Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss1/5

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names

Over two hundred proper names of peoples or places appear in the Book of Mormon text. Although some of those names appear in the Bible, a large majority of them are unique to the Book of Mormon. Paul Y. Hoskisson leads the Onomasticon Project, which seeks to identify and interpret Book of Mormon names using standard principles and methods. This article introduces five subsequent articles that demonstrate to nonspecialists how this type of research can and should be applied to the Book of Mormon. Prepared scholars—Hoskisson, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Dana M. Pike, John A. Tvedtnes—display the type of interchange that is required to clarify and settle the issues surrounding Book of Mormon proper names. This article also introduces two additional articles that complement the onomastic discussion.
Introduction

Over two hundred proper names of peoples or places appear in the Book of Mormon text. Some of those names occur in the Bible, so we can gain added understanding about them from research by Bible scholars. But a large majority are unique to the American record. For those names we would like to know more. For instance, knowing the etymology or linguistic origins, and their original meanings, could shed light on obscure portions of the text. From what Old World languages, if any, did the names descend? What might this information tell us about relationships among the different peoples in the record and about their history? Moreover, do the names tell us anything about how Joseph Smith translated the record? Are the names products of that prophet’s imagination, as some critics charge, or do they have actual sources in ancient tongues? These and other questions are legitimate areas of inquiry for researchers. Some research has already gone on to identify and interpret Book of Mormon names.¹

Paul Y. Hoskisson, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, has for a number of years been leading out in an effort called “The Onomasticon Project” (onomasticon is the technical term for a list of proper names) begun over a decade ago under FARMS sponsorship.

Research on the names in the Bible and in other ancient texts has established standard principles and methods that must be followed in research of this type. If Book of Mormon studies are to take advantage of what has already been learned about such matters, and if we wish LDS research to be accepted by other scholars, our investigations should proceed along established lines. In failing to do so—that is, if
merely impressionistic methods were employed—unreliable conclusions could be reached, undermining the credibility of the research and misleading both believers and nonbelievers. The accepted procedures for onomasticon research have rarely been stated or exemplified in terms that nonspecialists can appreciate. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate to nonspecialists how this type of research can and should be applied to the Book of Mormon.

Sound research to shed light on exotic names is complicated. Only those with a strong base of knowledge in one or more of the languages that are thought to be involved are able to participate fruitfully in the process. In the case of Book of Mormon names, that means that researchers must thoroughly control at least one of the background Near Eastern languages: Hebrew, related Semitic languages such as Akkadian or Arabic, Egyptian, Coptic, or neighboring tongues like Greek and Sumerian. Those of us who have not attained the required level of control of ancient languages have to be more than cautious; we need to be appropriately skeptical of any off-the-wall proposals. Well-meaning Latter-day Saints have frequently tried to treat Book of Mormon names without appropriate preparation. The results of ill-prepared, speculative efforts have confused, not helped, our understanding.

In this article, a group of prepared scholars have been invited to display the type of interchange that is required to clarify these matters. Readers will discover multiple viewpoints that have arisen in analyzing just two Book of Mormon names, Lehi and Sariah. Disagreements are not harmful but necessary, because they point out where more data and better reasoning must be brought to bear to settle the issues. It is in the nature of scholarly discourse about such a complex topic that someone puts forward a proposal about what a name means, where it came from, and how it was pronounced. Others then agree or disagree. From the clashes and agreements in the experts’ views, we hope that clarification may result. Also characteristic of this kind of discussion is the need to deal with technical linguistic and philological data. Participants usually need to refer to highly footnoted scholarly publications to support their arguments.

This journal is not the proper place to carry on high-level technical communication. To do so would intrude too much on our limited space and the patience of nonexpert readers. But this one time, we consider it valuable for anyone interested in this topic to be exposed to the scholarly process. Further detailed studies of the Book of Mormon onomasticon will no doubt be pursued by the handful of qualified people engaged in the work via the FARMS Occasional Papers series or in other publications where the length of arguments and footnotes is less constrained than in the Journal. One thing we bystanders can learn is patient respect for the fact that the experts’ arguments, that so forbiddingly demand knowledge of ancient texts, are making progress. Light is slowly being shed on the proper names of the Nephite scripture. We need to understand that despite disagreements on details, understanding of this topic is moving along. But we’ll have to be patient as the laborers in the field struggle toward consensus. And just possibly, some people who had not considered participating in the interchange will be stimulated to prepare themselves and wade in. Professor Hoskisson, a specialist in Akkadian, begins our discussion with his interpretation of the names Lehi and Sariah. Then three other language specialists offer their views on what he has said. Finally the original author responds to the critiques.

Two other articles in this issue complement the onomasticon interchange. John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matt Roper have collaborated to document striking new artifact finds from the Holy Land that seem to prove that certain names used in the Book of Mormon were in use in Israel before the Book of Mormon record was begun. Hence those names did not originate in Joseph Smith’s imagination, as some claim, but are evidence of the Israelite origins of the record.

In the article that follows, Mary Jane Woodger informs us about some of the problems involved in deciding how Book of Mormon names have been pronounced, as shown by the pronunciation guides included in English-language copies of the Book of Mormon. An interesting note by Frederick M. Huchel works through the phonetic characters used in the Deseret Alphabet to point out how some leading figures in the LDS Church, many of whom had heard Joseph Smith speak the names, were pronouncing Book of Mormon names in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. None of this material defines a standard of pronunciation that Latter-day Saints today “ought” to adopt, but these contributions make us more informed about and tolerant of attempts to understand what the names signify.
Reference Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names

1 Several researchers have worked on eno-omastic studies over recent decades. Hugh Nibley started the genre with several chapters in Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952). Robert F. Smith privately distributed several papers that are still unpublished. John A. Tvedtnes did the same; in addition see his A Phonemic Analysis of Nephi and Judahite Proper Names, Society for Early Histori.


3 Although the Book of Mormon presence in our modern hymnbooks is rather mod-est, other kinds of music make rich use of Book of Mormon materials: the impor-tance of Book of Mormon headings in Children's Songs lists only twelve songs, many of these are immensely popular, and they play a crucial role in familiarizing young Latter-day Saints with the Book of Mormon. A great deal could be written about the signification of the Book of Mormon in the works of serious Latter-day Saint composers, including Leroy Robertson's Overture from the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Leroy T. Smith, 1973) and Crawford Gates's score for the Hill Cumors Paganite. Music from the Hill Cumors. America's Women for the Church, The Christ of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, VCVT-488 (1980). Other examples are numerous. K. Newell Dayley has provided a musical setting for 3 Nephi 13:14-13, "I Come unto My Own," Rudolph G. Rohde's Hi (lyric), HI Nephi (music) (Victoria, B.C.: Grand Spirit, 1980). Much later she lengthened and "Mormonized" this poem, retitling it "The Lamanite." It was published in the Desert News, 20 September 1985. The expanded promises that "The scales will fall which now blind their eyes./ And they, in turn, will partake of the promise.


26 Parley P. Pratt, "When earth in bondage long has lain," in Young, Pratt, and Taylor, A Collection of Sacred Hymns + in Europe, (1840), 258.

27 Parley P. Pratt, "The solid rocks were rent in twain," in ibid, 259.

28 Parley P. Pratt, "I who that has search'd in the records of old," in ibid, 260.

29 Author unknown, "We ordain nations. now give ear," in ibid, 250.

30 When the plight of the Indians was treated in popular poetry, it was common for an Indian poet to speak for the first person: laments all three hymns printed with this article use this device.


32 The tune paired with this text in the Psalms (#12) is "Sea, the song of the hero" from George Frideric Handel's Judas Macabaeus (New York: Vanguard, 1976). A high expectations indeed from a congregation!

33 Louise L. Greene Richards, "The Savior at Jerusalem" in Desert Sunday School Songs, #131.

34 J. Marion Jensen, "A Voice Hath Spoken from the Dust," in Hymns of the Church (1894), #291.

35 This hymn is not listed under the Book of Mormon heading in the topical index: the text is aesthetically satisfying because of the diminutive, ecclesiastical use it makes of the Book of Mormon, but apparently its connection with its source is therefore more abstract.

Lehi and Sarah

Paul Y. Hoskisson

1 See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, 3rd ed., rev. Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, and Benedikt Hartmann (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 53. See for example the "Name List" in Appendix 3 of Jeanette D. Fowler, Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 334-45; for this reference I wish to thank my colleague Dana M. Pike of Religious Education at BYU. The biblical personal name Oen and its general onite (see Numbers 26:16) and Aminah (see Nehemiah 1:9), though related to the word for "race," are probably denomi-native verbal forms. See Koehler and Baumgartner, Hebrews and Aramaics Lexicon, 27. For a list of other possible body parts used in names see Fowler, Theophoric Personal Names, Appendix 3, sub 31, 487, 491, 497, 500, 502, 503.

2 Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, 1:159. I would like to thank Jonathan Gannell for finding this rather obscure example.

3 Paul Haupt, A German-American scholar working around the turn of the last century, was one of the first to derive the personal name Bery from the Hebrew "bear-bone." Hugh Nibley downplayed this interpretation, preferring Nelson Glueck's reading ("Baby") than suggesting the biblical place name Labah-roi in Genesis 24:62 and 25:11. See Hugh W. Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 239.


6 See the similar construction in Ran Zahor, De het Hellenise israal Antropونomi en Toponymie (Leuven: Peeters, 1988), 61; "La'af (W), Of God/EFF, Lurh (PE) Of Niy (my light)."

The Names Lehi and Sarah—Language and Meaning

Jeffrey R. Chadwick

1 Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1992), cols. 478, 478, 477, 477, 21/1, 472. The name also appears in Lachish Letter 1.

2 Oded, seal #145 and p. 496.

3 If 'Abrahahu the Elder' were implied, the word 'ez (parent) would need to include an initial h (representing the direct object he and would need to appear in a position following the name Abrahahu, as an adjectival title.

4 Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Lehi and Sarah," in ibid.

5 See Genesis 17:17-19 (Isaac: Genesis 30:8 (Naphtali); 1 Samuel 4:21-22 (Shelah).


Response to Paul Hoskisson's "Lehi and Sarah" Dana M. Pike


2 E.G., Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), 13, 390.


Lehi and Sarah Comments

John A. Tvedtnes


3 Ibid.