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Paul Y. Hoskisson

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Hoskisson begins the onomastic discussion with the names Lehi and Sariah. These are two Book of Mormon names that are close in time and space to ancient Jerusalem. Hoskisson suggests etymologies for these two names. He introduces his explanation of their names with a discussion of ancient names in general. He suggests that Sariah’s name is composed of common Hebrew and Semitic elements and probably means “Jehovah is my prince.” Lehi’s name has a few possible meanings, evidence that it is not yet possible to come to a firm conclusion about some names. Ambiguity reminds scholars that the study of onomastics does not always yield clear results, that conclusions cannot be dogmatic, that previous suggestions should always be reevaluated, and that new suggestions are welcome.
Lehi and Sariah

PAUL Y. HSOKISON

The theory of temporal propinquity would predict that the closer Book of Mormon names are in time to the known world of ancient Jerusalem, the easier it should be to provide Semitic meanings for the names. There are no names closer in time or space to ancient Jerusalem than Lehi and Sariah. Therefore, it is with delight on my part that I can suggest etymologies for the names of the two personalities in the Book of Mormon who stood closest to the cultural legacy of the ancient Near East, Sariah and Lehi.

Before I launch into an explanation of their names, however, allow me to say a few words about ancient names in general.

Some people find excitement hanging from the underside of what amounts to a large, airborne kite. Others enjoy quilting. Personally, I become animated about names, and more particularly, the meanings of names. In my ancient Near Eastern studies, I have learned that names reveal many things that would otherwise remain hidden. For example, if a king calls himself “Rightful King,” which is what Sargon, the Akkadian king’s name means, it no doubt means at the very least that his legitimacy as king had been challenged. Or, it could mean in the worst-case scenario that he was not the rightful king at all but a usurper who buttressed his claim to legitimacy by taking the name, “Rightful King.”

Of course, very few names reveal otherwise unrevealed facts. But it happens often enough that discovering what a name means is an exciting adventure, whether or not the etymology reveals anything more than just a meaning. For example, the name of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar means, “Nabu [a god] protect the heir,” which as it turns out is rather mundane. However, the King James Version of the Bible preserves an alternate spelling (present in the Hebrew text) of his name, Nebuchadnezzar, which means “Nabu protect the mule.” This meaning can only be a dysphemism (the opposite of a euphemism) coined by his enemies and speaks volumes about his popularity or lack of it.

At other times the meaning of a name may only set the stage for other eventualities. For example, the Hebrew masculine name Shaphan means “rabbit” or “cony.” He was a scribe in Jeremiah’s day. If however Shaphan were attested in the Book of Mormon and only in the Book of Mormon, detractors of the Restoration would cry foul, shouting, "Who, besides John Updike, would ever think of naming a man rabbit?” and heap derogatory remarks upon the Prophet Joseph Smith. However, the fact that a man in the days of Lehi and Jeremiah bore a name so unlikely (at least to most modern ears) should prepare us to expect a few unlikely names in the Book of Mormon onomasticon.

And now let us turn to the names at hand, Sariah and Lehi. Though the name Sariah is not attested as the name of a female, (as far as I am aware), in an ancient Near Eastern source, it is composed nevertheless of common Hebrew (and Semitic) elements and probably means “Jehovah is my prince.” It thus would be related to the masculine biblical personal name Seraiah, “Jehovah is prince,” attested in the Bible and inscriptions from near the time of Lehi. The first element of her name, sar, stemming from the common Semitic root šrr (the reduplicated r is not represented in most Semitic scripts), is exemplified in Hebrew by Sar(ah), (תַּר), and in Akkadian by šarru, meaning respectively “prince(ss)” and “king.” We should not be offended that Lehi’s wife bears a masculine element in her name. In fact, it is fairly common for women in the Hebrew Bible to have a name with a masculine theophoric (derived from deity) element. See for example the final syllables in the names Jezebel, Abigail, Athaliah (which is a perfect semantic parallel to Seraiah), and so forth. At the
same time, it is not surprising to note that the ending of Sariah's name (-iah) seems identical to the common Hebrew theophoric element consisting of the shortened form for Jehovah. Because it declares both allegiance to and honor of Jehovah, "Jehovah is my prince" would be an appropriate name for the wife of a prophet of God.

Years ago it was suggested that Lehi's name was to be derived from the Hebrew word for "cheek," "cheekbone," or "jawbone," lhy, יֵלְדָה, attested as a geographic name in Judges 15. For years I resisted this interpretation for two reasons. First, I could not figure out what such a name would mean. And second, personal names containing parts of the body are rare in all the ancient Semitic languages. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible there is only one likely example of a name with an element taken from a body part: Elioenai (and variants), which means approximately "To Jehovah mine eyes (are lifted)." Even in this example, the body parts, eyes, are being used metaphorically. What metaphorical meaning could be given to "cheekbone" or "jawbone"?

That Lehi could mean "cheekbone" or "jawbone" seemed so unlikely that I felt the need to look about for other possible interpretations and, of course, in this kind of activity you can always find whatever you are looking for. But it should not have bothered me, given the example of Shaphan cited above. That is why I was delighted when I recently became aware of an example of "cheekbone" or "side" in a Neo-Babylonian personal name. Neo-Babylonian is one of the major dialects of the East Semitic (or Akkadian) languages, all of which are related to the West Semitic languages, including Hebrew. In addition, Neo-Babylonian is roughly contemporary with the time of Lehi. For example, using the Akkadian form of "cheekbone," liatu, the Neo-Babylonian feminine personal name Le-et-ka-i-di-i would mean approximately "(O God,) incline thine head," that is, "(O God,) please pay attention." If a similar construction lies behind Lehi's name, Lehi would be a shortened form of a name that would mean something like, "(Incline thy) cheek, (O Jehovah)." This would make a very suitable personal name for one of God's prophets.

During the years when I was looking for etymologies other than "cheekbone" for Lehi, I became aware of other possibilities for his name. As Hugh Nibley pointed out years ago, numerous ancient South Arabian examples provide what looks like a dead ringer for Lehi. For example, the Qatabanian personal name lhy is exactly what would be expected if Lehi were written in a West Semitic script. In addition, the meaning of the name in Qatabanian, "May he live, (O God X)," applies equally well to Lehi. The expression lhy, then, would be composed of the elements lu, "may," and hay, "he live(s)." Such a name would only be fitting and proper for a person who was called to leave Jerusalem in order to save his life and the lives of his family. The only problem with this interpretation is that it would be difficult phonetically to derive Lehi from lu + hay.

Another possibility, one which works better phonetically, is to derive the name from the same two Hebrew elements: le, י, a preposition which can mean "to," "belonging to," or "of," and the word for life, lhy, י. Thus in Genesis 16:14 the name of the well, Beer-lahai-roi, יֵאֵרָוֶה לָהַיָּהְ וְרֵoi, can mean "Well of the living One who seeth me." The middle word is composed of the preposition le, י, plus the word for life, lhy, י (but not in the usual plural form familiar to all beginning Hebrew students). If the name Lehi is related to this construction, then it would be a shortened name meaning "Of the Living One," which seems appropriate for a prophet of God whom Jehovah commanded to flee the land Jerusalem because the inhabitants "sought his life" but whom God had made "mighty even unto the power of deliverance" (1 Nephi 1:20).

As has become evident from the above three possibilities for Lehi's name, it is not yet possible to come to a firm conclusion about some names. It is simply a matter of course when dealing with onomastica that some amount of ambiguity may be unavoidable. The very process of casting about in the ancient Semitic world for cognates and parallel constructions does not always lead to an obvious conclusion. Therefore, we must constantly keep in mind that ambiguity is not necessarily undesirable. It reminds us that the study of onomastica does not always yield clear and unambiguous results, that our conclusions cannot be dogmatic in the least, that previous suggestions should always be reevaluated, and that new suggestions are always welcome. If we were to demand absolute certainty and nothing less for each name, we would with few exceptions be frustrated, discouraged, and in the end disappointed. The fact that there are at least three possible etymologies for Lehi should rather be encouraging.
constitute verse 2 and the first half of verse 3.


24 See, for example, "The Indian Hunter" ("Oh, by the way they do follow my path, / Like the hound on the tiger's track!") by the English poet Eliza Cook (1818-1889), one of three cook poems anthologized in Hazel Feldman, comp., The Best Loved Poems of the American People (New York: Doubleday, 1956), #625; "Metaphor" by John Cowper

25 Whittier: "My father loved the white men, when / They were but children, shelterless, / Nor was it given him to know / That children whom he cherished then / Would rise to leal, as armed men, / To work his people's overthrow." The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1894), 489. Ellis R. Snow was also fond of this tradition. One of her first published poems (in 1830, five years before she became a Latter-day Saint) was "The Red Man of the West." The Griffiths, No. 3, said, to our forefathers gave / All the lands to the eastern and western big waves," Ohio State Library, March, 1881). Much later she lengthened and "Mormonized" this poem, retitling it "The Lamanite." It was published in the Deseret News, 20 September 1885. The expanded version promises that "The scales will fall which now blind-bed their eyes; / And they, in darkness working, shall / Seek for a light." 25 Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology" Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 17:3 (1984): 59.

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

27 Parley P. Pratt, "The solid rocks were rent in twain," in ibid., #279.

28 Parley P. Pratt, "I who that search'd in the records of old," in ibid., #626.

29 Author unknown, "Ye wandering 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 prophet to speak in first-person language; all three hymns printed with this article use this device.


32 The tune paired with this text in the Psalmody (#121) is "See, the springing hero" from George Frederic Handel's Joshua Maschinen (New York: Vanguard, 1957), high expectations indeed from a congregation!

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


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, exclamatory use it makes of the Book of Mormon, but apparently its connection with its source is therefore more abstract.

36 Although the Book of Mormon presence in our modern hymnbooks is rather mod- ern, other kinds of music make rich use of Book of Mormon materials. The impor- tance of Book of Mormon songs for the Primary organization has already been mentioned; although the book of Mormon heading in Children's Songs lists only twelve songs, many of these are immensely popular, and they play a crucial role in helping young Latter-day Saints to join the Book of Mormon. A great deal could be written about the significance of the Book of Mormon in the works of various Latter-day Saint composers, including Leroy Robertson's "Omni from the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Leroy Robertson, 1953) and Crawford Gates's score for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, Music from the Hill Cumorah Pageant: America's Festival of Church, the Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, VC104 188 (c. 1908). Other examples are numerous. K. Newell Dayley has provided a musical setting for 3 Nephi 13-14, "I Come unto My People," Ralph G. Roberts's hymn, "I, Nephi (Glorious)" (1974). Murder Playhouse, LP 14457 (q. 1978). In addition, popular vocal music written for the Mormon masses has used the Book of Mormon with great success, as fairly free-form works, without the strict requirements of meter and rhyme found in a hymn stanza, these songs often use paraphrased text. An example familiar to many English-speaking LDS people is "Oh, That I Were Majestical" set to music by Wunder Wale Panto.

37 Alfred Tennyson's ('Rycie), Crawford Gates ("Eternal in the Wild West," in Hymns, #185, c. 1921).

38 Deseret Sunday School Song Book (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1899).


40 Conversation with the author, 30 November 1999.

Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names


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Lehi and Sarah

Paul Y. Hoskinson

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 Juenane D. Fowler, Thespisic Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew (Shefeld: Sheffield: Arch Pres, 1986), 334ff; for this reference I wish to thank my colleague Dana M. Pike of Religious Education at BYU. The bibil- ical personal name Omni and its generic Oromite (see Numbers 26:16 and Azainah (see Nehemiah 10:19), though related to the word for "ezer", are probably denomi- native verbal forms. See Koehler and Baumgartner, Hebrewic and Aramaic Lexicons, 27. For a listing of other possible body parts used in names, see Fowler, Thespisic Personal Names, Appendix 3, #130, #142, #194, #39, and #146.

2 Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, 1:1501. I would like to thank Jonathan Gimmel for providing me with the translation.

3 Paul Haupt, A German-American scholar working around the turn of the last cen- tury, was one of the first to derive the personal name "Eve" from "chekh" or "jew- bone." Hugh Nibley downplayed this interpretation, preferring Nelson Glueck's reading "Labah," thus suggesting for the bibil- ical 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.

4 Hanh Hayajneh, Die Personennamen in den qattanischen Inschriften (New York: Ottn, 1998), 126, sub LIF. "Eve may be a feminine form of "Eve" (see note 1 above). The same entry, Hayajneh does not exclude the meaning "beauty" (of God)" Note the semantic parallel in Akkadian, ba-ba-il, in I. L. Gelb, Glossary of Old Akkadian (Chicaca: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 156-57.


6 See the similar construction in ran Zakod, The Pre Hebrew: Israelite Antiquity Anthropology and Proseography (Leaven: Feeters, 1988), 61: "'Lei' (W') Of God'EY, LurE (PE) 'Of Nry (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, 1993), 199-200. In the original article I could have added more examples of the masculine name 'Lahash', but it seemed to me unnecessary. A close-cut example of the name used for a female would be more helpful.

2 "jewbone" is interpreted as "naynay", god has