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## THE WITNESS OF ANCIENT INSCRIPTIONS

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attested proper names—from *Abish* to *Sariah*

In 1950 Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley pulled together a list of Book of Mormon proper names that had a striking resemblance to names from the ancient Near East, including Egypt.<sup>1</sup> He later expanded on his list in two subsequent publications, one in 1964 and the other in 1967.<sup>2</sup> His groundbreaking work opened the door to further research by subsequent scholars. One important study found clear evidence that several Book of Mormon names existed in ancient Israel.<sup>3</sup> These names, which do not appear in the Bible, include *Abish*, *Aha*, *Alma*, *Chemish*, *Hagoth*, *Himni*, *Isabel*, *Jarom*, *Josh*, *Luram*, *Mathoni*, *Mathonihah*, *Muloki*, *Sam*, and *Sariah*. They have been discovered in various ancient Hebrew inscriptions from the Holy Land and surrounding areas—on papyri, seals, ostraca (pieces of pottery), bronze arrowheads, and clay bullae (seal impressions).<sup>4</sup> As these scholars explain:

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.<sup>5</sup>

The discovered names are written in Hebrew, of course, and not English. Ancient Hebrew consists of consonants only, so ancient readers 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.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the following names, all discussed in the article referenced above, are represented only by their consonants in the ancient Hebrew inscriptions.

*Abish*—a Lamanite woman, servant to a queen (see Alma 19:16).<sup>7</sup> “*Abish* corresponds to the Hebrew name ’bš’, found on a seal from pre-exilic times (prior to 587 BC) in the Hecht Museum in Haifa.”<sup>8</sup> The date of 587 BC, as we recall, was around the time of Lehi.

*Aha*—a son of a military leader named Zoram (see Alma 16:5); *Aha* is found in several inscriptions.

*Alma*—the name of two leading personalities from the Book of Mormon. Significantly, Israeli scholar Yigael Yadin transliterates the Hebrew form of this name to read *Alma*.<sup>9</sup>

*Chemish*—a custodian of the small plates of Nephi (see Omni 1:8–10); his name is found on an ancient seal.

*Hagoth*—a Nephite shipbuilder (see Alma 63:5); his name appears on an Ammonite seal that predates the exile of the Israelites (about 587 BC).

*Himni*—one of Mosiah’s four sons (see, for example, Mosiah 27:34 and Alma 22:35); his name is found on two Israelite seals, both of which predate the time of Lehi.

*Isabel*—a harlot (see Alma 39:3); her name is written on a seal.

*Jarom*—a son of Enos and grandson of Jacob (Nephi’s brother; see Jarom 1:1, 14). *Yrm* is found in four Hebrew inscriptions—a jug inscription, seal, ostrakon, and clay bulla.

## SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT: JO ANN HACKETT



Professor Jo Ann Hackett, a prominent Biblical Hebrew scholar, has published in a variety of scholarly venues. She has taught at Occidental College in Los Angeles, Indiana University, Harvard University, and the University of Texas at Austin, where she is professor emerita. In 2015 scholars honored her with a Festschrift titled *Epigraphy, Philology, and Biblical Studies: Methodological Perspectives on Philological and Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of Jo Ann Hackett*. Professor Hackett's research interests include Biblical Hebrew and epigraphic, onomastic, and philological studies. In the 1980s she worked

with Latter-day Saint scholars on the early stages of the Book of Mormon Onomasticon Project (whose participating researchers continue to explore the ancient etymologies of Book of Mormon proper names) and submitted a number of contributions. See the findings of that project at [https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Main\\_Page](https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Main_Page).


*Josh*—the name of a military leader (see Mormon 6:14) and a city (see 3 Nephi 9:10); the name is recorded on several ancient inscriptions, including three letters (from Lachish), papyri from the Elephantine Jewish community, and four clay bullae from Tel Beit Mirsim.

*Luram*—the name of a military leader (see Moroni 9:2); *Luram* is found on an eighth-century-BC seal from Hamath, Syria, and also on some ancient graffiti.

*Mathoni*—the name of one of Jesus's twelve disciples (see 3 Nephi 19:4). For more on this name, see its variation, *Mathonihah*.

*Mathonihah*—the name of one of Jesus’s twelve disciples (see 3 Nephi 19:4). *Mathoni* is probably a shortened form of *Mathonihah*, which has the suffix *-ihah*. “*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.), seven seals (most from the seventh century B.C.), and eleven [clay] bullae (most from the time of Lehi).”<sup>10</sup>

*Muloki*—a missionary to the Lamanites (see Alma 20:2; 21:11). The name *Mlky*, discovered on a clay bulla in Jerusalem (City of David), dates to the general time of Lehi.



Anciently a small stone or other hard substance bearing a carved inscription was pressed into wet clay, soft metal, or wax to seal legal and commercial documents, letters, and other communications. This security feature allowed documents to be authenticated by ensuring that the seal inscription belonged to its owner (such as a king, queen, landowner, or military leader). It also discouraged tampering, which would result in a broken seal. These seal impressions, called *bullae* (singular *bulla*), featured names, images of people or animals, symbols, or a combination of these. Image (from top): Seal of Shemaryhau (8th c. BC), Seal of Shallum son of Ahikam Ahab (8th c. BC), and Seal of Jezebel (9th–8th c. BC). A number of ancient seals found in and around the Holy Land attest the Book of Mormon names *Abish*, *Aha*, *Ammonihah*, *Chemish*, *Himni*, *Isabel*, *Jarom*, *Josh*, *Luram*, *Mathoni*, *Mathonihah*, *Muloki*, and *Sam* (the last on a seal mounted on a bronze ring). See Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested.”

*Sam*—Nephi’s brother and Lehi and Sariah’s son (see 1 Nephi 2:5). The name *Sam* was found on a bronze seal that dates to the century before Lehi.

*Sariah*—the name of Lehi’s wife, found on a papyrus belonging to a Jewish community in Elephantine, Egypt, in the fifth century BC. The name has also been discovered on clay bullae and seals.<sup>11</sup> Similar to some modern names in the English language, certain ancient names—such as *Abijah*, *Solomon*, and *Sariah*—were used for both males and females.<sup>12</sup> Neal Rappleye has called our attention to an ostracon from Elephantine that “contains a sure attestation of the name ŚRYH [Seraiah/Sariah] as a woman’s name.” He points out that “the appearance of the name *Seraiah/Sariah* as a woman’s name exclusively in the Book of Mormon and at Elephantine is made even more interesting since both communities have their roots in northern Israel, ca. the eighth–seventh centuries BCE.”<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 27–36.
2. See Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 230–42; and Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 168–72.
3. See Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested,” 40–51, 78–79. The authors state in footnote 1 that “all the names attested in this article can also be found in G. I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).” Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper include additional important bibliographic items that support the different names treated in their article.
4. Ancient seals bore a name or symbol carved in stone or a similar surface; the seal was used to impress the name or symbol onto clay or wax. A bulla (plural *bullae*) is the seal impression itself on clay or wax. An ostracon (plural *ostraca*) is a fragment of pottery bearing an inscription.
5. Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested,” 42.
6. Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested,” 43.
7. For recent studies on the name *Abish*, see Bowen, “Father Is a Man”; and Welch et al., “Why Was Abish Mentioned by Name?,” 294–95.
8. Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested,” 46. As stated above, ancient Hebrew consists of consonants and not vowels; therefore we cannot be absolutely certain that ‘bš’ is equivalent to *Abish*.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY.

Handwritten Hebrew text, likely a land transaction or lease agreement, written in a cursive script. The text is arranged in approximately 20 horizontal lines. At the bottom of the document, there are several distinct signatures.

In 1960–61 Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin led a team to a cave near the western shore of the Dead Sea. There they discovered a niche of skulls, several skeletons, 2,000-year-old textiles (tunics and mantles), coins and other artifacts, and a number of documents written in Hebrew or Aramaic. One document consisted of land transactions and lease agreements (shown at left). Dating to circa 135 AD, this document attests the name *Alma*, the son of Judah. This manuscript has great significance to Latter-day Saints because it demonstrates, without any doubt, that the name *Alma* was a Hebrew male name in the land of Israel during ancient times. Note also the signatures at the bottom of the text.

From the time that the Book of Mormon came forth, critics have ridiculed its use of the name *Alma*, contending that it was a female name, perhaps from the Latin word *almus* (e.g., *alma mater*, literally “nourishing mother”). But the discovery of the “Alma Scroll” (technically designated “5/6Hev 44 Bar Kokhba”) containing the words “and Alma, the son of Judah” (see close-up at bottom) removes all doubt that the name was a male name in ancient Israel.

A close-up photograph of the bottom portion of the document, showing a signature. The signature clearly reads “ו אלמה בן יהודה” (And Alma, the son of Judah).

IMAGE COURTESY OF ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY.

9. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba*, 176. Hugh Nibley has also written regarding the name *Alma* in Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 281–82. For more recent scholarship, see Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” 72–73; and Szink, “Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma.” Some commentators have held the opinion that the name *Alma* in the Book of Mormon was related to the Hebrew word *’almah* (“young woman”), but in the Bar Kokhba text, *Alma* (also written in Hebrew) has a different spelling.
10. Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested,” 51.
11. For the name *Sariah*, see the two significant studies by Jeffrey R. Chadwick: “Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri” and “Names Lehi and Sariah—Language and Meaning.” Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper also observe that the name *Sariah* “is known from three seals . . . and two bullae,” 78n1. They provide the following sources: Avigad, “New Names on Hebrew Seals”; Avigad, “Seal of Se-raiah (Son of) Neriah”; Avigad and Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals*, 91; and Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah*, 46–47, 103–4.
12. See Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested,” 43.
13. Rappleye, “Revisiting ‘Sariah’ at Elephantine,” 1. For an important summary of scholarship on the name *Sariah*, see Welch et al., “Were There Ancient Israelite Women Named Sariah?”