



*The Names  
Lehi & Sariah—  
Language and  
Meaning*

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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 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 לֶחִי (*lḥy*—pronounced with a soft *ē* and a hard *h*, to be read as *lēhy*), a term that means “cheek” 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 להי-חמור (*lehy hamor*) 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 רמת-להי (*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 Judaeon personal names rarely featured words denoting body parts. However, reference to body parts was not unheard of. The Hebrew name בנימין (*Binyamin*) or Benjamin, for example, while not explicitly employing the word for “hand” (יד, *yad*), is almost universally understood as meaning “son of the right hand.” Even the word *right* (ימין, *yamin*) was often used to denote the right hand, as in: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let *my right hand* (ימיני, *yamini*) forget her cunning” (Psalm 137:5). The Hebrew name יאזניהו (*Ya’azanyahu*), which appears several places in the KJV Bible as “Jaazaniah” (2 Kings 25:23) as well as on several Judaeon stamp seals,<sup>1</sup> employs the verb form of the word for “ear;” און (*ozen*). As another example, a Hebrew stamp seal from the seventh century b.c. has been discovered bearing the name זקן (*zaqan*), a term which can mean “old” or “elder” but which literally means “beard.” The entire text of the “Beard” seal reads לזקן אחזיהו (*le-Zaqan Ahazyahu*), which Nahman Avigad reads as “belonging to Zaqan [son of] Ahazyahu.”<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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: יצחק (*Yitzhak* or Isaac), which means “laugher” or “he laughs”; Naphtali, which means “my wrestling”; or א-כבוד (*Ikavod* or Ichabod), which means “no glory.”<sup>5</sup> 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 נבל (*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

