*) into its Hebrew equivalent ("ch-loh-heem"), with the notation, "meaning unknown."

3. *The transliteration of the Hebrew words often does not match the Book of Mormon spelling and is often internally inconsistent.*

Two Book of Mormon names begin with the Hebrew element *abi-*, but the Salonimers treat them differently (p. 96). They render *Abinadom* as "father of he who is silent," while they see *Abinadi* as deriving from the root for "stone," which is *'eben*, from an original *'abn*. They transliterate the name as "ah-ven-ay-dee" (*'aben-ēdī*), "stone of my witness" and thus eliminate the *i* in the element *abi*. A much more reasonable etymology would be Hebrew *'abî-nodî*, "father of my wandering," though there are other possibilities that include "father" as the first element.

Despite the letter *h* in the name *Pahoran* (which has a good Egyptian etymology that the authors ignore), the Salonimers assign it to a Hebrew form that should have been transliterated *pe'ôren*, but which they render *peh'oh'ren*, giving the impression that the Hebrew has an *h* in it—which it does not. Readers who do not know Hebrew are consequently misled into believing that a valid etymology is being presented.

4. *They ignore Hebrew etymologies that more closely match the Book of Mormon spelling and make better sense or that entail a simpler explanation.*

The Salonimers give the meaning "a mighty warrior" to the name *Gideon*. While it is true that both the biblical and the Book of Mormon men of that name were, in fact, mighty warriors, that is not the meaning of the Hebrew name, which derives from the root *gd'*, "hew," perhaps because the original Gideon hewed down the grove of trees dedicated to Baal (Judges 6:25–26).

While the name *Jarom* seems to be a verbal form of the root meaning “to raise, exalt,” it is not a reflexive and cannot mean, as the Salonimers have it, “he will lift himself.” Rather, it is probably hypocoristic, from an original *Jeremiah*, “the Lord will raise/exalt,”<sup>6</sup> with the divine name dropped, as is frequent in Hebrew names. The vowel change can be explained in the same way as the change from the original *Berechiah*, “the Lord blesses,” to *Baruch*, the name of the scribe to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah.<sup>7</sup>

In some cases, the Salonimers have not followed Occam’s razor—giving the simplest possible explanation—but have gone out of their way to complicate things. Thus, for example, they assign the meaning “there are riches” to the place-name *Jashon*, requiring that it be made up of two Hebrew words. A simpler explanation would see the name as a derivative of one of the two Hebrew roots *yšn*, one meaning “sleep,” the other “old” or “ancient.” Similarly, they assign a meaning of “a peak of song” (two Hebrew words that don’t have this meaning) to *Siron*, which can be more readily explained by several other possibilities, one of which is “place of the thorn” or, more likely (based on Isaiah 34:13), “place of the forest.”

5. *They seem to be unaware of previous research in the area of both biblical and Book of Mormon names.*

This is most evident in the much-discussed name *Jershon*, the land given by the Nephites to the people of Ammon. The Salonimers, preferring to see the initial *j* as *g*, rather than the normal Hebrew *y* transliterated *j* in KJV, have rendered it “gayr-

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<sup>6</sup> The Salonimers incorrectly give the meaning “Yah will rise” to the name Jeremiah. The root means “be high,” not “rise,” and the verbal form here is “make high” or “exalt.”

<sup>7</sup> The vocalic variation between *Berechiah* and *Baruch*, generally accepted by scholars, can be compared with the variation between Book of Mormon *Mulek* and biblical *Malchiah*, proposed by Robert F. Smith, “New Information about Mulek, Son of the King,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 142–44. David Rolph Seely’s criticism of Smith’s suggestion on phonological grounds is, in light of the form *Baruch*, unwarranted; see his review in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 311–15. For the latest treatment of the name *Baruch/Berechiah*, see Herschel Shanks, “Fingerprint of Jeremiah’s Scribe,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22/2 (March/April 1996): 36–38.



shone" and assigned the meaning "a stranger, a refugee." But the Hebrew *Yeršôn* would mean "place of inheritance,"<sup>8</sup> which makes perfectly good sense, since the Nephites declared, "this land *Jershon* is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an inheritance" (Alma 27:22; cf. 35:14).

Though several Latter-day Saint writers have proposed etymologies for the name *Cumorah* (mine being *kamôrāh*, "priesthood"), the Salonimers give it the strange meaning of "storing underground," evidently from the Hebrew root meaning "darkness, gloominess." They don't even try to give an etymology for *sheum*, which appears in a list of grains in Mosiah 9:9, despite the fact that it is the Akkadian word for barley and sometimes other cereal grains and has been discussed by a number of Book of Mormon scholars.

The Salonimers assign Hebrew etymologies to names like *Paanchi*, which is clearly better explained in terms of Egyptian, as Hugh Nibley demonstrated many years ago.<sup>9</sup> They are also aware that Nibley long ago showed that the name *Alma* appears in one of the Bar Kochba documents of nearly two millennia ago, but not in the form given by the Salonimers.<sup>10</sup>

I have discussed elsewhere the use of the gentilic or *nisbeh* in names such as *Lamoni* ("Lamanite"), *Muloki* ("Mulekite"), and *Moroni* ("Moronite," from the land of Moron),<sup>11</sup> but the

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<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew suffix *-ôn* denotes places, as in the biblical site names Hebron ("place of the friend," from Abraham, the friend of God, who lived there), Gibeon ("place of the hill"), Ayyalon ("place of the deer"), etc.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988 [1st ed. 1952]), 27; *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988 [1st ed. 1957]), 283-84; *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988 [1st ed. 1970]), 170; and *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 281.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, review of *Bar-Kochba*, by Yigael Yadin, *BYU Studies* 14/1 (1973): 120; "Churches in the Wilderness," in Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 172. Both articles were reprinted in Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 281-82, 310.

<sup>11</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, "Since the Book of Mormon is largely the record of a Hebrew people, is the writing characteristic of the Hebrew language?" I Have a

Salonimers are unaware of this work. Consequently, they assign meanings of “to (for) me” to *Lamoni*, “my Mulok (or my Mulek)” to *Muloki*, and “my master” to *Moroni*. In the latter case, their etymology is based not on Hebrew, but on Aramaic, as it is in some of the other names discussed in their book. Consequently, to the Salonimers, *Moron* means “master,” which is a strange name to give to a Jaredite land (where, I assume, Moroni was born).

What is most surprising, however, is that the Salonimers assign etymologies to biblical names that are not in line with the work done by Bible scholars over the years. Thus, instead of assigning the meaning “exalted” to *Miriam*, the Hebrew equivalent of Mary, they give it the meaning “sea of bitterness.” They further declare that *Nazareth* is “of uncertain” derivation, despite the fact that scholars see the name as the feminine equivalent of the Hebrew word for “branch.”

This is not to say that all of the Salonimers’ etymologies are wrong, though I find myself disagreeing with most of them. In one instance, we find ourselves in virtual agreement while disagreeing with other writers. Like the Salonimers, I have noted elsewhere that *Zarahemla* probably derives from the Hebrew *zera’-hemlāh*. I rendered it “seed of compassion,” while they give a meaning of “child of grace, pity, or compassion.” The first word literally means “seed,” not “child,” though it is often used in the sense of offspring.

The Salonimers’ etymology for *ziff*, “pitch, tar, asphalt,” could correspond to the biblical place-name *Ziph*, which is what the Hebrew word they list indicates. They assign it a meaning of “pitch, tar, asphalt,” though this word appears in the Bible in the form *zepheth* (Exodus 2:3; Isaiah 34:9). Since *ziff* appears in the Book of Mormon in a list of other metals (silver, iron, brass, and copper; see Mosiah 11:3, 8), it is more likely to be a metal than tar. Some have likened *ziff* with the Hebrew *zîw*, “splendor, brightness,” which better fits the name of a metal, perhaps an alloy or a naturally occurring metal such as electrum (a mixture of gold and silver).

I find the etymological study of Book of Mormon names to be a fascinating endeavor, but one that cannot be undertaken without considering a number of important factors ignored by the Salonimers. We must contend, for example, with the fact that, while the Book of Mormon clearly follows the KJV pattern for biblical names, we cannot be certain if there was a consistent transliteration of names into our own alphabet.<sup>12</sup> After all, Joseph Smith dictated the text to scribes.<sup>13</sup> What of the names that appear to have an Egyptian etymology? Should we expect Hebrew etymologies of Jaredite names, in view of the fact that they were not Israelites?

These and many more issues make it clear that this is a work not to be undertaken by those whose background in Near Eastern languages is insufficient to the task. Consequently, I laud the Salonimers for their valiant attempt, but admonish them to do their homework first.

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the difficulties are discussed in Paul Y. Hoskisson's "An Introduction to the Relevance of and a Methodology for a Study of the Proper Names of the Book of Mormon," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:126-35. For evidence that the transliterations were at least somewhat regular, see my "A Phonemic Analysis of Nephite & Jaredite Proper Names," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the SEHA* No. 141, December 1977, now available as a FARMS reprint.

<sup>13</sup> For evidence that Joseph Smith spelled names to his scribe when first encountered in the Book of Mormon text, see Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/1 (1990): 52-53.