Liahona: “The Direction of the Lord”: An Etymological Explanation

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The etymological meaning of the name Liahona has been touched on before, but Curci seeks to deliver a more plausible etymology than has previously been given. By transliterating the word back into the Hebraic idioms of the time of Lehi and evaluating the grammatical elements to form the name, he has settled on the meaning of “direction of the Lord.” The name is broken into three parts, and Curci argues that each part is Hebraic in origin, including the meaning and interpretation of each part. The etymological evidence regarding the name Liahona strengthens the claim that the book was written by a group of ancient Hebrews and not Joseph Smith.
The name *Liahona*, although it appears only once in the Book of Mormon text, has drawn the rapt attention of the curious and the learned. My contribution builds upon past efforts to explain the possible etymological meaning of the name *Liahona*. I offer what I argue to be a more plausible explanation than those of my predecessors in light of the Lehites’ linguistic background. In fairness to past studies on this subject, I must mention that working with the Book of Mormon text in English only, and not with the text in its original language, makes the effort harder. The same can be said about the difficulty of working on the given names in English spellings rather than the originals. My approach is to transliterate back into the Hebraic idioms of the time of Lehi what I perceive that Joseph Smith saw or heard and dictated. Then I present the grammatical elements used to form the name *Liahona*, which I show to mean quite literally “to Yahweh is the whither” or, by interpretation, “direction of-to the Lord.”

Key to my analysis is a methodology based on the premise that *Liahona* was formed according to the traditional Hebrew method of forming...
names. The Hebrews created new words by combining existing words in accordance with the circumstances in which the need for that new word arose, taking into account the purpose of the object that received the word. I will demonstrate how the linguistic, textual, historical, and story contexts confirm and strengthen the most literal linguistic interpretation based on this premise and tend to exclude other possibilities unrelated to the linguistic elements of the word. In the process of applying this traditional Hebrew method of name formation, I formulate arguments that might seem circular. However, what superficially seems to be a circular argument in reality connects various pieces of evidence that form a preponderance of evidences in support of one etymology versus another. Hopefully, these arguments will yield all their convincing force “sufficient to free the mind wholly from all reasonable doubt” concerning one meaning over another and “sufficient to incline a fair and impartial mind to one side of the issue rather than the other.”

The Term Liahona in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon record associates the word Liahona with deliverance and survival, tying its meaning directly to a physical object—a ball—and to its essential function—a director (see Mosiah 1:16; Alma 37:38, 45). The elements forming the term Liahona become clear when they are analyzed in light of the customs and the rules of the Hebrew grammar in existence at the time of Lehi in 600 BC. The skillful formation of this word also sheds light on the linguistic world of the Nephite civilization, mainly a descendant of Hebrew. It also demonstrates that Joseph Smith, with his extremely limited language skills, could not have dreamed up such a name.2 The explanation of the etymology of the name Liahona adds another link to the pieces of evidence from other past explanations of names that Joseph Smith could not have known from just reading the Bible.

Paul Y. Hoskisson has written that “the greatest challenge for persons interested in the meanings of proper names in the Book of Mormon has to do with those names whose meanings we already know.”3 The well-known list of names whose interpretations are already provided in the Book of Mormon text includes Irreantum, “many waters” (1 Nephi 17:5); Rabbanah, “powerful or great king” (Alma 18:13); Rameumptom, “the holy stand” (Alma 31:21); deseret, “a honey bee” (Ether 2:3); and Ripli-ancum, “large, or to exceed all” (Ether 15:8).

The general interpretation of the name Liahona is found in the three following verses of the Book of Mormon:

And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director—or our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord prepared it. (Alma 37:38)

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Liahona means “the direction (director) of the Lord,” or literally “to the YHWH is the whither.”

The term Liahona is composed of three words: the first part of the name li ַּא ַי ַה ַי indicates the possession of something; iaho יִיוֹן exhibits the fingerprints of the tetragrammaton YHWH, i.e., the Lord; and ona אוֹנָה is an adverb that means direction or motion to a certain place.
And moreover, he also gave him charge concerning the records which were engraved on the plates of brass; and also the plates of Nephi; and also, the sword of Laban, and the ball or director, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby they might be led, every one according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto him. (Mosiah 1:16)

And now I say, is there not a type in this thing? For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. (Alma 37:45)

My first observation is that it is questionable whether there was a distinct word for compass at that point in time. So this is likely an interpretation and not a translation. Second, the Book of Mormon writers used the three words compass, ball, and director to refer to the same object. The etymologist needs to analyze the basic elements of the name Liahona by drawing on the interpretations that the Book of Mormon provides.

Liahona as a Hebrew Name

One may suppose that, because the name Liahona first appears in the book of Alma, written about 74 BC (500 years after Lehi), it might have been in an Amerindian language that had developed from Lehi’s Hebrew of 600 BC. The following argument demonstrates that this supposition is not correct.

First, Alma refers to his “fathers” who gave the name Liahona to the ball (see Alma 37:45). Lehi is the first to have found the Liahona and is referred to as “father” in Enos 1:25, Alma 56:3, Helaman 8:22, and 3 Nephi 10:17. The name fathers is a typical indicator of the founding fathers of the Nephite nation and civilization—father Lehi and his son Nephi. The Book of Mormon prophets followed the customary Hebraic tradition of referring to the God of the fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for the nation of Israel; Lehi and Nephi for the Nephite civilization). It is absolutely unlikely that the term fathers may refer to the immediate ancestors of Alma, who supposedly had spoken a language that had deformed the Hebrew of the founding fathers of the Nephite civilization. The evident Hebrew elements in the name Liahona (explained hereafter) heavily support the conclusion that Lehi and Nephi coined the name Liahona.

Furthermore, it would be hard to believe that such an important object of the Nephite civilization would have changed its pronunciation from the original Hebrew of Lehi to another language developed in America.

The “fathers” (Lehi and Nephi) must have given this name to the object during the Lehites’ journey in the wilderness. This increases the chance that the name was Hebrew since it was the language that they spoke in everyday life and also the language used in their holy books. The textual and material etymological evidences given hereafter outweigh the supposition that the name Liahona might have been Amerindian, as might be the case for other names that start to appear around the time of Alma.

Past Efforts

“To God is light” and “of God is light”

George Reynolds and Janne Sjodahl state that Liahona, composed of “Hebrew with an Egyptian ending,” means “of God is light,” giving the meaning “of God is light.” I imagine that their translation of God is of Yah that is present in L-iahona. The linguistic distance between the Egyptian element annu and the ‘ona of Liahona makes the connection merely hypothetical and, most importantly, does not reflect the interpretation of “compass” or “director” offered in the Book of Mormon. A second explanation, given by Sidney B. Sperry, suggests that the name derives from Arabic terms lahah and henna, meaning “point where.” However, lahah has no etymological connection with liahona, hence I do not support it. Both lahah and annu are too distant from the transliteration of Liahona. Furthermore, in these two etymologies Liahona would
be composed of terms from different languages, which is not common in ancient Hebrew linguistics practices.

“The Guidance of the Lord”

It has been recorded that Hugh Nibley, during one of his lectures on the Book of Mormon, stated:

And many people have dealt with the word Liahona. We had a teacher from Hebrew University here for a few years; in fact he bought a house in Provo. He was so fond of it he wanted to come and visit often. His name was [Jonathan] Shunary. He never joined the Church, but the first thing that fascinated him was this name Liahona. He traced it back to the queen bee, the leader of bees swarming in the desert. When bees swarm, that’s Liahona. I took it from a different one. Yah is, of course, God Jehovah. Liyah means the possessive, “To God is the guidance,” hona (Liya unhona). That’s just a guess; don’t put it down. But it’s a pretty good guess anyway.8

Whereas the translation “to God” catches my attention, the other two elements in the above explanation leave too many questions. This is true for the reference to the queen bees and for the Hebrew hona translated as “guidance,” because hona does not mean “guidance.”

Reynolds and Sjodahl, Sperry, and Nibley have broken the ground for a necessary etymological explanation of this fascinating name.

The Etymological and Grammatical Explanation of the Meaning: “The Direction of the Lord”

Liaho “to (of) the Lord”

The meaning of the Liaho (“to (of) the Lord”) part of the word is common to all the above explanations and seems to gather the agreement of most scholars. The fact that the first two words are

Lehi discovered the Liahona outside his tent during his family’s journey through the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:10). Throughout the journey, the Liahona provided direction from the Lord as long as the Lehites were obedient. Lehi Finding the Liahona, C. C. A. Christensen, Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.
Hebrew entails that the final term should be of the same language. Although it is known that Lehi was learned in “the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), until now no Egyptian terms have been convincingly associated with the name Liahona.

Li ʿawi: The first part of the name is li-, the letter lamed forming a contraction of ʿel which, in this case, indicates the possession of something, and can also mean toward something.

Iaho ʿawi: The three letters yod, he, waw exhibit the fingerprints of the tetragrammaton YHWH because they are the first three letters that appear as a prefix or a suffix in the yahwistic theophoric names. When they form a suffix they are pronounced yah, e.g., Yesha-yahu, Yerem-yahu, Shelem-yahu, Malk-yahu, etc.

When these letters appear as a prefix of the theophoric proper name, the waw is pronounced “o” instead of “u”; thus we find yeho in names such as Yehonathan (Jonathan), Yehonadab, or Yehoshua (Joshua).

It is a well-known fact that when the scribes introduced the vocalization in the Hebrew Bible, the divine name YHWH יְהוָה (yod he waw he) received with a slight deformation the vowels of ʿadonay (“Lord”) in order to let the tetragrammaton YHWH be pronounced ʿadonay so as to avoid the repetition of the ineffable name. The majority of the scholars maintain that the tetragrammaton was pronounced Yahweh. The translators of the Bible in European languages, not fully aware of this tradition, transliterated Yahweh as Jehovah. Because of the shift in the vowels, the pronunciation of theophoric names with the yahwistic prefix were also pronounced Yehonathan and Yehoshua instead of Yehonathan and Yehoshua. The vocalization of Liahona similarly indicates that the name YHWH was pronounced Yahweh in Lehi’s day. This observation points to the antiquity of the name Liahona. The fact that Joseph Smith translated Liahona instead of Liehona is very indicative of the antiquity of the name. Yaho is indeed the original marker of the tetragrammaton YHWH that was originally pronounced Yahweh.

An objection can be raised to the vocalization of liahö as meaning “to (of) YHWH.” Under the rules of Hebraic vocalization of the Masoretic Text of the Bible, the lamed (as the preposition of before a yod) is pronounced li only when the yod has the vowel schwa. In the case of Liahona, the letter yod of yah has the punctuation (vowel) of a patach and not a schwa. Under these rules, if the lamed indicated the preposition to, the lamed should keep the short sound of a schwa, and be pronounced le instead of li; and the Book of Mormon text would read leyah(on) instead of Liahona (see for instance the case of leyaʾaqov in Genesis 48:2). There are two main answers to this objection. The first is that it is anachronistic since both ancient epigraphy and archeology confirm that the most precise rules of the nikud punctuation were definitively fixed around 100 AD in the town of Yavneh near Jerusalem and were almost nonexistent at the time of Lehi, from whose time inscriptions have only the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and no vowel signs. Although we do not know the exact pronunciation of names like Yehonathan or Yehoshua at the time of Lehi, one would expect that the 600 BC vernacular adaptation of le (indicating the possessive) before yah would exactly have been liahö instead of le-iaho. The tetragrammaton marker yod, he, waw in this case is not a prefix but is in the middle of the word as L-iaho-na, hence it would be unthinkable that the pronunciation in this case would be yeho (typical of the prefix). A second argument is that the lamed before the yod of Yahweh would be pronounced in the spoken language as liahö and not as leyah, even if a schwa was placed under the yod. In other words, the pronunciation liahö corresponds to the customary rules of pronunciation of the “to (of) YHWH,” which reflects both a very plausible everyday practice of that time and modern Hebrew formation of names that have these exact features.

As with the other Hebraic words in the Book of Mormon text, such as Jershon (Alma 27) and the terms in 1 Nephi 2:10, which play around the word ʿaqiq meaning both “valley” and also “firm,” “steadfast” or “immovable,” the meaning of Liahona can also be derived from an adjoining verse, which might include a quick reference interpretation. A further evidence that the tetragrammaton marker of yod he waw is present in l-iaho-na is when Alma in the same verse (Alma 37:38) says “which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord prepared it.” The word Lord had to be YHWH in the original text, whose marker iaho (yod he waw) is exactly part of l-iaho-na.

“The Direction (Director) of YHWH” or literally “To the Lord Is the Whither”

How can Liahona possibly mean “compass” or “director”? The answer is found in the final part of
the word (liaho)’ona: the adverb ‘ona appears several times in the preexilic texts of the Hebrew Bible. It can be translated as “whither.” It is often tied to the verb halakh “to go.” Some instances in which it appears are Genesis 16:8 “whither wilt thou go?” and “whither are you going” (אנה תלך; see Genesis 37:30; also 2 Kings 6:6; Genesis 32:17; 37:30 אנה תלך).

The adverb ‘ona נא means direction or motion to a certain place. We certainly do not know Lehi’s exact pronunciation of words. However, the words surrounding the name often reveal the elements of which it is formed. The following passages give a contextual meaning of the adverb ‘ona נא meaning “whither.”

As my father arose in the morning, . . . to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither [‘ona] we should go into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:10)

I, Nephi, did make out of wood a bow, and out of a straight stick, an arrow; wherefore, I did arm myself with a bow and an arrow, with a sling and with stones. And I said unto my father: Whither [‘ona] shall I go . . . ? . . . I, Nephi, did go forth up into the top of the mountain, according to the directions which were given upon the ball. (1 Nephi 16:23, 30)

The compass, which had been prepared of the Lord, did cease to work. Wherefore, they knew not whither [‘ona] they should steer the ship. . . . And it came to pass after they had loosed me, behold, I took the compass, and it did work whither [‘ona] I desired it. (1 Nephi 18:12–13, 21)

The appearance of the terms compass, ball, and director in the text is usually related to the question, “whither shall we go?” (‘ona nelekh). This is why they called the compass Liahona: it indicated the direction of the Lord.

As a variant to the above meaning could be “to the place of YHWH,” which is also related to the
interrogation of director in Alma 37:38 and 37:45. Bearing in mind the discussion above, I wish to examine ‘on, the typical Canaanite indicator of place-names. I note that Tvedtnes and Ricks have carefully studied this element because it is recurrent in Book of Mormon place-names. However, the “local he” or the “final he” is grammatically incompatible with the beginning “lamed. In other words, Liahona would have meant “to the place of the Lord,” but in l-iah-ona, the “l” and the final “a” are grammatically mutually exclusive. Thus this possible solution loses its attractiveness.

Conclusion

As Elder David A. Bednar explained, “The primary purposes of the Liahona were to provide both direction and instruction during a long and demanding journey. The director was a physical instrument that served as an outward indicator of their inner spiritual standing before God.” It worked according to the principles of “faith and diligence” (1 Nephi 16:28). In this way, the Liahona not only indicated the geographical direction whither they should go in the wilderness but also directed the Lehites to the Lord. This meaning would be in harmony with the appellation director inscribed by Alma in 37:38: “our fathers call [it] a ball, or director—or our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord [Yahweh] prepared it.” After having specified that the interpretation was ball or compass, Alma associates the term compass with the fact that the

This interpretation of the Liahona by Lowell Fitt shows the spindles that directed Lehi and his family (1 Nephi 16:10) and the words that were “written and changed from time to time, according to the faith and diligence which we gave unto it” (1 Nephi 16:29). Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.
Lord prepared it. Retranslating the verse in Hebrew, we would have the concept of direction 'ona, and the director, or Yahweh the Lord, side-by-side, thus composing the name Liahona.

Alma continues to explain to his son Helaman in Alma 37:45 the purpose of the instrument, which is to set forth the direction, by analogy, to our spiritual journey: "just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise." Thus, when the children of Lehi questioned "Whither shall we go?" the Liahona provided the answer in accordance with their faith: it embodied the "direction of the Lord," which is the literal translation of the term Liahona.

In its own way, this etymological explanation of the word Liahona yields all its probative value to stand as another evidence for the claims of Joseph Smith that the Book of Mormon was not written from his own imagination, but rather by a group of Hebrews who lived between 600 BC and 400 AD. The book’s Hebraic linguistic fingerprints are within its text, and they emerge when we carefully read and diligently study the culture and the language of the people who wrote this holy book. This search reflects at least one facet of President Gordon B. Hinckley’s assertion: “evidence for its truth and validity lies within the covers of the book itself. The test of its truth lies in reading it.”

The fact that Joseph Smith, after translating the plates, never submitted an etymological explanation of non-English terms in the Book of Mormon, or that the historical record does not mention any intellectual research conducted to produce these names, strengthens the evidence of his lack of intentionality or of his unawareness in producing the elements that scholars have demonstrated to be authentically antique and impossible for him to guess with such a frequency in the Book of Mormon texts. Broadly speaking, historians understand the character of Joseph Smith as inclined to be reserved about the supernatural events occurring to him, to the point that he did not try to convince people through rational evidences of the miraculous events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. As a matter of fact, he did not possess the rational evidences in the first place until he seriously studied some basics of Hebrew about ten years later. Joseph’s character traits reveal a distinct insouciance over matters of proof along with a concurrent personal assurance of the reality of the events relative to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

I think that after 150 years of wandering in a linguistic wilderness we are finding the direction we should go to fully appreciate the beauty and meaning of the name of Liahona. Such a finding would have required a deep knowledge of Hebrew transmission of names and the Middle Eastern pronunciation of names that Joseph Smith did not possess after limited formal schooling in rural upstate New York. Although further studies are certainly needed to confirm or refute such a new explanation, this etymology confirms once more that the Book of Mormon is, as Isaiah 29:14 foresaw it, "a miraculous work and a miracle."
and the vessels of the sanctuary wherewith they minister, and the hanging, and all the service thereof” (Numbers 8:1). Speaking particularly of priests, the Chronicler wrote: “Of the priests [the text then lists names and genealogies] and their brethren, heads of the house of their fathers, a thousand and seven hundred and threescore; very able men for the work of the service of the house of God” (1 Chronicles 24:10, 13).

16. In Exodus 12, the chapter that describes the Passover, Moses emphasizes that the Passover sacrifice is also called service. Moses instructs the children of Israel, “It shall come to pass, when ye be come to the land which the Lord will give you, according as he hath promised, that ye shall keep this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That you shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover” (Exodus 12:22–23).


18. One source notes that “Benjamin’s speech, see Coutts and others, ‘Appendix: Complete Text of Benjamin’s Speech with Notes and Comments’, King Benjamin’s Speech, 529.

19. In the above paragraph, I have drawn a connection to Benjamin’s statement “that your blood should not come upon me . . . that I might rid my garments of your blood” with temple sacrifice. In the present paragraph, Jacob’s just-cited statement regarding the blood and garments (Jacob 1:19) is also contextually associated with the temple; two verses earlier, Jacob made the statement “as I taught them in the temple” (Jacob 1:17).

20. For additional references to Jesus’s atoning blood in Benjamin’s speech, see Coutts and others, “Appendix: Complete Text of Benjamin’s Speech,” 554.
13. As in other languages, in modern Hebrew there is a difference between efe "where" (see also the German wo) and le'or which is formed by le and an, which does not have the "le" particle (see also the German wohin). The archaic Hebrew instead of le had an ending with the "le" local.

14. A very accurate grammar of Hebrew demonstrates that "il gnatset medio deriva dal primitivo a breve, ed è il più frequente. Ad ambedue però viene dato lo stesso suono, a secondo la pronuncia babilonese, o aperto secondo la tiberiese," Antonio Carrozzi, *Grammatica della lingua ebraica*, 2nd ed. (Casale Monferrato, Italy: Marietti, 1966), 5. This means that medium kamatz is a sound that in Palestine was an open "o." The medium kamatz generally appears at the beginning of the word and also lies beneath 'ona.


18. For instance, in a conference, Joseph Smith said it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon . . . it was not expedient for him to relate these things. *History of the Church* 1:220.


21. Assessing the Broad Impact of Jack Welch’s Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon

Robert F. Smith

Gordon C. Thomasson made several important suggestions for this short appraisal.


30. This translation is mine, but is heavily dependent upon the January 1999 Josserand and Hopkins Seminar at UCLA on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing, as well as upon the translation in Harris and Stearns, *Understanding Maya Inscriptions*, 107, 153–58.


32. Josserand, "Narrative Structure of Hieroglyphic Texts at Palenque," in *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, 1986, 27 (see fig. 9 on p. 26), citing Richard A. De Long, "Chiasmus in Mesoamerican Writing," paper presented...