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 unaltered 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 L-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 שֵׁמי (shemiy—pronounced with a soft š and a hard h, to be read as lehi), 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 (Lehî) is a place name, denoting the location where Samson defeated a squad of Philistine warriors using a donkey’s jawbone 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 רַמְתֶּ-לְהִי (Ramat-lehi), 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 Judean personal names rarely featured words denoting body parts. However, reference to body parts was not unheard of. The Hebrew name בִּיְנָיִם (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 ( יָמִין, yamin) was often used to denote the right hand, as in: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand ( יָמִין, yamin) forget her cunning” (Psalm 137:5). The Hebrew name יָעָזָאָן (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,” יָאָן (ozen). As another example, a Hebrew stamp seal from the seventh century B.C. has been discovered bearing the name צַקָּנ (zaqan), a term which can mean “old” or “elder,” but which literally means “beard.” The entire text of the “Beard” seal reads צַקָּנ אִזָּאָן (le-Zaqan Aḥazyahu), which Nahman Avigad reads as “belonging to Zaqan [son of] Aḥazyahu.”

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

I have not found the proposals linking Lehi’s origin with Arabian or South Arabian cultures convincing. The “Laheil” 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: יִיצְחָק (Yitzhak or Isaac), which means “laughter” or “he laughs”; נַפְתָּל (Naphtali), which means “my wrestling”; or אֵקָדוֹד (Ekavod or Ichabod), which means “no glory.” 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 נַבְא (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 lehi might have been an affectionate nickname. In any event, it

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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 נְרָשָׁ (sryh), 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 נְרָשָׁ (sryh), 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 נְרָשָׁ (sryh) 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 נְרָשָׁ (sryh) 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 נ-ר-ש 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 (נְרָשָׁ) appear, Israeli scholar Nahman Avigad suggests that the correct reading of the נ-ר-ש (s-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 נְרָשָׁ 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 יְרָשֵׁה (Elyahu) or יְרָשֶׁה (Elyah), misleadingly spelled “Elijah” 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.
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 familiarizing 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 various Latter-day Saint composers, including Leroy Robert's "Cantons from the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Leroy Robert, 1933)" and Crawford Gates's score for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, Music from the Hill Cumorah Pageant: America's Witness for Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (VCOT 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.'s (Ill.) "3 Nephi (Gospel)" (1972). In addition, popular vocal music written for the Mormon mission and thus found in a hymn stanza, these songs often unpreserved forms. An example familiar to many English-speaking LDS people is "Oh That I Were a Priest," by Wanda West Palmer.

37 Alfred Tennyson (Lyric), "Crawford Gates (composer), "The King of Old, Wales" (Hymns, 1985), 753.

38 Deseret Sunday School Song Book (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1889).


40 Conversation with the author, 30 November 1999.

Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names


2 Lehi and Sarah—Language and Meaning

1 Nahan Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1997), seals #. 4174, 4175, #41, 4072. The name also appears in Lachdish Letter #1.

2b, seal #415 and p. 496.

3 "Abrahaynu the Elder" were implied, the

word "20" (zaqen) would need to include an initial 1 (h) representing the direct object he and would need to appear in a position following the name Abrahaynu, as an adjectival title.


5 See Genesis 17:12-19 (Isaac); Genesis 30:18 (Naphtali); 1 Samuel 4:21-22 (Ishahud).


8 Ibid., vell. 8. 


Response to Paul Hovland's "Lehi and Sarah"

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2 E. G., Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), 136, 1390.


5 Lehi and Sarah: Comments

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3 Ibid.

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2 Rcd, seal #415 and p. 496.

3 "Abrahaynu the Elder" were implied, the