Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names

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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 these 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.
36. Although the Book of Mormon presence in our modern hymnbooks is rather mod-  
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tance of Book of Mormon songs for the Primary organization has already been  
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38. Several researchers have worked on eco-  
onomistic studies over recent decades.  

39. The text is aesthetically satisfying because of the inclusive, emotive 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 Koebler and Walter  
  Baumgartner, Hebrewisches und  
  Aramisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament,  
  3rd ed., rev. Walter Baumgartner, Johann  
  Jakob Stamm, and Benedikt Hartmann  
  (Leipzig: Rahel, 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), 334ff; for this reference  
  I thank my colleague Dana M. Pike of  
  Religious Education at BYU. The bibli-  
cal personal name Osn and its generic  
  Onite (see Numbers 26:16) and Aznath  
  (see Nehemiah 1:10), though related to  
  the word for "eel," are probably denom-  
  inative verbal forms. See Koehler and  
  Baumgartner, Hebrewisches und Aramisches  
  Lexikon, 27. For a listing of other  
  possible body parts used in names, see  
  Fowler, Theophoric Personal Names,  
  Appendix 3, sub *zbn, *hšl, *zl, *hšl,  
  *ztn, etc.

  I would like to thank Jonathan Gammel  
  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 *B̄ēš from the "check"  
  or "jaw-bone." Hugh Nibley downplayed  
  this interpretation, preferring Nelson  
  Glueck’s reading ("Labah"). He did  
  suggest for the bibli-  
cal personal name Labah-2 in Genesis 24:62  
  and 25:11. See Hugh N. Nibley, An  
  Approach to the Book of Mormon (Salt  
  Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS,  
  1988), 239.

4. Hanu Hayajneh, Die Persönennamen in  
  den antischulischem Inschriften (New  
  York: Olmke, 1998), 226, sub *LTP,  
  "Er möge leben, (O Gott NNI)." Under the  
  same entry, Hayajneh does not exclude  
  the meaning "beauty of God." Note the  
  semantic parallel in Akkadian, *la-ba-2-ni*.

5. In L. C. Geis, Glossary of Old Akkadian  
  (Chicago, University of Chicago Press,  
  1957-58), 1926, sub *LTP, "Er möge  
  leben, (O Gott NNI)." Under the same  
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  the meaning "beauty of God." Note the  
  semantic parallel in Akkadian, *la-ba-2-ni*.

6. The Names Lehi and Sarah—Language and  
  Meaning

Jeffrey R. Chadwick

1. Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass,  
  Corpus of West-Semitic Stemma  
  Summarized in the  
  Stemmata, 1987-92, tables 48,  
  474, 4175, 4111, 4072. The name  
  also appears in Lachish Letter 1.


3. The reference is interpreted as *Ihru 5*, god has  
  the word *ra* (raan) would need to include  
  an initial *b* (bih) representing the direct  
  object he and would need to appear in  
  a position following the name Abiyəryah,  
  as an adjectival title.

4. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Lehi and  
  Sarah," in this issue.

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

6. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Sarah in the  
  196-200.

7. Jermaine E. Cowley, ed. and trans.,  
  Ancient Papyri of the Fifth Century a.d.  

8. Ibid., Jermaine E. Cowley, Archivos from  
  Elephantine (Berkeley: University of  

9. See 2 Samuel 8:17; 2 Kings 25:18; 23:25;  
  1 Chronicles 21:14; 4:35; 6:14; Ezra 2:2;  
  Zechariah 10:2; Nehemiah 11:12; 12:1;  
  Jeremiah 40:8; 51:59; 61:  

10. Nahman Avigad, Hebrew Bible from  
  the Time of Jeremiah (Jerusalem: Israel  
  Exploration Society, 1986), 47.

Response to the Comments

Paul Y. Hoskisson

1. See, for example, R. Brown, R. K.  
  Driver, and C. Briggs, Hebrew and English  
  Lexicons of the Old Testament, 976,  
  sv.*šəl*; The Hebrew and Aramaic  
  Lexicon of the Old Testament (New  

2. E.g., Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass,  
  Corpus of West-Semitic Stemma  
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