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Title Liahona: “The Direction of the Lord”: An Etymological Explanation

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Abstract The etymological meaning of the name *Liahona* has been touched on before, but Curci seeks to deliver a more plausible etymology than has previously been given. By transliterating the word back into the Hebraic idioms of the time of Lehi and evaluating the grammatical elements to form the name, he has settled on the meaning of “direction of the Lord.” The name is broken into three parts, and Curci argues that each part is Hebraic in origin, including the meaning and interpretation of each part. The etymological evidence regarding the name *Liahona* strengthens the claim that the book was written by a group of ancient Hebrews and not Joseph Smith.



L I A H O N A

“*The Direction of the Lord*”

AN ETYMOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

JONATHAN CURCI

THE NAME *Liahona*, although it appears only once in the Book of Mormon text, has drawn the rapt attention of the curious and the learned. My contribution builds upon past efforts to explain the possible etymological meaning of the name *Liahona*. I offer what I argue to be a more plausible explanation than those of my predecessors in light of the Lehites’ linguistic background. In fairness to past studies on this subject, I must mention that working with the Book of Mormon text in English only, and not with the text in its original language, makes the effort harder. The same can

be said about the difficulty of working on the given names in English spellings rather than the originals. My approach is to transliterate back into the Hebraic idioms of the time of Lehi what I perceive that Joseph Smith saw or heard and dictated. Then I present the grammatical elements used to form the name *Liahona*, which I show to mean quite literally “to Yahweh is the whither” or, by interpretation, “direction of-to the Lord.”

Key to my analysis is a methodology based on the premise that *Liahona* was formed according to the traditional Hebrew method of forming



names. The Hebrews created new words by combining existing words in accordance with the circumstances in which the need for that new word arose, taking into account the purpose of the object that received the word. I will demonstrate how the linguistic, textual, historical, and story contexts confirm and strengthen the most literal linguistic interpretation based on this premise and tend to exclude other possibilities unrelated to the linguistic elements of the word. In the process of applying this traditional Hebrew method of name formation, I formulate arguments that might seem circular. However, what superficially seems to be a circular argument in reality connects various pieces of evidence that form a preponderance of evidences in support of one etymology *versus* another. Hopefully, these arguments will yield all their convincing force “sufficient to free the mind wholly from all reasonable doubt” concerning one meaning over another and “sufficient to incline a fair and impartial mind to one side of the issue rather than the other.”¹

The Term *Liahona* in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon record associates the word *Liahona* with deliverance and survival, tying its meaning directly to a physical object—a ball—and to its essential function—a director (see Mosiah 1:16; Alma 37:38, 45). The elements forming the term *Liahona* become clear when they are analyzed in light of the customs and the rules of the Hebrew grammar in existence at the time of Lehi

in 600 BC. The skillful formation of this word also sheds light on the linguistic world of the Nephite civilization, mainly a descendant of Hebrew. It also demonstrates that Joseph Smith, with his extremely limited language skills, could not have dreamed up such a name.² The explanation of the etymology of the name *Liahona* adds another link to the pieces of evidence from other past explanations of names that Joseph Smith could not have known from just reading the Bible.

Paul Y. Hoskisson has written that “the greatest challenge for persons interested in the meanings of proper names in the Book of Mormon has to do with those names whose meanings we already know.”³ The well-known list of names whose interpretations are already provided in the Book of Mormon text includes *Irreantum*, “many waters” (1 Nephi 17:5);⁴ *Rabbanah*, “powerful or great king” (Alma 18:13); *Rameumptom*, “the holy stand” (Alma 31:21); *deseret*, “a honey bee” (Ether 2:3); and *Ripliancum*, “large, or to exceed all” (Ether 15:8).

The general interpretation of the name *Liahona* is found in the three following verses of the Book of Mormon:

And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a *ball*, or *director*—or our fathers called it *Liahona*, which is, being interpreted, a *compass*; and the Lord prepared it. (Alma 37:38)

ôna	iaho	l
“whither” or direction	theophoric indicator of YHWH	to
<p><i>Liahona</i> means “the direction (director) of the Lord,” or literally “to the YHWH is the whither.”</p> <p>The term <i>Liahona</i> is composed of three words: the first part of the name <i>li</i> לִי indicates the possession of something; <i>iaho</i> יְהוֹ exhibits the fingerprints of the tetragrammaton YHWH, i.e., the Lord; and <i>ona</i> אָנָּא is an adverb that means direction or motion to a certain place.</p>		

And moreover, he also gave him charge concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass; and also the plates of Nephi; and also, the sword of Laban, and the *ball* or *director*, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby they might be led, every one according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto him. (Mosiah 1:16)

And now I say, is there not a type in this thing? For just as surely as this *director* did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. (Alma 37:45)

My first observation is that it is questionable whether there was a distinct word for compass at that point in time. So this is likely an interpretation and not a translation. Second, the Book of Mormon writers used the three words *compass*, *ball*, and *director* to refer to the same object. The etymologist

The evident Hebrew elements in the name Liahona heavily support the conclusion that Lehi and Nephi coined the name Liahona.

needs to analyze the basic elements of the name *Liahona* by drawing on the interpretations that the Book of Mormon provides.

Liahona as a Hebrew Name

One may suppose that, because the name *Liahona* first appears in the book of Alma, written about 74 BC (500 years after Lehi), it might have been in an Amerindian language that had developed from Lehi's Hebrew of 600 BC. The following argument demonstrates that this supposition is not correct.

First, Alma refers to his "fathers" who gave the name *Liahona* to the ball (see Alma 37:45). Lehi is the first to have found the *Liahona* and is referred to as "father" in Enos 1:25, Alma 56:3, Helaman 8:22, and 3 Nephi 10:17. The name *fathers* is a typical

indicator of the founding fathers of the Nephite nation and civilization—father Lehi and his son Nephi. The Book of Mormon prophets followed the customary Hebraic tradition of referring to the God of the fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for the nation of Israel; Lehi and Nephi for the Nephite civilization). It is absolutely unlikely that the term *fathers* may refer to the immediate ancestors of Alma, who supposedly had spoken a language that had deformed the Hebrew of the founding fathers of the Nephite civilization. The evident Hebrew elements in the name *Liahona* (explained hereafter) heavily support the conclusion that Lehi and Nephi coined the name *Liahona*.⁵

Furthermore, it would be hard to believe that such an important object of the Nephite civilization would have changed its pronunciation from the original Hebrew of Lehi to another language developed in America.

The "fathers" (Lehi and Nephi) must have given this name to the object during the Lehitest journey in the wilderness. This increases the chance that the name was Hebrew since it was the language that they spoke in everyday life and also the language used in their holy books. The textual and material etymological evidences given hereafter outweigh the supposition that the name *Liahona* might have been Amerindian, as might be the case for other names that start to appear around the time of Alma.

Past Efforts

"To God is light" and "of God is light"

George Reynolds and Janne Sjodahl state that *Liahona*, composed of "Hebrew with an Egyptian ending," means "of God is the light," giving the meaning "of God is light."⁶ I imagine that their translation of God is of *Yah* that is present in *L-iah-ona*. The linguistic distance between the Egyptian element *annu* and the *ona* of *Liahona* makes the connection merely hypothetical and, most importantly, does not reflect the interpretation of "compass" or "director" offered in the Book of Mormon. A second explanation, given by Sidney B. Sperry, suggests that the name derives from Arabic terms *lahab* and *henna*, meaning "point where." However, *lahab* has no etymological connection with *liaho*, hence I do not support it. Both *lahab* and *annu* are too distant from the transliteration of *Liahona*. Furthermore, in these two etymologies *Liahona* would



Lehi discovered the Liahona outside his tent during his family's journey through the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:10). Throughout the journey, the Liahona provided direction from the Lord as long as the Lehiters were obedient. *Lehi Finding the Liahona*, C. C. A. Christensen, Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

be composed of terms from different languages,⁷ which is not common in ancient Hebrew linguistics practices.

“The Guidance of the Lord”

It has been recorded that Hugh Nibley, during one of his lectures on the Book of Mormon, stated:

And many people have dealt with the word *Liahona*. We had a teacher from Hebrew University here for a few years; in fact he bought a house in Provo. He was so fond of it he wanted to come and visit often. His name was [Jonathan] Shunary. He never joined the Church, but the first thing that fascinated him was this name *Liahona*. He traced it back to the queen bee, the leader of bees swarming in the desert. When bees swarm, that's *Liahona*. I took it from a different one. Yah is, of course, God Jehovah. Liyah means the possessive, “To God is the guidance,” hona (*Liyahhona*). That's just

a guess; don't put it down. But it's a pretty good guess anyway.⁸

Whereas the translation “to God” catches my attention, the other two elements in the above explanation leave too many questions. This is true for the reference to the queen bees and for the Hebrew *hona* translated as “guidance,” because *hona* does not mean “guidance.”

Reynolds and Sjodahl, Sperry, and Nibley have broken the ground for a necessary etymological explanation of this fascinating name.

The Etymological and Grammatical Explanation of the Meaning: “The Direction of the Lord”

Liaho “to (of) the Lord”

The meaning of the *Liaho* (“to (of) the Lord”) part of the word is common to all the above explanations and seems to gather the agreement of most scholars. The fact that the first two words are

Hebrew entails that the final term should be of the same language. Although it is known that Lehi was learned in “the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), until now no Egyptian terms have been convincingly associated with the name *Liahona*.

Li לִ: The first part of the name is *li-*, the letter *lamed* forming a contraction of *’el* which, in this case, indicates the possession of something, and can also mean toward something.

Iaho יהו: The three letters *yod*, *he*, *waw* exhibit the fingerprints of the tetragrammaton YHWH because they are the first three letters that appear as a prefix or a suffix in the yahwistic theophoric names. When they form a suffix they are pronounced *yahu*, e.g., *Yesha-yahu*, *Yerem-yahu*, *Shelem-yahu*, *Malk-yahu*, etc.

When these letters appear as a prefix of the theophoric proper name, the *waw* is pronounced “o” instead of “u”; thus we find *yeho* in names such as *Yehonathan* (Jonathan), *Yehonadab*, or *Yehoshua* (Joshua).

It is a well-known fact that when the scribes introduced the vocalization in the Hebrew Bible, the divine name YHWH יהוה (*yod he waw he*) received with a slight deformation the vowels of *’adonay* (“Lord”) in order to let the tetragrammaton YHWH be pronounced *’adonay* so as to avoid the repetition of the ineffable name. The majority of the scholars maintain that the tetragrammaton was pronounced *Yahweh*.⁹ The translators of the Bible in European languages, not fully aware of this tradition, transliterated *Yahweh* as *Jehowah*. Because of the shift in the vowels, the pronunciation of theophoric names with the yahwistic prefix were also pronounced *Yehonathan* and *Yehoshua* instead of *Yahonathan* and *Yahoshua*. The vocalization of *Liahona* similarly indicates that the name YHWH was pronounced *Yahweh* in Lehi’s day. This observation points to the antiquity of the name *Liahona*. The fact that Joseph Smith translated *Liahona* instead of *Liehona* is very indicative of the antiquity of the name. *Yaho* is indeed the original marker of the tetragrammaton YHWH that was originally pronounced *Yahweh*.

An objection can be raised to the vocalization of *liaho* as meaning “to (of) YHWH.” Under the rules of Hebraic vocalization of the Masoretic Text of the Bible, the *lamed* (as the preposition *of* before a *yod*) is pronounced *li* only when the *yod* has the vowel *schwa*. In the case of *Liahona*, the letter *yod* of *yah* has the punctuation (vowel) of a *patach* and

not a *schwa*. Under these rules, if the *lamed* indicated the preposition *to*, the *lamed* should keep the short sound of a *schwa*, and be pronounced *le* instead of *li*; and the Book of Mormon text would read *leyah*(*’ona*) instead of *Liahona* (see for instance the case of *leya’aqov* in Genesis 48:2). There are two main answers to this objection. The first is that it is anachronistic since both ancient epigraphy and archeology confirm that the most precise rules of the *nikud* punctuation were definitively fixed around 100 AD in the town of Yavneh near Jerusalem and were almost nonexistent at the time of Lehi, from whose time inscriptions have only the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and no vowel signs.¹⁰ Although we do not know the exact pronunciation of names like *Yehonathan* or *Yehoshua* at the time of Lehi, one would expect that the 600 BC vernacular adaptation of *le* (indicating the possessive) before *yah* would exactly have been *liaho* instead of *le-iaho*. The tetragrammaton marker *yod*, *he*, *waw* in this case is not a prefix but is in the middle of the word as *L-iaho-na*, hence it would be unthinkable that the pronunciation in this case would be *yeho* (typical of the prefix). A second argument is that the *lamed* before the *yod* of *Yahweh* would be pronounced in the spoken language as *liah* and not as *leyah*, even if a *schwa* was placed under the *yod*. In other words, the pronunciation *liah* corresponds to the customary rules of pronunciation of the “to (of) YHWH,” which reflects both a very plausible everyday practice of that time and modern Hebrew formation of names that have these exact features.¹¹

As with the other Hebraic words in the Book of Mormon text, such as *Jershon* (Alma 27) and the terms in 1 Nephi 2:10, which play around the word *’afg* meaning both “valley” and also “firm,” “steadfast” or “immovable,”¹² the meaning of *Liahona* can also be derived from an adjoining verse, which might include a quick reference interpretation. A further evidence that the tetragrammaton marker of *yod he waw* is present in *l-iaho-na* is when Alma in the same verse (Alma 37:38) says “which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the *Lord* prepared it.” The word *Lord* had to be YHWH in the original text, whose marker *iaho* (*yod he waw*) is exactly part of *l-iaho-na*.

“*The Direction (Director) of YHWH*” or literally
“*To the Lord Is the Whither*”

How can *Liahona* possibly mean “compass” or “director”? The answer is found in the final part of



the word (*liah*)^o*na* : the adverb ^o*na* appears several times in the preexilic texts of the Hebrew Bible. It can be translated as “whither.” It is often tied to the verb *halakh* “to go.” Some instances in which it appears are Genesis 16:8 “whither wilt thou go?” and “whither are you going” (אנה הלך; see Genesis 37:30; also 2 Kings 6:6; Genesis 32:17; 37:30 בא אנה).

The adverb ^o*na* אנה means *direction* or *motion to a certain place*.¹³ We certainly do not know Lehi’s exact pronunciation of words. However, the

The appearance of the terms compass, ball, and director in the text is usually related to the question, “whither shall we go?” (‘ona nelekh). This is why they called the compass Liahona: it indicated the direction of the Lord.

efforts of the etymologist should be based on the transmitted rules and practices of Hebrew grammar. The striking assonance between the archaic Hebrew ^o*na* אנה and the ending part of (*liah*)^o*na* immediately drew my attention. How does the link between *l-iaho* ליהו and ^o*na* אנה function? The first part ends with a *waw* ן and the ^o*na* אנה begins with an ^{alef} א. These two sounds had to be extremely similar since the *waw* is pronounced “o” and the vowel *kamatz* under the ^{alef} at the beginning of the word, which is generally a medium *kamatz*, is pronounced as an open “o.”¹⁴ The transliteration of *Liahona* is then correct in this sense. Thus, *Liahona* had to be written ליהו(א)נה or ליהונה in the mind of Lehi and Nephi. This second spelling might have entailed the omission of the ^{alef} א for the sake of brevity. This Hebrew spelling perfectly transliterates from Hebrew the English spelling that Joseph Smith received.

Furthermore, the entire context helps in understanding the meaning of the name *Liahona*. The

words surrounding the name often reveal the elements of which it is formed. The following passages give a contextual meaning of the adverb ^o*na* אנה meaning “whither.”

As my father arose in the morning, . . . to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way *whither* [^o*na*] we should go into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:10)

I, Nephi, did make out of wood a bow, and out of a straight stick, an arrow; wherefore, I did arm myself with a bow and an arrow, with a sling and with stones. And I said unto my father: *Whither* [^o*na*] shall I go . . . ? . . . I, Nephi, did go forth up into the top of the mountain, according to the *directions* which were given upon the *ball*. (1 Nephi 16:23, 30)

The compass, which had been prepared of the Lord, did cease to work. Wherefore, they knew not *whither* [^o*na*] they should steer the ship. . . . And it came to pass after they had loosed me, behold, I took the compass, and it did work *whither* [^o*na*] I desired it. (1 Nephi 18:12–13, 21)

The adverb *whither* is present with the translations of the word *Liahona* ליהו(א)נה or ליהונה.

The appearance of the terms *compass*, *ball*, and *director* in the text is usually related to the question, “whither shall we go?” (^o*na nelekh*). This is why they called the compass *Liahona*: it indicated the direction of the Lord. When the Lehtes wondered whither (^o*na*) they should go (*halakh*), they turned to YHWH, the Lord (*iaho*), through the *Liahona*. Both the direction and the object Yahweh gave belonged to Him (*liah*). So when the Lehtes wanted to know where to go (^o*na*), they turned to the object that Yahweh gave them.

In sum, this etymology is confirmed by, first, the link between the final letter *waw* of *iaho*, and the vowel *kamatz* beneath the *alef* of ^o*na*. They match perfectly in sequence and sound. Second, the surrounding contexts repeat one of the meanings of the name, a practice typical in Hebrew prose.

“To the place of YHWH”

A variant to the above meaning could be “to the place of the Lord,” which is also related to the



This interpretation of the Liahona by Lowell Fitt shows the spindles that directed Lehi and his family (1 Nephi 16:10) and the words that were “written and changed from time to time, according to the faith and diligence which we gave unto it” (1 Nephi 16:29). Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

interpretation of *director* in Alma 37:38 and 37:45. Bearing in mind the discussion above, I wish to examine *‘on*, the typical Canaanite indicator of place-names. I note that Tvedtnes and Ricks have carefully studied this element because it is recurrent in Book of Mormon place-names.¹⁵ However, the *ה* “local *he*” or the “final *he*” is grammatically incompatible with the beginning *ל* *lamed*. In other words, *Liahona* *לִיהוֹנָה* would have meant “to the place of the Lord,” but in *l-iah-ona*, the *ל* “*l*” and the final *ה* “*a*” are grammatically mutually exclusive. Thus this possible solution loses its attractiveness.

Conclusion

As Elder David A. Bednar explained, “The primary purposes of the *Liahona* were to provide

both direction and instruction during a long and demanding journey. The director was a physical instrument that served as an outward indicator of their inner spiritual standing before God.”¹⁶ It worked according to the principles of “faith and diligence” (1 Nephi 16:28). In this way, the *Liahona* not only indicated the geographical direction *whither* they should go in the wilderness but also directed the Lehitese to the Lord. This meaning would be in harmony with the appellation *director* inscribed by Alma in 37:38: “our fathers call [it] a ball, or director—or our fathers called it *Liahona*, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord [*Yahweh*] prepared it.” After having specified that the interpretation was *ball* or *compass*, Alma associates the term *compass* with the fact that the



Lord prepared it. Retranslating the verse in Hebrew, we would have the concept of direction *‘ona*, and the director, or *Yahweh* the Lord, side-by-side, thus composing the name *Liahona*.

Alma continues to explain to his son Helaman in Alma 37:45 the purpose of the instrument, which is to set forth the direction, by analogy, to our spiritual journey: “just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to


I think that after 150 years of wandering in a linguistic wilderness we are finding the beauty and meaning of the name of Liahona.

the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise.” Thus, when the children of Lehi questioned “Whither shall we go?” the *Liahona* provided the answer in accordance with their faith: it embodied the “direction of the Lord,” which is the literal translation of the term *Liahona* ליהונה or ליהו(א)נה.

In its own way, this etymological explanation of the word *Liahona* yields all its probative value to stand as another evidence for the claims of Joseph Smith that the Book of Mormon was not written from his own imagination, but rather by a group of Hebrews who lived between 600 BC and 400 AD. The book’s Hebraic linguistic fingerprints are within its text, and they emerge when we carefully read and diligently study the culture and the language of the people who wrote this holy book. This search reflects at least one facet of President Gordon B. Hinckley’s assertion: “evidence for its truth and

validity lies within the covers of the book itself. The test of its truth lies in reading it.”¹⁷

The fact that Joseph Smith, after translating the plates, never submitted an etymological explanation of non-English terms in the Book of Mormon, or that the historical record does not mention any intellectual research conducted to produce these names, strengthens the evidence of his lack of intentionality or of his unawareness in producing the elements that scholars have demonstrated to be authentically antique and impossible for him to guess with such a frequency in the Book of Mormon texts. Broadly speaking, historians understand the character of Joseph Smith as inclined to be reserved about the supernatural events occurring to him, to the point that he did not try to convince people through rational evidences of the miraculous events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, he did not possess the rational evidences in the first place until he seriously studied some basics of Hebrew about ten years later.¹⁹ Joseph’s character traits reveal a distinct insouciance over matters of proof along with a concurrent personal assurance of the reality of the events relative to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

I think that after 150 years of wandering in a linguistic wilderness we are finding the direction we should go to fully appreciate the beauty and meaning of the name of *Liahona*. Such a finding would have required a deep knowledge of Hebrew transmission of names and the Middle Eastern pronunciation of names that Joseph Smith did not possess after limited formal schooling in rural upstate New York. Although further studies are certainly needed to confirm or refute such a new explanation, this etymology confirms once more that the Book of Mormon is, as Isaiah 29:14 foresaw it, “a miraculous work and a miracle.”²⁰ 

and the vessels of the sanctuary wherewith they minister, and the hanging, and all the service thereof” (Numbers 3:31). Speaking particularly of priests, the Chronicler wrote: “Of the priests [the text then lists names and genealogies] and their brethren, heads of the house of their fathers, a thousand and seven hundred and threescore; very able men for the work of the service of the house of God” (1 Chronicles 9:10, 13).

16. In Exodus 12, the chapter that describes the laws regarding the Passover, Moses emphasizes that the Passover sacrifice is also called *service*. Moses instructs the children of Israel, “It shall come to pass, when ye be come to the land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this *service*. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this *service*? That you shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover” (Exodus 12:25–26).
17. On the rite of sprinkling blood in the temple, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 233–34.
18. One source notes that “Benjamin’s use of the key words of garments and blood signal this as a temple oration.” Alison V. P. Coutts and others, “Appendix: Complete Text of Benjamin’s Speech with Notes and Comments,” *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 529.
19. In the above paragraph, I have drawn a connection to Benjamin’s statement “that your blood should not come upon me . . . that I might rid my garments of your blood” with temple sacrifice. In the present paragraph, Jacob’s just-cited statement regarding the blood and garments (Jacob 1:19) is also contextually associated with the temple; two verses earlier, Jacob made the statement “as I taught them in the temple” (Jacob 1:17).
20. For additional references to Jesus’s atoning blood in Benjamin’s speech, see Coutts and others, “Appendix: Complete Text of Benjamin’s Speech,” 554.

Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful Wm. Revell Phillips

1. Lynn M. Hilton, “In Search of Lehi’s Trail—30 Years Later,” *JBMS* 15/2 (2006): 4–7, 110.
2. Warren P. Aston, “Across Arabia with Lehi and Sariah: ‘Truth Shall Spring out of the Earth,’” *JBMS* 15/2 (2006): 8–25, 110.
3. Richard Wellington and George Potter, “Lehi’s Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi’s Harbor,” *JBMS* 15/2 (2006): 68–77, 112.
4. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “An Archaeologist’s View,” *JBMS* 15/2 (2006): 68–77, 112.

Liahona: “The Direction of the Lord”: An Etymological Explanation Jonathan Curci

I would like to thank professors S. Kent Brown, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, John W. Welch, Donald W. Parry, and John A. Tvedtnes, as well as Frank Kelland, and James Stevens for the enlightening oral and epistolary exchanges on this subject.

1. Bryan A. Garner, ed., *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 8th ed. (West, a Thomson Business, 2004), see *preponderance of the evidence*.
2. I believe that one of the purposes of carefully studying the etymology of Book of Mormon names like *Liahona* is to confirm the historical fact that Joseph Smith did not possess the intellectual tools necessary for the production of the Book of Mormon. All witnesses agree with Joseph Smith establishing that the basic motivation to produce the Book of Mormon started with what he defined as divine manifestations (of the angel Moroni), rather than cogently fabricating them through a sort of conspiracy intention as critics have attempted to suggest. As it has been widely demonstrated by LDS scholarship, Joseph Smith was not seeking or researching through natural intellectual tools the necessary elements to produce the book. These linguistic findings lend credence to the methodology of acquisition of the information as Joseph Smith described it, i.e., through the regular

encounters with a messenger called Moroni sent from the presence of God every 21st or 22nd of September from 1823 until 1827, marking the obtaining of the plates that then were translated by the power of God; see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 56.

3. Paul Y. Hoskisson, with Brian M. Hauglid and John Gee, “What’s in a Name? Irreantum,” *JBMS* 11 (2002): 90.
4. Hoskisson, “Irreantum,” 90.
5. From these considerations, a question naturally arises: Why did the name *Liahona* not appear in 1 and 2 Nephi but only in the later book of Alma? The chronology of the translation of the Book of Mormon may provide a very plausible answer. It may well be that once the name appeared for the first time in the translation of the Book of Mormon in Alma 37, Joseph Smith did not feel the necessity to constantly report the original Semitic name of *Liahona*. After all, the Book of Mormon did not undergo an editorial arrangement of harmonization. From historical and textual evidence of the manuscript of the Book of Mormon, it has been acknowledged that, after the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph Smith started to translate from the period of the reign of King Benjamin. Joseph Smith translated from the book of Mosiah until the end of the Book of Mormon and only afterward did he translate from 1 Nephi. The first mention of the “compass” and “director” is in Mosiah 1:16. The statement by Bushman goes in the direction of my hypothesis: “It also appears that the Book of Mosiah in the current *Book of Mormon* is not complete. It begins abruptly without the introduction that Mormon affixed to all the other books he abridged. Possibly the first pages of Mosiah were among the 116 that were lost. The evidence implies Joseph and Oliver began work on Mosiah when they began translating together in April 1829, finished the book to the end, and then went back and translated 1 Nephi up through Mosiah” (Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 579, n. 63; emphasis

added). Until which chapter of Mosiah did they translate? In my line of reasoning, the presence of the word *Liahona* only in Alma 37 and not in Mosiah 1:16 may serve as an additional element to indicate not only that Mosiah was translated after Alma but that, after the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph started translating after the end of Mosiah 1. Additionally, Royal Skousen validly argues that the 116 pages that were lost contained the two chapters of Mosiah and that the book of Mosiah begins with what would have been Mosiah chapter 3 (see Royal Skousen, “Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 138–39. Further studies on the original manuscripts may verify the correctness of the hypothesis that Joseph Smith started to translate from Mosiah 3 down to the end and then from 1 Nephi to Mosiah 2.

6. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4:178–79.
7. I hasten to add that this is totally different from the proposition that the Book of Mormon text could be Hebrew language written in Egyptian characters.
8. Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 1* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 216.
9. See the note of the Exodus 3:13 of *La Bibbia di Gerusalemme*, ed. Andrea Tessarolio, 9th ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1991), 133; that clearly indicates that the name given to Moses was pronounced Jahweh based on the Hebrew verb “to be” (*he yod-waw he*).
10. Further studies are certainly needed to locate the exact time of the change in the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton from *yahweh* to *adonay* and the exact way in which the yahwistic theophoric names were pronounced.
11. At this juncture, I should spell out some of the relevant Hebrew rules fixed after the masoretic punctuation (vocalization) of the Bible text. The first says that the *schwa* at the beginning of the word is pronounced as “e”;

the second rule states that the *schwa* in the middle of the word is silent. However, the customary, rapid pronunciation relaxes the first rule. This is how the general population of the modern State of Israel (a modern version of Biblical Hebrew) pronounces words with a *schwa* at the beginning of the word. For instance, the word *s'lichā* ("excuse me") is pronounced *slichā* instead of *selichā*. By comparison, the customary pronunciation confirms that the hypothetical *schwa* that had to be placed under the *lamed* of *Liahona* is practically always silent. The strictness of the rule of pronouncing the *schwa* at the beginning of the word is much relaxed in practice. It is not followed in today's spoken Hebrew, and nobody can plead that in 600 BC the Lehighites would follow such a puritan or scholastic application of the formal rule when the written words did not have vowels (or very few, see the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated 200 BC) or when the rule was not fixed as yet.

12. Jershon, which is based on the verb "to inherit," is used near various forms of the word *inherit* in the surrounding verses of Alma 27:22. Nahom, which means "to groan" in mourning, is used in the verse before the "daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly" (1 Nephi 16:34–35).
13. As in other languages, in modern Hebrew there is a difference between *efso* אפס "where" (see also the German *wo*) and *le'an* אן which is formed by *le* ל and *an* אן, which does not have the "ה he local" (see also the German *wohin*). The archaic Hebrew instead of *le* ל had *an* אן ending with the "ה he local."
14. A very accurate grammar of Hebrew demonstrates that "il qametz medio deriva dal primitivo a breve, ed è il più frequente. Ad ambedue però vien dato lo stesso suono, à secondo la pronunzia babilonese, ò aperto secondo la tiberiese," Antonio Carrozzi, *Grammatica della lingua ebraica*, 2nd ed. (Casale Monferrato, Italy: Marietti, 1966), 5. This means that medium

kamatz is a sound that in Palestine was an open "o". The medium *kamatz* generally appears at the beginning of the word and also lies beneath 'ona.

15. Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Origin of Three Book of Mormon Place-Names," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 89.
16. David A. Bednar, "That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us," *Ensign*, May 2006, 31.
17. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Four Cornerstones of Faith," *Ensign*, February 2004, 2–7.
18. For instance, in a conference, Joseph Smith said "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon . . . it was not expedient for him to relate these things." *History of the Church* 1:220.
19. D. Kelly Ogden, "The Kirtland Hebrew School (1835–36)," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History, Ohio*, ed. Milton V. Backman Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1990), 63–87.
20. More literal translation of the idiomatic expression פלאה ה' פלאה provided by John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens, Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 77.

Assessing the Broad Impact of Jack Welch's Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon

Robert F. Smith

Gordon C. Thomasson made several important suggestions for this short appraisal.

1. Origen Bachelier, *Mormonism Exposed: Internally and Externally* (New York, 1838), 36, cited in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 400.
2. See especially Daniel C. Peterson's "Editor's Introduction—"In the Hope That Something Will Stick": Changing Explanations

for the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): xi–xxxii, for an excellent summary of horrific,

traditional attacks on the Book of Mormon, and of recently changing assessments of that book; see also Richard H. Cracroft, "Had for Good and Evil": 19th-Century Literary Treatments of the Book of Mormon," *JBMS* 12/2 (2003): 4–19.

3. Roger D. Launius, "From Old to New Mormon History: Fawn Brodie and the Legacy of Scholarly Analysis of Mormonism," in *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect*, ed. Newell G. Bringham (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 208–9; cf. William D. Russell, "A Further Inquiry into the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 7/5 #34 (1982): 20–27.
4. Daniel A. Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), ix.
5. Cracroft suggests as much in his "Had for Good and Evil," 17–18.
6. Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal*, n.s., 19/2 (1998): 179–205. First delivered on April 25, 1997, at the Evangelical Theological Society Far West Annual Meeting.
7. Massimo Introvigne, "The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective," *JBMS* 5/2 (1996): 1–25; available online at www.aliveonline.com/ldspapers/introvigne.htm (accessed November 15, 2007). This is an expanded version of his article in Douglas J. Davies, ed., *Mormon Identities in Transition* (London: Cassell, 1996), 25–34.
8. J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas Hopkins, *Maya Cosmology and Astronomy: A Short Course on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing Featuring Inscriptions from the Maya Codices*, Workbook (Tallahassee, FL: Jaguar Tours, 1998), 22; cf. J. Kathryn
9. Josserand and Hopkins, *Maya Cosmology and Astronomy*, 20–22; the vertical east side of Stela C reproduced below from Harris and Stearns, *Understanding Maya Inscriptions*, 154, fig. 8:11, from Alfred P. Maudslay, *Archaeology: Biologia Centrali-Americana*, 5 vols. (London: Porter and Dulau, 1889–1902; repr. New York: Milpatron and University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), II.
10. Josserand and Hopkins, *Maya Cosmology and Astronomy*, 24, "Hearth of Creation," from drawing by the late Linda Schele, in David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 80, fig. 2:14.
11. This translation is mine, but is heavily dependent upon the January 1999 Josserand and Hopkins Seminar at UCLA on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing, as well as upon the translation in Harris and Stearns, *Understanding Maya Inscriptions*, 107, 153–58.
12. Josserand and Hopkins, *Maya Cosmology and Astronomy*, 4, 7, 11, 15; Harris and Stearns, *Understanding Maya Inscriptions*, 142–52.
13. Josserand, "Narrative Structure of Hieroglyphic Texts at Palenque," in *Sixth Palenque Round Table, 1986*, 27 (see fig. 9 on p. 26), citing Richard A. De Long, "Chiasmus in Mesoamerican Writing," paper presented