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Response to Paul Hoskisson’s “Lehi and Sariah”

Dana M. Pike


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In this article Pike responds to Hoskisson’s conclusions about the etymology of the names Lehi and Sariah. He agrees with Hoskisson that Sariah is a theophoric name, which was common in ancient Israel and means “My prince is Jehovah.” However he suggests that the name should be grammatically distinguished from the masculine biblical personal name Seraiah. Although he offers an additional possibility for the meaning of the name Lehi, he agrees with Hoskisson’s suggestion that the name means “cheek.” The remainder of the article discusses the challenge of doing onomastic analysis on ancient non-English names when only an English form is available and further mentions the frequency of giving newborns in ancient Israel names of a religious nature.
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Sariah

As indicated by Paul Hoskisson, there can be little, if any, doubt that the name Sariah is a Hebrew compound theophoric name: šar + yah, “Jehovah is prince,” or šariy + yah, “my prince is Jehovah.” A theophoric personal name is one in which one of the elements is a divine name or title (such as in the name just cited). This type of personal name was very common in ancient Israel and in the ancient Near East in general (e.g., Elijah, Isaiah, Nebuchadrezzar). Note, however, that Hoskisson states that the name Sariah “would be related to the masculine biblical personal name Seraiah, “Jehovah is prince.” Several people mentioned in the Bible bear the name Seraiah, šērå + yah(u) (see 2 Kings 25:18; Jeremiah 51:59), but it is usually interpreted as consisting of a verbal form of šrâh plus the divine name: “Jehovah prevails/rules.”

Thus the first elements in the names Sariah and Seraiah derive from related linguistic roots but should be grammatically distinguished. Of course, these observations are based upon the preserved vocalizations—Sariah as found in the Book of Mormon, and Seraiah in the Masoretic Text (the traditional, vocalized text of the Hebrew Bible). While it is possible that the name šryh(tw) found on Israeliite stamp seals could be vocalized šariyyah, Sariah, it is usually vocalized Seraiah, following the pronunciation of the bibliically attested form because it is thought that one of these seals belonged to Seraiah, the brother of Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe (see Jeremiah 51:59–64).  

Lehi

Professor Hoskisson has done a good job of reviewing what are the most likely explanations of the name Lehi. And he rightly observes that we cannot, at present, be certain about which option is the correct one. This is not because we don’t know the languages of the ancient Near East, but because close onomastic parallels from ancient Israel are lacking. In our efforts to find similar forms elsewhere we must always weigh the differences in time, place, and linguistic relationship (e.g., is a name from the same time as Lehi but from a more distant relative of the Hebrew language “better” evidence than a name more chronologically removed but more proximate to the language family tree?). One example Hoskisson did not mention is the Phoenician name šmlīhy found at Elath. The element šlm is understood to be a divine name or appellative, and the element līhy is generally connected with the Arabic element to which Hoskisson made reference in discussing his second option (see his comments on Qatabanean). Thus it makes sense to regard the name Lehi as a shortened version of such a form, but again, as Hoskisson notes, if we accept the vocalization of the name Lehi as presented in the Book of Mormon, then the element preserved in the Phoenician name and later in Arabic—if we can assume consistent pronunciation—is more challenging phonetically. At present, I tend to favor the first option identified by Hoskisson, the Hebrew word līhy, as the most likely explanation of the meaning of the name Lehi. This word is employed
several times in the Bible with the sense of “cheek” (e.g., 1 Kings 22:24; Psalm 3:8; Lamentations 1:2).

General Comments

First, discussing the names Sariah and Lehi provides an opportunity to comment on the challenge of doing onomastic analysis on ancient non-English names when only an English form is available. This is one of the great challenges in working with the names in the Book of Mormon. For example, the Hebrew letters he (h) and het (h) are both usually rendered in English by the letter h. In the case of the name Lehi we are confident that the middle letter in the original form was het, not he, because the combination l-h-y does not occur in Hebrew, but the combination l-h-y does. Unfortunately, we are not always able to be so certain regarding several letters. We are thus dependent on the vocalizations that have come to us from Joseph Smith and his scribes, primarily Oliver Cowdery. Can we be certain that these vocalizations reflect ancient pronunciation? Do we know enough about the translation process from reliable, informed sources to be confident about this matter? I am not sure that we know enough to eliminate all questions.4

Second, I have some concern about the way Hoskisson closes his comments on the meaning of the name Sariah and all three of the suggested meanings for the name Lehi. To label the meaning of these names as “suitable” or “appropriate” or “fitting” for the prophet and his wife is fine as a casual comment from hindsight. But I hope that readers do not think that our assumed appropriateness of a name has any bearing on analyzing the meaning of a name. This should never be a determining factor. Unless we are notified in the text that a person’s name was changed as an adult (e.g., Jacob to Israel) or a name was divinely indicated for a newborn child (e.g., Hosea’s children), then we must assume that the parents chose a name for the child that seemed suitable to them. Many, if not most, of the names given to newborns in ancient Israel were of a religious nature; such names were often chosen for the sentiment they contained, such as the parents’ expression of gratitude for their infant, devotion to Jehovah, and so on. This means that many names would qualify as being “appropriate” for prophets, their wives, and righteous Israelites in general. But the vast majority of ancient Israelite children were not given a name that their parents knew would be appropriate to some particular function or office their child would fill as an adult. I don’t think Hoskisson was implying that this was the case, but I don’t want anyone to misunderstand his remarks.
constitute verse 2 and the first half of verse 3.


24 See, for example, "The Indian Hunter" ("Oh, how does your face follow my path, / Like the hound on the tiger's track?"); the English poet Eliza Cook (1813–1889), one of three Cook poets anthologized in Hazel Fellenzer, comp., The Best Loved Poems of the American People (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 625; or "Mestizo" by John Greenleaf Whittier: "My father 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 length, like armed men, / To work his people's overthrow," The Complete Poetical Works of John Greenleaf Whittier (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1884), 489.

25 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 Desert." The story, as told to our forefathers gave / All the lands the twist / The eastern and western big wave," Ohio State Journal, March 1830. Much later she lengthened and "Mormonized" this poem, retitling it "The Lamanite." It was published in the Deseret News, 20 September 1858. The expanded promises that "The scales will fall which now befoul their eyes; / And they, in turn, / Will join the ranks of the beasts."


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., 279.

29 Author unknown, "We wound 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 poem to open with first-person lament: all three hymns printed with this article use this device.


32 The tune paired with this text in the Psalmody (#212) is "See, the coming hero" from George Frideric Handel's Joko Muzamas (New York: Vanguard, 1957), a high expectation indeed from a congregation!

33 Louise L. Greene Richards, "The Savior at Jerusalem" in Desert 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 inclusive, eccentric 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- est, 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 material in the heading in Children's Songs list only twelve songs, many of these are immensely popular, and they play a cru- cial 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 Robinson's "From the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Leroy Robinson, 2003) and Crawford Gates's score for the Hill Cumorah Pageant, Music from the Hill Cumorah, Great Performances: America's Witness for Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, VCVT 4188 (1988).

37 Other examples are numerous. K. Newell Dayley has provided a musical setting for 3 Nephi 13:1-14, "I come unto My Own," Ralph G. Rodgers Jr., (lyric), III Nephi (Orlando: "Mormon"), 1973. Much later she lengthened and "Mormonized" this poem, retitling it "The Lamanite." It was published in the Deseret News, 20 September 1858. The expanded promises that "The scales will fall which now befoul their eyes; / And they, in turn, / Will join the ranks of the beasts."

38 Chicago Asyrian Dictionary, L-159. I would like to thank Jonathan Gimbal for finding this rather obscure example.

39 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 from "chokh" or "jaw- bome." Hugh Nibley downplayed this interpretation, preferring Nelson Glueck's reading "Labah," thus suggesting the bibili- cal place name Labah-ri in Genesis 24:62 and 25:11. Hugh N. Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 239.

40 Hani Hayajneh, Die Personennamen in den egyptologischen Inschriften (Berlin: Oldenbourg, 1998), 16, sub LBYT. "Ere möge leben, (O Gott NIH)." Under the same entry, Hayajneh does not exclude the meaning "beauty( of God)." Note the semantic parallel in Akkadian, lu-ah-ku-lu.


42 Translation from the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1950, ed.

43 See the similar construction in Ran Zadok, The Pre-Hellenistic Jewish Anthroponyms and Topography (Leuven: Peeters, 1988), 61; "La'at (W) / Of God/ETY (PE) / 'O Ney (my light)."

Seeking Agreement on the Meaning of Book of Mormon Names

1 Several researchers have worked on etno- nomy studies over recent decades. Hugh Nibley started the genre with several- chapters in Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredite (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952). Robert F. Smith private- ly distributed several papers that are still unpublished. John A. Tvedtnes did the same; in addition see his "A Phenomenal Analysis of Nephi and Jaredite Proper Name," Society for Early Historic Archaeology Newsletter and Proceedings 141 (12 December 1977): 1–4.


3 Neither the word niffn nor the name Lehi is used in the Book of Mormon, but it is used in the King James Version of the Bible.


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


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2 E.G., Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals (Jérusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), 136, #390.


Lehi and Sarah Comments

John A. Tvedtnes


3 Ibid.

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, 1997), cols. 48, 471, 475, #141, 47027. The name also appears in Lachish Letter #1.

2 End, seal #145 and p. 496.

3 If <naph> was the oracular term implied, the word "naphn" would need to include an initial "n" (representing the direct object he and would need to appear in a position following the name Abinadi, as an adjetival title.


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


7 In the original article I could have added more examples of the masculine name <naph>, but it seemed to me unnecessary. A clear-cut example of the name used for a female would be more helpful.

8 <naph> is interpreted as "naphn," god has