

Lehi and Sariah

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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.”

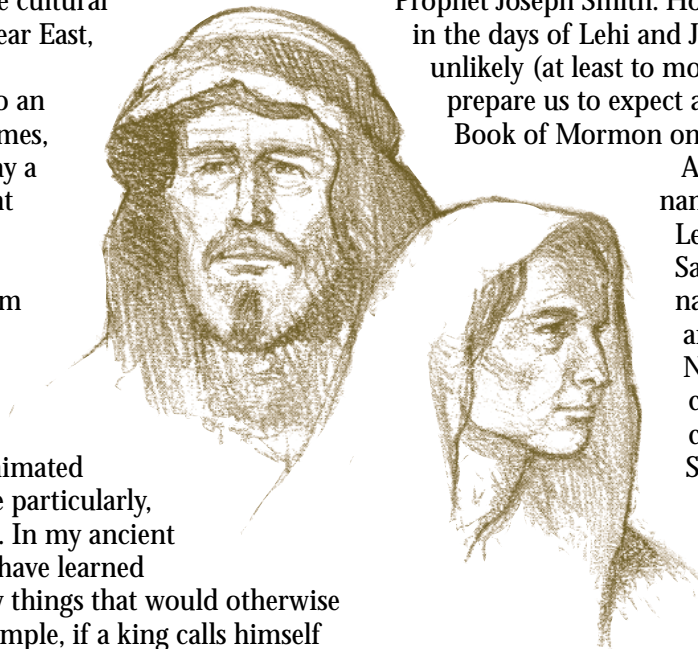
Of course, very few names reveal otherwise unrevealed facts. But it happens often enough that discovering what a name means is an exciting adventure, whether or not the etymology reveals anything more than just a meaning. For example, the name of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar means, “Nabu [a 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)*, שר(ה), 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*, לְחִי, 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: Elihoenai (and variants), which means approximately "To Jehovah mine eyes (are lifted)."¹ 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," *lētu*, the Neo-Babylonian feminine personal name *Le-et-ka-i-di-i* would mean approximately "(O God,) incline thine head,"² 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,³ 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),"⁴ 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*, לְ, a preposition which can mean "to," "belonging to," or "of," and the word for life, *hy*, חַי. Thus in Genesis 16:14 the name of the well, Beer-lahai-roi, בְּאֵר לְחַי רֹאִי, can mean "Well of the living One who seeth me."⁵ The middle word is composed of the preposition *le*, לְ, plus the word for life, *hy*, חַי (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,"⁶ 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.