The Names Lehi and Sariah—Language and Meaning

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Unlike the Old and New Testaments, where a variety of Hebrew and Greek texts exist to aid us, for the Book of Mormon we have only the King James English translation produced by Joseph Smith. The languages of the Book of Mormon were hardly the same throughout the original composition. Chadwick continues the onomastic discussion of the names Lehi and Sariah by suggesting that the Book of Mormon name Lehi matches the spelling in the King James Bible in the place-name Ramath-lehi; therefore the two must necessarily represent the same Hebrew term. He agrees with one of Hoskisson’s meanings for Lehi’s name—“jaw”—and indicates this may be a nickname rather than a proper name. Sariah is attested as a female name in a Near Eastern document. Although not found as a female name in the Bible, it is well documented as a male name in ancient Israel. In this light, the name means “Jehovah is Prince,” meaning Jehovah is the son of a king.
Students of ancient scripture face a unique challenge with the Book of Mormon in regard to textual issues such as proper names because we lack an original language text. Unlike the Old and New Testaments, where a variety of Hebrew and Greek texts exist to aid us, for the Book of Mormon we have only the English translation produced by Joseph Smith. Nor is there any agreement, across the board, concerning what the languages of original composition even were. The terms Hebrew, Egyptian, characters, and reformed are bandied about quite regularly, but no real consensus exists among LDS scholars of note as to what these expressions mean.

Joseph Smith rendered his English translation of the Book of Mormon into what is often called “King James English,” which can be abbreviated with the initials KJE. By this term is meant the idiomatic phraseology of the King James Version of the Bible. The KJE idiom is fairly consistent in our Authorized Version of the Bible, crossing over from the archaic Hebrew of the Old Testament to the Greek of the New Testament without variation in the English translation noticeable to the average reader. The same phenomenon seems to be at work in our English translation of the Book of Mormon—the KJE idiom that Joseph Smith used crosses over unchanged from the small plates of Nephi into the plates of Mormon, making it appear to the modern reader as if the whole book were originally a consistent linguistic product, even though it certainly was not. It is because of KJE that phraseology in Alma or Ether appears the same as in 1 Nephi or Jacob. However, this could hardly have been the case in the languages of original composition, since Mormon and Moroni were not only culturally and linguistically different from Nephi and Jacob, but were also writing some nine hundred years later.

It is also due to KJE that proper names from the Bible appear in consistent English spelling throughout the Book of Mormon. The name Lehi is spelled I-e-h-i in Helaman as well as 1 Nephi, even though it is a certainty that different languages of original composition were at work. (By the same token, Abraham is spelled the same throughout our King James Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, even though it appears differently in the Hebrew of the one than in the Greek of the other.)

There has never been any doubt in my mind that the name Lehi, as it appears in our English translation of 1 Nephi, represents the Hebrew term לֵיחַ (Lehy—pronounced with a soft e and a hard h, to be read as lehy), a term that means “check” or “jaw.” A methodological assumption from which I operate, in regard to Joseph Smith’s KJE translation of the Book of Mormon, is that where a proper name from the Bible shows up in the Book of Mormon text, it will most likely represent the same name as in the Bible. It seems to me that since Lehi, as a proper name in our translation of 1 Nephi, matches the spelling of Lehi as a proper name in our KJV Bible, the two must necessarily represent the same Hebrew term.
In the biblical book of Judges, Lehi (Lehy) is a place name, denoting the location where Samson defeated a squad of Philistine warriors using a donkey’s jawbone or כף הנד (lehy harum) as a weapon (see Judges 15:9–15). It must have been quite a fight! So remarkable was it that in later Judean memory the place was also called רמות-לחיים (Ramat-lehy), spelled “Ramath-lehi” in our KJV Bible, meaning “Jawbone Height.” The biblical meaning of the proper place name Lehi, then, was unquestionably “jawbone.” The term was used to mean either “jaw” or “cheek.”

It should not unduly bother us that Lehi does not appear in the Bible as a personal name, but only as a place name. The fact that a proper name was used as a place name does not disqualify the term from also being a legitimate personal name. Well-known biblical names such as Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, Manasseh, and others appear as both place names and personal names.

Admittedly, Lehi (“jaw”) would be an unusual personal name. It has been pointed out that Israelite and Judaean personal names rarely featured words denoting body parts. However, reference to body parts was not unheard of. The Hebrew name ייִנֵּם (Binyamin) or Benjamin, for example, while not explicitly employing the word for “hand” (יָד, yad), is almost universally understood as meaning “son of the right hand.” Even the word right (דָּרֶך, yamin) was often used to denote the right hand, as in: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand (נֵב, yamin) forget her cunning” (Psalm 137:5). The Hebrew name יִשָּׂרָאֵל (Ya’azanyahu), which appears several places in the KJV Bible as “Jaaazaniah” (2 Kings 25:23) as well as on several Judean stamp seals, employs the verb form of the word for “eat,” נְא (ozen). As another example, a Hebrew stamp seal from the seventh century B.C. has been discovered bearing the name נָר (zaqan), a term which can mean “old” or “elder” but which literally means “beard.” The entire text of the “Beard” seal reads נָר נָר (Le-Zaqan Ahazyahu), which Nahman Avigad reads as “belonging to Zaqan [son of] Ahazyahu.”

That Zaqan or “Beard” is a personal name here, and not merely an adjective or title describing Ahazyahu as “elder,” seems clear from the positioning of the names on the seal.³

In addition to these examples, it is encouraging that Paul Hoskisson has identified a “cheekbone” element in a Neo-Babylonian personal name from about the time of Lehi.⁴

I have not found the proposals linking Lehi’s origin with Arabian or South Arabian cultures convincing. The “Lahai” sherd discovered by Nelson Gluek does not seem to me to be a player in the Lehi name game. In any case, Lehi was a Jew, not an Arab, and would not likely have been given an Arabic or South Arabian name by his Jewish parents.

But the real question is why? Why the name Lehi? Why would Jewish parents in seventh century B.C. Jerusalem give their son “Jaw” for a name? Here we can only speculate.

Many of the names in the Bible, when we determine their meanings, would certainly seem strange in terms of modern western culture. Consider the following Hebrew Bible names: יִצְחָק (Yitzhak or Isaac), which means “laugher” or “he laughs”; נַפְתָּלִי (Naphtali), which means “my wrestling”; or וִיטָב (Ikavod or Ichabod), which means “no glory.”⁵ Such names refer to some circumstance connected to the child’s birth. Could “Jaw” have been the case with Lehi? Was there some circumstance connected with Lehi’s birth that prompted this odd nomen?

It may have been, however, that Lehi was not a given name at all but a nickname of sorts that originated with family, friends, or associates when Lehi was a youth or full-grown man, which then stuck with him and wound up being used instead of a given name unknown to us. A biblical example would be נָכָל (Naval) or “Nabal” (1 Samuel 25:3), which means “fool” or “scoundrel,” a name hardly likely to have been given a baby boy by his parents but which was probably assigned him by associates as he grew older. If Lehi had a particularly prominent jaw, for example, a reference to his lehy might have been an affectionate nickname. In any event, it
seems to me perfectly plausible that the Hebrew name Lehi, meaning “jaw” or “cheek,” could be the name of an individual living in Jerusalem in the seventh century B.C.

Though we do not see a female name Sariah in the Bible, and thus have no definitive biblical Hebrew spelling to compare with the Book of Mormon English name, a conjectural Hebrew spelling based on biblical principles would be נָרָה (nārah), pronounced Sar-yah. Without an attested female usage of the name in an ancient Near Eastern source, however, it would be difficult to state with confidence its meaning or validity as an Israelite female name.

It is exciting, then, to report that this name has been attested in an ancient Near Eastern document.

In a significant historical parallel to the Book of Mormon, the Hebrew name Sariah, spelled נָרָה (nārah) (םי), has been identified in a reconstructed form as the name of a Jewish woman living at Elephantine in Upper Egypt during the fifth century B.C. My report on this discovery appeared previously in the Journal.6

I discovered the reference to Sariah of Elephantine in Aramaic Papyrus #22 (also called Cowley #22 or C-22).7 The language of the document is Aramaic, but both Cowley and Bezalel Porten specify that the names are Hebrew.8

Although נָרָה (nārah) is not found as a female name in the Bible, it is well documented as a male name in ancient Israel, appearing nineteen different times in the Hebrew Old Testament representing eleven different men.9 However, the name is spelled “Seraiah” in the English KJV Bible, and Cowley (incorrectly, in my estimation) follows the KJV in using the S-e-r-a-i-a-h spelling when rendering the female name נָרָה (nārah) of Papyrus C=22 into English. The KJV “Seraiah” spelling is an effort to represent a Hebrew pronunciation of Sera-yah or Sra-yah, which would mean “Yah (Jehovah) has struggled” (from the נָרָה or s-r-h root, meaning to “struggle” or “strive”). But in light of evidence from Iron Age Judean stamp seals and clay bullae, where several instances of the name in fuller form (נָרָה) appear, Israeli scholar Nahman Avigad suggests that the correct reading of the נָר (n-r) component be vocalized not as sera or sra but as sar, the Hebrew term for “prince.”10 Therefore, our male names in the Bible, as well as our female names from the Elephantine Papyri and from 1 Nephi would be most properly pronounced Sar-yah, and its meaning would be “Yah (Jehovah) is Prince.”

Note here that Sariah does not mean “Yah is my Prince.” It simply means “Yah is Prince.” In נָרָה the yod (letter y) cannot do double duty—it is not a possessive element in the name—it belongs solely to the theophoric element “Yah.” By the same token, a name like יְהֹוָה (Yahu) or יְהֹוָה (Yahu), misleadingly spelled “Eliahu” in our KJV English Old Testament, does not mean “Yah is my God, but rather “Yah is God.”

Just as the theological importance or Elijah’s name, “Jehovah is God,” was not lost on those whom he ministered (see 1 Kings 18:39), neither should we miss the theological message inherent in Sariah’s name—that “Jehovah is Prince,” the son of a king.
constitute verse 2 and the first half of verse 3.
24 See, for example, "The Indian Hunter" ("Oh, why does she follow me on my path, like the hound on the tiger's track?") by the English poet Eliza Cook (1813–1869), one of three core poems anthropologized in Hazlitt Fellow, comp., The Best Loved Poems of the American People (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 625; or "Metamorphosis" by John Greenleaf Whittier: "My father's loved the white men, when / They were but children, shelterless, / Nor was it given to him to know / That children whom he cherished then / Would rise to a height, like armed men, / To work his overthrow," The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1894), 489.
25 Elias 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 Great Spirit, his Laws, our forefathers gave / All the lands to the eastern and western big wave," Ohio Star (March, 1830). Much later she lengthened and "Mormonized" this poem, retitling it "The Lamanite." It was published in the Deseret News, 20 September 1835. The expanded version promises that "The scales will fall which now bedazzle their eyes; And they, in turn, shall see the light of truth.
27 Parley P. Pratt, "When earth in bondage long had lain," in Young, Pratt, and Taylor, A Collection of Sacred Hymns ...in Europe, (1840), #258.
28 Parley P. Pratt, "The solid rocks were rent in twain," in ibid., #259.
29 Parley P. Pratt, "I who that search'd in the records of old," in ibid., #260.
30 Author unknown, "The word ring nations, now gene out in" ibid., #260.
31 When the plight of the Indians was treated in popular poetry, it was common for an Indian prophet to speak in the first person; all three hymns printed with this article use this device.
33 The tune paired with this text in the Paduaer (1812) is "See, the cunning hero" from George Frideric Handel's Jokua Massaceus (New York: Vanguard, 1957), high expectations indeed from a congregation!
34 Louisa L. Green Richards, "The Savior at Jerusalem" in Desert Sunday School Songs, #81.
36 This hymn is not listed under the Book of Mormon heading in the topical index. The text is aesthetically satisfying because of the conducive, exalting use it makes of the Book of Mormon, but apparently its connection with its source is therefore more abstract.
37 Although the Book of Mormon presence in our modern hymnbooks is rather modest, other kinds of music make rich use of Book of Mormon materials. The importance 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 the familiar young Latter-day Saints with the Book of Mormon. A great deal could be written about the significance 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 Robertson, 1933) and Crawford Gates's score for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, Music from the Hill Cumorah Pageant: America's Worship for Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, VC07 418B (1988). Other examples are numerous. K. Newell Dayley has provided a musical setting for 3 Nephi 13–14, "I Come unto My Own," Ralph G. Rodgers Jr., (lyric), N. Nephi (music) (Foundations, #1), 1990. More popular, perhaps, is M. W. Anderson's "Anchorage," a hymn setting for the hymn stanzas, its name meaning music for the most popular juvenile singing groups; see, for example, the "name list" in Appendix 3 of Jeanette D. Fowler, Theoplastic Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 334ff; for this reference I wish to thank my colleague Dana M. Pike of Religious Education at BYU. The biblical personal name Osen and its genealogic Orize (see Numbers 26:16) and Azzainah (see Nehemiah 13:10) are related, and the tree used for "ezai" are probably denomi- national vertical forms. See Koecher and Baugartner, Hebräisches und Assyrisches Lexikon, 27; for a listing of other possible body parts used in names, see Fowler, Theoplastic Personal Names, Appendix 3, sub tr. bry, lthy, sol, ym, and ym.
38 Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, 1:509.1 would like to thank Jonathan Gimbel for finding this rather obscure example.
39 Paul Haupt, a German-American scholar working around the turn of the last century, was one of the first to derive the personal name By from "check" or "lame:" Hugh Nibley downplayed this interpretation, preferring Nelson Gluck's reading of "Laba." But, as you can see from the bibli- ographical name Labai-ri 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.
40 Hans Hayesjehn, Die Persensamen in den akkadischen Inschriften (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 195, add. sub LFTY. "Ere möge leben, (O Gott NNN)" Under the same entry, Hayesjehn does not exclude the meaning "blessing (of God)." Note the semantic parallel in Akkadian, la-ba-I.1,
43 See the similar construction in Ben Zadok, The Pre-Hellenistic Israelite Anthropomorphism and Panpsychism (Leiden: E. Feustel, 1988), 61; "Lekh (W): Of God(EE); LEF (PE); Of Niy (my light)."
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45 Jeffrey R. Chadwick.
46 Nahlman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1997), seals #8, #747, #743, #1, 0702. The name also appears in Lachisch Letter #1.
46 K. Newell Dayley, "Lyrical, No. 1"
47 K. Newell Dayley, "Lyrical, No. 1"
48 In the original article I could have added more examples of the masculine name "lehí" and "lehi," but I think to that unnecessary. A close-up example of the name used for a female would be more helpful.
49 TBN is interpreted as "to say." God has