Some Notes on
Book of Mormon Names

Stephen D. Ricks

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The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Document:
Proper Names as a Test Case

Abstract: *This study considers the Book of Mormon personal names Josh, Nahom, and Alma as test cases for the Book of Mormon as an historically authentic ancient document.*

At the beginning of *Lehi in the Desert*, the late, legendary Hugh Nibley reviews the distinguished American archaeologist William F. Albright's criteria for determining the historical plausibility of the Middle Egyptian tale of Sinuhe, which Albright considers to be "'a substantially true account of life in its milieu' on the grounds (1) that its 'local color [is] extremely plausible,' (2) it describes a 'state of social organization' which 'agrees exactly with our present archaeological and documentary evidence,' (3) 'the Amorite personal names contained in the story are satisfactory for that period and region,' and (4) 'finally, there is nothing unreasonable in the story itself.'"[1] Nibley then asks about the story of Lehi: "Does it correctly reflect 'the cultural horizon and religious and social ideas and practices of the time'? Does it have authentic historical and geographical background? Is the mise-en-scène mythical, highly imaginative, or extravagantly improbable? Is its local color correct, and are its proper names convincing?"[2] As regards proper names

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1. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 3.

2. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 4.

in the Book of Mormon, they are arguably ancient, deriving either from ancient Hebrew, another ancient Semitic dialect, ancient Egyptian, or some other ancient language. The following three Book of Mormon proper names—**Josh**, **Nahom**, and **Alma** (the first of several that will be presented and discussed in forthcoming issues of this journal)—are illustrations of the ancient setting of this book, as well as being of interest in their own right.

Book of Mormon Proper Names: Josh, Nahom, Alma
JOSH

The Book of Mormon proper name **Josh** (mentioned as a place name in 3 Nephi 9:10 and as a personal name—the name of a Nephite general—in Mormon 6:14) is not, as English speakers might suppose, an abbreviated form of Joshua (Hebrew *Yehōshuaʿ*) but of Josiah (Hebrew *Yōʾshiyyāhū*). The unabbreviated name means "the Lord is a support," from the hypothetical Hebrew root *ʾashah* "to support" (cf. the noun form *ʾoshyāh*, "support, buttress").

Josh, in a slightly different abbreviated form from this root, appears in the Lachish Letters[3] as *Jāʾuš*[4] (an abbreviated form of *yāʾushyāhū*, "the Lord will give as a gift"), according to the preexilic pronunciation. In their illuminating study, "Book of Mormon Names in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper note that "four of the bullae found near Tel Beit Mirsim and dating from ca. 600 BC bear the name *Yʾš*. Three of them were made from the same seal."[5] They also point out that the personal name *Yʾš* appears

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3. Hugh Nibley was the first person to call attention to the *Jāʾuš* in the Lachish letters. See "The Lachish Letters: Documents from Lehi's Day," *Ensign*, 11:12 (December 1981): 51.

4. For the most recent treatment of this name in the Lachish letters see Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 481–82.

5. John Gee, John A. Tvedtnes, and Matthew Roper, "Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," *Journal of Book of Mormon*

six times in the fifth-century B.C. Jewish Aramaic papyri from Elephantine in Upper Egypt.[6] The Book of Mormon form, *Josh*, reflects the loss of the consonantal quality of the "*waw*" from the Hebrew root *ʾwš*, meaning "to give, to gift; gift, reward, etc." Though the root *ʾwš* does not occur apart from personal names in the Hebrew Bible, it does occur in, for example, Ugaritic *usûn*, "gift"; Arabic *ʾāsa*, "to give, reward"; *ʾaws*, "gift"; Old South Arabian *ʾws*.[7]

NAHOM

Surprisingly, evidence for **Nahom**, the name of the place where Ishmael was buried (1 Nephi 16:34), is based on historical, geographic, and archaeological—and only secondarily on etymological—considerations.

Three altar inscriptions containing NHM as a tribal name and dating from the seventh to sixth centuries BC—roughly the time period when Lehi's family was traveling though the area—have been discussed by S. Kent Brown.[8] Dan Vogel, writing in the misleadingly named *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* and responding to two books by LDS authors about Lehi's journey in the Arabian desert, has objected to the dating of the Arabian word NHM: "There is no evidence dating the

Studies 9/1 (2000): 49, 78, citing Nahman Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 42–43, 59; Robert Deutsch and Michael Heltzer, *New Epigraphic Evidence from the Biblical Period* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 1995), 56–57; Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), 184, 202–3.

6. Gee, Tvedtnes, and Roper, "Book of Mormon Names," 48, 78, citing Elephantine Documents 12:8; 13:13; 18:5; 22:89; 39:4; 40:5, in Arthur Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century BC* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923).

7. See further Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:26.

8. Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 55–125, esp. 81–82.

Arabian NHM before A.D. 600, let alone 600 B.C."[9] It should be noted, however, that Burkhard Vogt, perhaps unaware of its implications for the Book of Mormon, dates an altar having the initial letters NHM(yn) to the seventh to sixth centuries BC.[10] This is not insignificant since Vogel's book was published in 2004, while Vogt's contribution was published in 1997.

Nhm appears as a place name and as a tribal name in southwestern Arabia in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period in the Arab antiquarian al-Hamdani's *al-Iklīl*[11] and in his *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-ʿArab*.[12] If, as Robert Wilson observes, there is minimal movement among the tribes over time,[13] the region known in early modern maps of the Arabian Peninsula as "Nehem" and "Nehhm" as well as "Nahom" may well have had that, or a similar, name in antiquity.[14]

The Hebrew root *nhm*, meaning "to groan" (of persons),[15] mentioned in Ezekiel 24:23 and Proverbs 5:11, may reflect the actions of the daughters of Ishmael in 1 Nephi 16:35 in "mourn[ing]

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9. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 609.

10. Burkhard Vogt, "Les temples de Maʾrib," in *Yémen: au pays de la reine de Saba* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 144.

11. Al-Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Hamdani, *al-Iklil*, ed. Nabih Faris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 35, 94.

12. al-Hamdani, *Sifat Jazirat al-ʿArab*, ed. David H. Müller (Leiden: Brill, repr. 1968), 49, l. 9; 81, l. 4, 8, 11; 83, l. 8, 9; 109, l. 26; 110, l12. 2, 4 126, l. 10; 135, l. 19, 22; 167, l. 15–20; 168, l. 10, 11, where *nhm* is listed as either the name of a "region, territory" (Ar. *balad*) or a "tribe" (Ar. *qabila*); Jawad ʿAli*, Al-Mufassal fi Ta'rikh al-ʿArab qabla al-Islam* (Beirut: Dar al-ʿIlm lil-Malayin, 1969–73), 2:414, gives "Nhm" as the name of a "region" (Ar. *ard*) during the period of the "*mukarrib*s and the [ancient] kings of Saba" (Ar. *fi ayyam al-mukarribina wa-fi ayyam muluk Saba'*); he also gives "Nhm" as a place name, *Al-Mufassal*, 4:187 and 7:462.

13. Robert Wilson, "al-Hamdani's Description of Hashid and Bakil," *Proceedings of the Seminar on Arabian Studies* 11 (1981): 95, 99–100.

14. On the names of this location in maps of the early modern era (1751-1814), see James Gee, "The Nahom Maps," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 17/1 (2008): 40–57.

15. D. J. A. Clines, ed, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 5:631.

exceedingly, because of the loss of their father, and because of their afflictions in the wilderness." Were the name originally "*Neḥem*," the Semitic roots suggested in 1950 by Hugh Nibley (the Arabic *naḥama*, "to sigh or moan;" and the Hebrew root *nḥm*, "comfort")[16] would also fit the context of 1 Nephi 16.

ALMA

Although the female personal name Alma (from the Latin adjective *almus*, *alma*, *almum*, "nurturing, fostering,") is popular in the Western tradition of naming, the male personal name **Alma** is of incontestable antiquity. The name appears at least eight times in documents dating from the late third millennium BC from the archives at Ebla (located in modern-day Syria).[17] It also occurs in the Bar Kokhba letters, dating from the period of the Second Jewish Revolt in AD 132–35.[18] It appears as Alma ben Yehudah ("Alma son of Judah") in a business document and is written both *ʾlmʾ* and *ʾlmh*.

The initial consonant of the name **Alma** in the Bar Kokhba documents is *aleph* (transliterated as *ʾ*). However, the name ultimately derives from the consonant *ghayin* (hence the pronunciation *ghlmʾ* in the period before the third century BC). However, over the centuries the sound *ghayin* came to be pronounced as *ʿayin* and, finally, as *ʾaleph*.[19]

The Hebrew word *ʿelem* occurs twice in the Old Testament— once at 1 Samuel 17:56 and again at 1 Samuel 20:22 with the

16. Hugh W. Nibley, "Lehi in the Desert," *Improvement Era* 53 (June 1950): 517; Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 79, 90–91.

17. Terrence L. Szink, "The Personal Name 'Alma' at Ebla," *Religious Educator* 1/1 (2000): 53–56; see also Szink, "New Light: Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 70.

18. Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Last Jewish Revolt against Imperial Rome* (Jerusalem: Steimatzky, 1971), 121.

19. On aleph and ʿayin in the spelling of the name "Alma," see John A. Tvedtnes, "More on the Name Alma" *Book of Mormon Research* (September 2008), which may be accessed online at http://bookofmormonresearch.org/more-on-the-name-alma.

meaning "youth, lad." The personal name **Alma** (ʾ*lmʾ*) may well be a hypocoristic form (a word or name with the name of deity—El—suppressed), thus "God's lad, youth." Strikingly, in Mosiah 17:2 when **Alma** is first introduced, he is described as a "young man," a subtle play on words that would likely have escaped Joseph Smith, whose education in ancient Hebrew did not begin until after his arrival in Kirtland, Ohio in the early 1830s.

The demonstrable antiquity of these names is significant for understanding the Book of Mormon as an ancient document. The names themselves are arguably Semitic: two (**Josh** and **Alma**) are Hebrew but are not found in the Bible, while the third (**Nahom**) is ancient Arabian and attested archaeologically from the period dating from the seventh to sixth centuries BC. The name **Alma** contains a subtle play on words that Joseph Smith would most likely not have understood given the state of his understanding of ancient Hebrew at that time. All of this, in turn, obliges the reader to decide whether Joseph Smith was an unsophisticated hayseed who just happened to get these names right, or a divinely inspired translator.

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