

Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions

John A. Tvedtnes

John Gee

Matthew Roper



Personal names found in the Book of Mormon but unknown from the Bible have long intrigued LDS scholars. Some have proposed Hebrew etymologies for many of the nonbiblical names used in Nephite and Lamanite society. While this kind of activity suggests an Israelite origin for these peoples and hence provides strong evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon, we now have an even stronger source of evidence.

In recent years, a large number of ancient writings have been found in and around Israel. While many of these include names found in the Bible and other ancient texts, others were previously unattested in written sources. Some of these previously unattested names are unknown in the Bible but are found in the Book of Mormon. The discovery of these Hebrew names in ancient inscriptions provides remarkable evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and provides clear refutation of those critics who would place its origin in nineteenth-century America.

Two of these names have been discussed in previous issues of the *Journal*. Jeffrey Chadwick demonstrated that Sariah, known in the Book of Mormon as the name of Lehi's wife, appears on one of the papyri written by members of a Jewish community in Elephantine, Egypt, in the fifth century b.c. and discovered at the turn of the twentieth century, and on several seals and clay bullae (for the meaning of this and other technical terms, see the glossary on page 44) found in Israel that date from the time of Lehi.¹ Paul Hoskisson, following up on previous notes from Hugh Nibley,² showed that the name Alma appears on a Jewish document of the early second century a.d., also found in Israel.³ Terrence Szink provided evidence that the name Alma is even older, being attested on clay tablets found at the northwestern Syrian site of Ebla and dating to the second half of the third millennium b.c.⁴ A number of other biblical names have been found at Ebla, which is in the region that some scholars consider to be the homeland of the Hebrews.

The Hebrew Language

Some peculiarities of the Hebrew language will help the reader appreciate the value of the various names that we will discuss in this article. The ancient Israelites spoke the same language as their neighbors, the Canaanites, though there may have been some dialectal variation. The Canaanite languages (which include Canaanite/Hebrew, Phoenician and its descendant Punic, Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite) are part of a larger family known as Semitic.

The Canaanite languages, along with a number of other Semitic languages, were written with consonants only, right-to-left rather than the left-to-right orientation of English writing. The reader had to mentally add the vowels according to the context of the words—which is still the case in modern Hebrew. The vowels found in medieval Hebrew Bible scrolls and in modern printed Hebrew Bibles were supplied by later scribes. Thus, the Hebrew form of Alma was written *ʾlmʾ*. From Hebrew phonetic rules, the most likely pronunciation was Alma, which is how its discoverer, Yigael Yadin, rendered it in English.⁵

Hebrew names tend to have meanings in that language, making it possible for us to assign etymologies to most of the names discussed in this article and to other names in the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

Sariah

The Hebrew form of the name Sariah is *Śryh*. The first element of the name is *śar* (with vowel), generally rendered “prince” in the KJV.⁶ The second element is a theophoric element, *Yāh* or *Yāhû*, an abbreviated form of the divine name that appears as either Jehovah or LORD (all caps) in the KJV. Thus the correct vocalization would be *śaryāh*, meaning either “prince of Jehovah” or “Jehovah is Prince.”

The theophoric element is usually transliterated *-iah* in the Bible, as in the names Jeremiah and Isaiah, though sometimes it is rendered *-jah*, as in Elijah and Abijah. (In earlier forms of English, the letters *j* and *y* were pronounced alike, and even names like Ishmael and Isaiah begin with the *y* sound in Hebrew.)

Previous to its discovery as a woman's name at Elephantine, Sariah was known from the Bible as a male name, transliterated Seraiah in English, though spelled the same in Hebrew, which, as previously mentioned, was originally written without vowels.⁷ Indeed, the name seems to have been common in the time of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi and his wife Sariah (see Jeremiah 36:26; 40:8; 51:59, 61; 52:24), and is attested on seals and bullae of that time period.⁸

It may seem strange to modern readers that a male name could be given to a woman, but the phenomenon is common in many languages, including English (e.g., Jan, Kim, Bobbie), and is known from the Bible (e.g., Abijah is a man's name in 1 Kings 14:1 but a woman's name in 2 Chronicles 29:1). Even the name Solomon (Hebrew *Šlmh*) is attested on a bulla in the Moussaieff collection as the name of a woman, the “daughter of Shebniah.”⁹

Other Book of Mormon Names

In addition to Alma and Sariah, a number of other Nephite names are attested in ancient Hebrew inscriptions. These include Aha, Ammonihah,

Chemish, Hagoth, Himni, Isabel, Jarom, Josh, Luram, Mathoni, Mathonihah, Muloki, and Sam, none of which appear in English Bibles. The name Gilgal is known from the Bible as a place name and refers to something that rolls, such as a wheel (see Joshua 5:9). In addition to the Nephite city Gilgal (see

3 Nephi 9:6), one of the Nephite

military leaders who perished in the great battle at Cumorah also bore

this name (see Mormon 6:14). In the Old

World, it also appears as the name of a man (*Glg*) on Arad Ostrakon 49, from the second half of the eighth century b.c.¹⁰

Sources of the Attested Names

Most of the Book of Mormon names that are now attested are known from Hebrew inscriptions on bullae. These inscriptions typically give the owner's name and often his or her paternity. In the early 1960s, Israeli archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni discovered the first collection of Hebrew bullae in a pottery jar at Lachish, some twenty miles southwest of



Jerusalem. Because one of them bore the name of a royal official, he suggested that they had been part of an administrative archive.

In the mid-1970s, a group of nearly 70 bullae and two seals of the Persian period came to light. Their provenance is unknown because they fell into the hands of private collectors.

A number of bullae from a hoard illegally excavated near Tell Beit Mirsim began appearing in the Jerusalem antiquities market in 1975. Of these, nearly 200 were acquired by a single Israeli collector, Yoav Sasson, while another 49 were purchased by Dr. Reuben Hecht of Haifa and donated to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. The clay bullae were accidentally preserved by being fired when the site was burned during the Babylonian invasion of 588–587

b.c. The Sasson and Hebrew University collections, comprising 255 bullae impressed by 211 different seals, were published in 1986 by Nahman Avigad.¹¹ Bullae from the same site ended up in the collections of Solomon Moussaieff of London and Ch. Kaufman of Antwerp.



In 1982, another 50 Hebrew bullae were discovered in the ancient City of David, south of the current Old City of Jerusalem.

Other bullae were uncovered during archaeological excavations at Tell el-Judeideh, Beth-Zur, Lachish, Beer-Sheba, and Tel el-Hesi. By 1997, Robert Deutsch was able to report that some 510 bullae had been published.¹²

Arrowheads are another source for the names. To date, about forty ancient bronze arrowheads of the tenth and eleventh centuries b.c., inscribed with the names of their owners, have been discovered in northern Israel and Lebanon. A few of them bear names also found in the Book of Mormon. Some of the arrowheads are held by private collectors, others by museums.

Patristic Names

A feature of the Book of Mormon that is unknown from the Old Testament is the naming of a son after his father. Thus, we have Alma son of Alma, Helaman son of Helaman, Nephi son of Nephi son of Helaman, and Pahoran son of Pahoran. Until recently, patristic names of this sort

Glossary

Biform—Parallel forms of the same name, such as English Rick and Richard.

Bulla (plural **Bullae**)—The impression of an engraved seal made on clay or wax. Hebrew bullae were formed when scrolls were rolled up and sealed with a lump of clay onto which the seal (often carved in stone) was pressed. Most bullae had the name of the scroll's owner or sender. When a bulla was removed from the document, the underside often retained the impression of the strips of papyrus to which it had adhered.

Etymology—The origin or meaning of a word or name.

Hypocoristic—An adjective denoting an abbreviated name. A parallel in English would be diminutives, such as Joe for Joseph or Will for William. Hebrew hypocoristic names generally dropped the theophoric element, usually from the end.

Ostrakon (plural **Ostraca**)—A shard or fragment of pottery on which writing has been affixed, either by engraving or by ink and pen.

Seal—A carved stamp, usually of stone, that was used to impress an image or writing onto wet clay. Most seals had the name of the owner, often with his patronymic ("son of N"). The seals of government officials often included the individual's title, the most common being "servant of K," where K is the name of the king. Occasionally, a seal included some sort of design. These often included Egyptian motifs.

Theophoric—An adjective denoting a divine name. Many Hebrew names were composed of a verb or adjective plus the divine name, which could be either *ʾEl* (generally rendered "God" in the Bible) or various shortened forms of the name rendered "Jehovah" or "Lord" in the Bible, such as *Yĕhō-* or *Yô-* at the beginning of names or *-Yāh* or *-Yāhū* at the end. Sometimes the theophoric element was dropped from the name, perhaps out of respect for deity.

Transliteration (verbal form **Transliterate**)—A method of depicting a foreign alphabet by means of the Latin alphabet used in English. Because some sounds do not exist in English, it is sometimes necessary to add diacritical marks above or below the character.

were unknown from epigraphic sources. But an ostrakon from the late seventh or early sixth century b.c. in the Moussaeiff collection lists one *ʾlkn bn ʾlkn*, “Elikon [or Elkanah] son of Elikon.”¹³

Implications for the Book of Mormon

Critics of the Book of Mormon have long suggested that Joseph Smith (or sometimes another nineteenth-century personality, such as Solomon Spaulding or Sidney Rigdon) wrote the Book of Mormon and invented all of the nonbiblical names found therein. One critic claimed that Book of Mormon names “were the product of a schizophrenic mind that was excessively religious. They are in no sense divinely inspired.”¹⁴

Another critic wrote that “There is not a single discovery or scrap of evidence in support of any of the following names of heads, under which the book has been divided. . . . This altogether remarkable production of an over-imaginative mind bears evidences of the eagerness with which the would-be

could have learned Egyptian from any early nineteenth century sources. Explaining that he was a Protestant and hence not a believer in the Book of Mormon, he observed, “It is all the more surprising that there are two Egyptian names, Paanch[i] and Pahor[an] which appear in the Book of Mormon in close connection with a reference to the original language being ‘Reformed Egyptian.’” Puzzled at the existence of such names in an obscure book published by Joseph Smith in 1830, Albright vaguely suggested that the young Mormon leader was some kind of “religious genius.”¹⁷

Incensed by this response, the critic wrote to another scholar in England. Without mentioning Albright by name, he complained of “another scholar who is renowned in ancient Semitic studies” who “though a Protestant, he writes of the Book of Mormon like it had authentic Egyptian-Hebrew support. He even offered me what he said were two good Egyptian names in the Book of Mormon—Paanchi and Pahoran. . . . Certainly he would know

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prophet sought to study his *profit*, and how he mistook his calling in life, rather than anything in the way of support towards its claims.”¹⁵

A pair of critics wrote, “It would be easy to make up hundreds of ‘new names’ by simply changing a few letters on names that are already known or by making different combinations with parts of names. . . . If he used a list of Bible names and a little imagination, it would have been very easy to have produced the ‘new names’ found in the Book of Mormon.”¹⁶

Critics of the Book of Mormon have been reluctant to grant the historical complexity of Book of Mormon names, even when faced with evidence supporting their authenticity. One man, after writing a series of inflammatory letters designed to elicit negative comments about LDS scriptures from prominent Near Eastern scholars, received a response from William F. Albright of Johns Hopkins University, who expressed doubts that Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith didn’t understand Egyptian, but why would he leave an impression that Joseph Smith was on the right track?”¹⁸

The names described in this article deal a serious blow to critics of the Book of Mormon. Found in both the Book of Mormon and ancient inscriptions, these names are Hebrew in origin, as one would expect for people who emigrated from ancient Jerusalem. Except where noted, these names are not known from the Bible. Of particular interest is the fact that most of these names are attested in inscriptions dating to the time of Lehi. Indeed, some are relatively common for that time period. We can only speculate about how they made their way to the New World—whether on the brass plates of Laban or on the large plates of Nephi (which we no longer have) or in the names of the sons of Ishmael or their children or Lehi’s grandchildren.

With ongoing excavation in Israel and elsewhere in the Near East, it is likely that more Book of

Mormon names will show up in ancient Hebrew inscriptions.



Abish is the name of a Lamanite woman, a servant to king Lamoni's queen (see Alma 19:16). Abish corresponds to the Hebrew name ʾbš , found on a seal from pre-exilic times (prior to 587 b.c.) in the Hecht Museum in Haifa.¹⁹ The addition of the Hebrew letter *aleph* (symbolized by ʾ in transliteration) to the end of the name is known from other Hebrew hypocoristic names, suggesting that the name on the seal may be hypocoristic. (See Hypocoristic Forms on page 50.) However, no etymology has been proposed. The form ʾbš is also attested as a Semitic name on a wall relief in the tomb of Khnum-hotep III at Beni Hasan, Egypt, dating to the nineteenth century b.c. The relief depicts a group of Asiatics, probably Semites, entering Egypt with their donkeys. Scholars have often compared the scene to the emigration of Abraham and later his grandson Jacob into Egypt. W. F. Albright suggested reading the name as Abi-shar, but in view of the more recent evidence, this must now be abandoned.²⁰



Aha was one of the sons of the Nephite military leader Zoram (Alma 16:5). Hugh Nibley proposed that the name was of Egyptian origin, ʿh^h , meaning "warrior." But the name is now attested in several early inscriptions as Hebrew ʾh , thought by scholars to have been vocalized ʾAlha and to be a hypocoristic name based on ʾah , "brother." The longer form, rendered Ahijah in the King James Bible, is ʾahîyāh(û) , which means "brother of Yah (Jehovah)" or "Yah is my brother,"²¹ which is also attested in a dozen ancient Hebrew inscriptions.²²

The name ʾh is inscribed in Canaanite letters of

the eleventh and ninth centuries b.c., respectively, on two bronze arrowheads in the possession of a collector who prefers to remain anonymous, and on a Moabite seal.²³ More importantly, the name also appears on several Hebrew ostraca, including Samaria Ostrakon 51,²⁴ Ostrakon 1543/1 from Khirbet el-Meshash,²⁵ and Arad ostraca 49, 67, 74.²⁶ It is also known from four jar stamps, two from Tel el-Judeideh,²⁷ and two from Khirbet Rabud,²⁸ along with a Hebrew bulla of unknown provenance.²⁹ Of particular significance for our study is a Hebrew bulla found in Jerusalem that dates from the time of Lehi.³⁰

The addition of the Hebrew letter *aleph* to the end of the name Aha is also known from other Hebrew hypocoristic names.

Ammonihah was the name of a Nephite who founded the city of the same name (see Alma 8:6–7). The name is attested on two Hebrew seals, one known to date to the seventh century b.c., in the forms ʾmnyhw and ʾmnwyhw .³¹

Nibley saw the ending *-ihah*, found in this and several other Book of Mormon names, as the theophoric element rendered *-iah* in the KJV and found in many Hebrew names from the time of Lehi.³² The use of *-ihah* for the divine name *Yhwh* (KJV "Jehovah") suggests that the Nephites may have used this longer form. It is possible, however, that the first *h* merely reflects Joseph Smith's transliteration.



Chemish was a descendant of Jacob and one of the guardians and authors of the small plates of Nephi (see Omni 1:8–10). His name is apparently related to that of the Ammonite god Chemosh, spelled *Kmš* in prevocalic Hebrew and Ammonite (related languages). A number of names containing the element *Kmš* are known, in which it is clear that the divine name was meant.³³ Also known is a seal currently in the Israel Museum that has *Kmš* as the name of a man or woman.³⁴

Hagoth was a Nephite shipbuilder who constructed ships that took colonizers into the land

Symbols Used in Transliteration

ʔ—the sound produced when the vocal cords open up, as in English words beginning with a vowel (e.g., *orange*); no equivalent in written English

ḥ—the Egyptian glottal stop, equivalent to ʔ for Hebrew

h—nonexistent in English; very much like the *ch* in German *ich* or Scottish *loch*

ʕ—nonexistent in English; pronounced in the back of the throat

ś—an *s* sound

š—like English *sh* in *ship*

ṣ—an emphatic *s* sound; in modern Hebrew, it is pronounced like English *ts*, as in *its*

northward (see Alma 63:5). Contrary to LDS folklore, there is no indication in the text that Hagoth himself sailed on any of them (see Alma 63:6–9).

One Book of Mormon critic argued that Joseph Smith derived the name Hagoth from the name of the biblical prophet Haggai.³⁵ Indeed, the names may be related, but a closer parallel is the biblical Haggith (see 2 Samuel 3:4; 1 Kings 1:5, etc.), which may have been vocalized Hagoth anciently. All three names derive from a root referring to a pilgrimage to attend religious festivals.

The name Hagoth is attested in the form *Hgt* on an Ammonite seal inscribed sometime in the eighth through the sixth centuries b.c.³⁶ (The Ammonites, neighbors of the Israelites and descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, wrote and spoke the same language as the Israelites.)

Himni was one of the four sons of Mosiah₂ who went on the mission to the Lamanites (see Mosiah 27:34; Alma 22:35; 23:1; 25:17; 27:19; 31:6). Of this name, an early critic wrote, “It appeared to the present writer, by this time, almost certain that the name Harmony, that of the town where Joseph Smith spent so many happy, loving hours courting Emma, would be discernible, so he again consulted the list and found HiMNI. I need not point out the radical resemblance. Is *that* resemblance accidental, and not due at all to the haunting cadences of that doubly blessed name ‘Harmony?’”³⁷



Contrary to this speculation, the name Himni is clearly Hebrew and is represented by the unvocalized form, *Hmn* on two Israelite seals. The first, from the eighth century b.c., was found at Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley.³⁸ The other is from the first half of the seventh century b.c.³⁹

Because the seal inscriptions do not have vowels, we cannot know precisely how the name is to be read. The Bible knows of a non-Israelite Haman from the time of Esther, and Heman was a noted poet and musician in the time of David and Solomon. The vowel at the end of Himni suggests that it is a gentilic form, meaning “Hemanite.” (See the glossary on page 44.)

Isabel was a harlot in the land of Siron, on the border between the Lamanites and the Zoramites (see Alma 39:3). LDS scholars have generally assumed that

the name is identical to that of the Old Testament Jezebel, the Hebrew form of which was *ʿIzebel*, and this is probably correct. But the spelling *Yzbl* is now attested on a seal in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem that is thought to be Phoenician in origin.⁴⁰

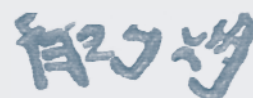
Jarom was the son of Enos and grandson of Nephi's brother Jacob (see Jarom 1:1, 14). The fifth book in the Book of Mormon bears his name. One might wish to compare Jarom with the biblical name Jehoram, which is found twenty-one times in the Bible, while its hypocoristic form Joram occurs twenty-four times. But several Hebrew inscriptions bear the name *Yrm*, which scholars consider to be the hypocoristic form of *Yrmyh(w)*, Jeremiah, whose name means "Yah (Jehovah) exalts."⁴¹ *Yrm* is found in four Hebrew inscriptions, including a seal of the seventh century b.c., found in Egypt,⁴² and three items from the time of Lehi: a jug inscription from Tel esh-Shari'ah, and an ostracon and bulla in the Moussaieff collection.



Josh was the name of a city destroyed at the time of Christ's crucifixion (see 3 Nephi 9:10) and of a Nephite military leader who died in the great battle at Cumorah (see Mormon 6:14). Critics have suggested that this is merely the American diminutive for the name Joshua.

But a number of Hebrew inscriptions bear the name *Yṣ*, probably vocalized *Yôṣ*, which Israeli scholars have acknowledged to be hypocoristic for the biblical name *Yṣyhw*, Josiah, in whose reign Jeremiah began his prophetic mission (see Jeremiah 1:2; 27:1).⁴³ The name appears in three of the Lachish letters (2, 3, and 6) from the time of Lehi.⁴⁴ It is also the name of four persons named in the fifth-century b.c. Jewish Aramaic papyri from Elephantine, Egypt.⁴⁵ Four of the bullae found near Tel Beit Mirsim and dating from ca. 600 b.c. bear the name *Yṣ*.⁴⁶ Three of them were made from the same seal.

Luram is the name of a Nephite military leader who served with Mormon (see Moroni 9:2). The name is reflected in the second element of the name *ʿdn-Lrm*, "Lord of LRM," known from a seal of ca. 720 b.c. found during excavations at Hama (Hamath) in Syria. The name is also known from graffiti on three bricks from the same level at Hama.⁴⁷



Mathoni and Mathonihah were the names of two of the twelve disciples chosen by Christ during his visit to the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 19:4). Critic Walter Prince suggested an unusual derivation for the name, writing, "Just lisp the sibilant and you have the entire word 'Mason' and almost the entire

word ‘Masonic’ in both of these appellations.”⁴⁸ Prince would have done better to look to the Bible.

The fact that Mathoni is hypocoristic for Mathonihah reinforces the idea that the element *-ihah* is the Nephite form of the divine name (see Ammonihah, above). This being the case, Mathonihah would correspond to KJV Mattaniah (Hebrew *Mtnyhw*), the birth-name of Zedekiah (see 2 Kings 24:17), who was king of Judah when Lehi left Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:4). Several other biblical personalities bore this name. We can then compare Mathoni to biblical Mattan, the name of two different men, one of whom was a contemporary of Lehi and Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 38:1). (Note that the Hebrew letter *tav* is sometimes transliterated *t* in the Bible, as in these names, and sometimes *th*, as in Methuselah.)

Hugh Nibley was the first to suggest that the Book of Mormon name Mathonihah corresponded to biblical Mattaniah, while its biform Mathoni (see 3 Nephi 19:4) corresponded to biblical Mattan. He further noted that both names are found in the Elephantine Papyri and that the longer form occurs in the Lachish letters, written just a few years after Lehi left Jerusalem.⁴⁹

The Hebrew name *Mtnyhw* appears on a seventh-century b.c. wine decanter,⁵⁰ on six seals,⁵¹ and on seven bullae, most of them from the time of Lehi.⁵² The hypocoristic *Mtn*, which could be vocalized either Mattan (as in the Bible) or Mathoni (as in the Book of Mormon), is found on Ostrakon 1682/2 from Khirbet el-Meshash (second half of the seventh century b.c.),⁵³ seven seals (most from the seventh century b.c.),⁵⁴ and eleven bullae (most from the time of Lehi).⁵⁵

Muloki was one of the men who accompanied the sons of Mosiah on their mission to the Lamanites (see Alma 20:2; 21:11). His name suggests that he may have been a Mulekite. Also from the same root are names such as Mulek⁵⁶ and Melek,⁵⁷ which is the Hebrew word meaning “king.” Mulek is hypocoristic for Hebrew *Mlkyh(w)* (KJV Melchiah and Malchiah), which is attested both in the Bible (see 1 Chronicles 6:40; Ezra 10:25, 3; Nehemiah 3:14, 31; 8:4; 11:12; Jeremiah 21:1; 38:1, 6) and in numerous ancient inscriptions, most of them from the time of Lehi. Indeed, it has been suggested that one of the men bearing this name is the Mulek of the Book of Mormon. He is called “Malchiah the son of Hammelech,” which means “Malchiah, son of

the king” (see Jeremiah 38:6).⁵⁸

Muloki corresponds to the name *Mlky* on a bulla found in the City of David (Jerusalem) and dating from the time of Lehi.⁵⁹



Sam, brother of Nephi, came to the New World with his father Lehi and family (see 1 Nephi 2:5; 2 Nephi 5:6; Alma 3:6). Critics have suggested that Joseph Smith simply used the common English diminutive of Samuel. What these critics failed to realize is that the name Samuel, which appears in the English Bible, is from the Hebrew name (*Šamûʿēl*) comprised of two elements, Shem (“name”) + El (“God”).

The name Sam is attested on a bronze ring-mounted seal dated to the seventh century b.c.⁶⁰ While others have read this name as Shem, in paleo-Hebrew there is no distinction in writing between *ś* and *š* (the latter written *sh* in English). (It is the same letter used at the beginning of the name Sariah.) Various dialects of Hebrew pronounced this letter in different ways anciently. From the story in Judges 12:6, we find that some of the tribe of Joseph pronounced it *s* instead of *š*, reminding us that Lehi was a descendant of Joseph (see 1 Nephi 5:14).