Lehi in the Samaria Papyri and on an Ostracon from the Shore of the Red Sea

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Until the discovery of Ostracon 2071, dating from the fifth century bc, in the 1930s on the shores of the Red Sea, the name Lehi (lḥy in the discovered text) had been unattested in any extant document outside of the Book of Mormon. However, Nelson Gluek, along with many other scholars, including Hugh Nibley, vocalized lḥy as “Laḥai,” which pronunciation would have south Semitic roots. Chadwick argues, instead, that a Hebrew context for the ostracon would be more plausible and that therefore the more likely pronunciation would be “lĕḥy.” He also argues for a Hebrew origin of the compound name ’blḥy, found in the fourth-century bc Samaria Papyri. Both of these names, given their strong Hebrew context, seem to confirm that Lehi was a name in use in ancient Israel and its surrounding areas.
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The Book of Mormon introduces a man named Lehi, a prophet and native of Jerusalem during the late seventh century B.C. (1 Nephi 1:4). There is currently no consensus among Latter-day Saint scholars on how this man’s name would have been spelled or pronounced in the Hebrew language of that period. One strong possibility is that it would have been spelled לֵחי (l̄ḥy) and have been pronounced lĕḥy, with a soft ֓ and a hard ֟ (like the ch in the name Bach). This is the same spelling and pronunciation as the geographic name Lehi (l̄ḥy) that occurs in the biblical story of Samson (Judges 15:9, 14), where the Hebrew term means “cheek” or “jaw,” as in the account of a donkey’s jawbone (l̄ḥy) used as a weapon (Judges 15:15). Since the Hebrew term l̄ḥy does not occur as a personal name in the Bible but only as this place name, skeptics might suggest that Joseph Smith simply appropriated it as a male personal name for the Book of Mormon.

However, two different twentieth-century archaeological finds from Palestine attest to the term l̄ḥy as a male personal name. One inscription is on a papyrus fragment found in 1962 among the Samaria Papyri of the Wadi el-Daliyeh; it preserves l̄ḥy as the main element of a compound name. The other inscription in which l̄ḥy stands alone as a personal name appears on an ostracon (an inscribed ceramic sherd) found in 1939 at Tell el-Kheleifeh (ancient Elath) on the shore of the Red Sea. This article will describe and evaluate these two inscriptions as they may apply to the Book of Mormon personal name “Lehi.”
Since the inscription from Tell el-Kheleifeh has already been mentioned in LDS literature (initially in Hugh Nibley’s landmark 1950 series “Lehi in the Desert”), I will discuss it first. The inscription was discovered by Nelson Glueck, a renowned Near Eastern archaeologist of the mid-twentieth century and president of Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Institute of Religion. Glueck excavated during three seasons from 1938 to 1940 at Tell el-Kheleifeh (generally identified as biblical Elath; compare 1 Kings 9:26; 2 Kings 14:22; 16:6), located on the north shore of the Red Sea’s Gulf of Aqaba.3 During his 1939 season, Glueck’s team unearthed the inscription referred to in his report as Ostracon 2071 in a stratum of building remains from Period V, dated to the Persian period (fifth and fourth centuries BC), and characterized as a period of Edomite control of ancient Elath. Sherds of imported black-glazed Attic ware, typical of the Persian period, were found in the same stratum as the ostracon, suggesting the fifth-to-fourth century BC dating. According to Glueck’s description of the find, the plain, four-sided 2 x 3 inch ceramic fragment upon which the inscription was written was “a sherd from a thin-walled, hard-baked, wheel-made jug, wet smoothed, of brownish buff texture, with numerous tiny white grits. The outer, wet-smoothed surface is slightly coated with a thin, grayish-white lime accretion, which makes the inscription much less legible on the ostracon itself than on the photographs of it, made with the use of various filters.”4 The inscription comprises four horizontal lines and was written in dark ink, in Aramaic script typical of the Persian period. Glueck prepared a photo and facsimile drawing of the ostracon for publication (see photo on p. 15).

Though incomplete because of breakage, the four-line inscription reads as follows (Latin letter transcription by Glueck; my Hebrew letter transcription):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Šalman, the servant of [ . . . ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Lhāi, the servant of [ . . . ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>Partial “Baal” name, perhaps “Bāli[s]”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>Unknown name, perhaps ʾšb ʾśb (Ashba?) or just ʾšb (Ashab?) the servant of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Glueck dated the first three lines of script to a fifth-century BC hand but speculated that the fourth line of script was added at a later date in the fourth century BC. With regard to the name lḥy, Glueck felt that it must be vocalized as “Laḥai” (pronounced lā-hāi) and that it was primarily a south Semitic name: “The name Laḥai occurs quite
frequently either as a part of a compound, or as a separate name of a deity or a person, particularly in Minaean, Thamudic, and Arabic texts.”7 However, a footnote to Glueck’s view was added by the BASOR editor, William F. Albright, who suggested, “The diminutive vocalization Luḥaṣi seems preferable.”8 The Luḥaṣ suggestion will be revisited later in this paper.

As already noted, the first mention of this “Laḥai” inscription in LDS literature was by Hugh Nibley in his series “Lehi in the Desert,” which appeared in the Improvement Era in 1950. Nibley mentioned the find, very briefly, in a single paragraph he wrote about aspects of the name Lehi:

One thing is certain, however: that Lehi is a personal name. Until recently this name was entirely unknown, but now it has turned up at Elath and elsewhere in the south in a form which has been identified by Nelson Glueck with the name Lahai.9

Nibley did not actually mention that “the name Laḥai” had appeared inscribed upon a pottery sherd, although a small, stylized drawing of Ostracon 2071 (as originally published in BASOR in 1940) appeared with the article. The caption for the drawing mentions that the ostracon had been found at Elath (Tell el-Kheleifeh) and identified part of the inscription as reading “lḥ b[d] . . . ‘Lḥy the servant of . . .’.”10 Although the drawing did not appear in any of the subsequent book versions of Lehi in the Desert, Nibley’s statement about Glueck’s find remained essentially the same.

In An Approach to the Book of Mormon, Nibley’s study that was published by the Church in 1957 as a Melchizedek Priesthood manual, Nibley mentioned that the name “Laḥai” actually appeared on an ostracon:

The name of Lehi occurs only as part of a place-name in the Bible. And only within the last twenty years a potsherd was found at Elath (where Lehi’s road from Jerusalem meets “the fountain of the Red Sea”) bearing the name of a man, LHI, very clearly written on it. . . . While Glueck supplies the vowels to make the name Lahai, Paul Haupt in a special study renders it Lehi, and gives it the mysterious meaning of “cheek” which has never been explained.11

A brief allusion to Glueck’s find of the name Lehi appeared in a single sentence in Nibley’s 1964 Improvement Era series, “Since Cumorah”, “Which reminds us that in 1938 [1939] Nelson Glueck first showed Lehi to be an authentic West Semitic name, at home in the borders near the Red Sea.”12 There was no illustration of the ostracon in the Improvement Era “Since Cumorah” series, but a drawing of it did appear in the book edition.13

In all of his published works cited above, Nibley cited only non-Hebrew examples as evidence that the Book of Mormon name Lehi was correctly spelled with the Semitic consonants l-h-y.14 He did not equate the Book of Mormon name with the Hebrew term of the same spelling, namely, from lēḥy, which appears in Judges 15 as a place name meaning “cheek” or “jaw.” He seems to have accepted, without question, Glueck’s rendering of lḥy from Ostracon 2071 as “Laḥai,” rather than Albright’s “Luḥaṣ.”15

I certainly agree with Nibley that the discovery of the three-letter name lḥy on Ostracon 2071 is remarkable in that it demonstrates such a spelling can indeed have been a personal name, thus vindicating the appearance of Lehi as a personal name in the Book of Mormon. In saying this I also agree with Nibley that the Book of Mormon name Lehi was spelled l-h-y. However, in contrast to Nibley’s examples from south Semitic origins, I have suggested (and continue to suggest) that the personal name Lehi is a Hebrew term, equivalent to the place name Lehi in Judges 15, and that it carries the same meaning—“cheek” or “jaw.”16 Lehi was a Jew who had “dwelt at Jerusalem all his days” (1 Nephi 1:4). I do not believe he is likely to have been given a linguistically south Semitic name by his Jewish parents (whether that name be Laḥai or Luḥaṣ), but rather a linguistically Hebrew name—Lehi, pronounced lēḥy.

In this regard, it is important to keep some key facts in mind. Ostracon 2071 (1) was found in a fifth-century bc Edomite material culture context and (2) was inscribed with an Aramaic script. It was not found in a south Arabian context, nor was the script thereon any type of ancient south Arabian script. Edomites spoke a northwest Semitic language more closely related to Hebrew than south Arabian, and geographical Edomite territory was not thought of as Arabian territory. In fact, Edom had always been territorially contiguous with Judah,
and during the Persian period Edomite territory had included the Negev and wilderness areas west of the Jordan rift. In terms of linguistic influences which are likely to have been found in Edomite names, it is just as probable that Jewish/Hebrew names would be found in Edomite Elath as that south Arabian names would be found there. In this regard, it is not at all improbable that the ʾḥy of Ostracon 2071 could have actually been the Hebrew name pronounced lēḥy—in fact it may be even more plausible than a south Arabian pronunciation.

The Name Lehi on a Papyrus Fragment from Wadi el-Daliyeh

In turning to territory that was clearly influenced by Hebrew, we can now report that Lehi may be identified as a male personal name element from the Samaria Papyri found in Wadi el-Daliyeh, located in the so-called West Bank territory of the land of Israel. Lehi (lḥy, לחי) appears in the compound name ʾblḥy, ʾbilḥy, which was probably pronounced av-lēḥy or perhaps avi-lēḥy. If the name were put into King James English forms it would most likely be Ablehi or Abilehi. The meaning of the name would be either “The Father Is Lehi” or “My Father Is Lehi.”

Before discussing the specific papyrus upon which this name was found, a brief background on the deposition and discovery of the Samaria Papyri is in order. The papyri were found in 1962 in a cave in the desolate desert canyon Wadi el-Daliyeh, located some 20 kilometers north-northwest of Jericho on the edge of the Jordan rift. (At the time, the West Bank area was under the administration of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan—the state of Israel took control of the area in June 1967.) The poorly preserved papyri were discovered by Bedouin of the Taamireh tribe (well known as the finders of the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran in 1947). Through the offices of Roland de Vaux of the École biblique et archéologique française in Jerusalem, Paul W. Lapp of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem (now the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research), and Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University, the papyri were purchased in November 1962 for presentation to the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem (now the Rockefeller Museum). Two seasons of excavation at the cave site were carried out by Lapp and the American School in January 1963 and February 1964. Skeletal remains of over 200 bodies were recovered, all apparently killed in the cave in antiquity. Pottery from the fourth century BC was recovered as well. In all, 128 clay seal impressions (bullae), seventy of which were legible, were recovered from the original papyri and in the excavations. Coins from the cave all dated to the late Persian period, immediately before Alexander’s conquest of Samaria in 332 BC.

Cross, who worked on the reconstruction and translation of the texts on the papyri, suggested a historical scenario for the massacre at the el-Daliyeh cave. After having initially ingratiated themselves with Alexander upon his arrival in the region in 332 BC, the Samaritans rebelled and burned alive Alexander’s prefect in Syria. Alexander returned to the city of Samaria and destroyed it, resettling the site as a Macedonian colony. Cross believes the Samaritan leaders responsible for the rebellion fled from Samaria in advance of Alexander’s approach, making their way down the Wadi Farah and into the wilderness to the cave in Wadi el-Daliyeh. A considerable number of families were among the refugees, possibly with some of their slaves, and certainly with their pottery vessels and supply of food. They also brought important documents, including deeds and other recorded transactions, written on papyrus and sealed. The papyri represented transactions recorded throughout the fourth century BC. The Macedonians eventually discovered the hiding place of the Samaritans, probably through betrayal, and killed all those who had fled.

The name Ablehi (for brevity I will use the simplest transliteration for ʾbilḥy) appears on the document designated as “WDSP papDeed of Slave Sale F arterial” (see photo on p. 14). The badly decayed papyrus roll measures 33.4 cm high (long) by 7.6 cm wide. When unrolled, traces of 12 lines of text were detected written across its width (no writing was found on the back side). Douglas M. Gropp estimates that less than 14 percent of the original text was preserved. The only name preserved is Ablehi, and, remarkably, all five letters of the name are visible. Parts of the last two letters, the ḥ and the y, are missing, but enough remain of both letters that they are positively identifiable. The letter ʾl is prefixed to the name as a preposition indicating the
person being sold in a transaction. Gropp’s reconstruction of the rest of the badly broken text is a typical slave sale pattern, indicating that Ablehi and one other person were sold as slaves by one party to another party for a certain amount of money, witnessed by the governor and prefect. The name Ablehi, with its l prefix, appears as the first word of line 2, which is to say that l appears as the first of the six-letter combination 'blly.

Cross, the first scholar to read or reconstruct and then vocalize the names found in the Samaria Papyri, did not render 'blly in the way I have above. Rather, in a study he originally prepared in 1978–79 that was published by the American Schools of Oriental Research in 2006, Cross expressed the opinion that “the name is probably to be read 'abi-luḥay, ‘My father is (the divine) Luḥay.” Luḥay is the name of an ancient south Arabian god and is the same as the name Luḥai that Albright suggested as a reading for lḥy on Ostracon 2071. Cross offers no comment or explanation as to why the name of an Arabian deity is his preferred reading for the three-letter element lḥy in a Samaritan document, beyond noting that Luḥay is a frequent element in Arabic names. Likewise Gropp, without comment or explanation, follows Cross’s reading, except that he spells it with an “i” in English (ʾAbiluḥai) rather than a “y.”

In fact, however, the Hebrew nature of the name receives support from its appearance in the Jewish/Aramaic names of the Persian period in Egypt. There the name is written מָלְי, lūḥi. The name need not necessarily be a cultural remnant of ethnic Arabs who were brought to Samaria by Sargon II in the eighth century BC, after the Assyrian deportation of large segments of the Israelite population. Cross himself emphasizes that the number of Hebrew names in the Samaria Papyri is much higher than the number of non-Hebrew names. Of the 69 names Cross notes, 28 featured the Hebrew theophoric element yh or yhw (Yah or Yahu), and another 16 were Hebrew names familiar from the Bible or Hebrew seals. The total number of Hebrew/Israelite names in the Samaria Papyri is 44, as compared to only 25 that Cross views as non-Hebrew. He includes the ‘abi-luḥay reading, with its alleged south Arabian element, in his count of non-Hebrew names, but identified only 2 other names in the corpus of 69 which might possibly contain Arabian elements—[d]wmn and lnr. In such a collection, however, so heavily weighted in favor of Hebrew names, it seems odd that Cross would not at least consider the possibility that the lḥy element of 'blly should be read as the Hebrew lĕḥy rather than the Arabic luḥay. In fact, given that lĕḥy is a well-known geographic name in the Hebrew Bible, it would seem the far more likely reading for lḥy in a corpus of predominantly Hebrew/Israelite names, and this in spite of the fact that it is not a personal name in the Bible.
The pronunciation lehi rather than lubay would seem to be supported by the Amorite personal name lalwi-malik, found in a Middle Bronze Age letter, dated to a thousand years before the time of Lehi.28 The Amorite language was a West Semitic dialect spoken during the Middle Bronze Age and is related to other West Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Aramaic. This is the only occurrence of the element lalwi in a personal name in the cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia. If normal rules of vowel change are assumed, Amorite lalwi would become in the Hebrew of later years lehi.29 In any case, if the name element lalwi is the same element as ily in the Samaria Papyri name, then the latter would be pronounced lehi. Because this name element is a hapax legomenon in Amorite, it would be foolish to posit any meaning. Suffice it to say, it would not be pronounced lubai.30

Ablehi would be typical of Hebrew/Israelite compound father-names, which combine the Hebrew word ‘ab (av, Ⲥ), meaning “father,” or ‘bi (avi, ⲥ), meaning “my father,” with a second word or proper name. Examples of such compound father-names in the Old Testament include Abner (av-ner), Absalom (av-shalom), Abinadab (avi-nadav), and Abimelech (avi-melekh). As a Hebrew/Israelite name, Ablehi would join the group of 34 other known compound father-names, 24 of which appear in the Old Testament11 and 10 additional names not found in the Bible but which appear on known Hebrew stamps and seals.32

In any event, whether the ily element of the name Ablehi was meant as a reference to “cheek” or “jaw” or as a reference to a father whose name was Lehi, the fact that it appears in a proper name in the Samaria Papyri is a significant piece of evidence in support of the notion that Lehi could be a Hebrew/Israelite proper name, just as it is found in the narrative in 1 Nephi. The occurrence of the name Ablehi in the Samaria Papyri (in addition to the name ily on Ostracon 2071) is a second confirming witness that the name Lehi was indeed used as a proper male name in Israel during the Iron Age.

Conclusions

That the ily element of Ablehi was written in Aramaic script of the Persian period, just like the name ily on Ostracon 2071, and that the two inscribed names even look very much alike, also seems significant. If, indeed, it is quite plausible that the ily element of Ablehi is actually a Hebrew name (in a Samaritan context, north of Judea), then the plausibility of ily on Ostracon 2071 being a Hebrew name (in an Edomite context, south of Judea) is enhanced.

It is also an interesting coincidence that similar evidence for Lehi’s wife’s name has turned up in a papyrus document, written in Persian period Aramaic, in the era following the sixth century BC. The female Jewish/Hebrew name Sariah appears in an Aramaic papyrus from the fifth century BC (albeit partially restored by the original publisher). The document is known as C-22 (or Cowley-22), and was found at Elephantine in upper Egypt around the year 1900. The appearance of the name Sariah was first published as a possible example of the Book of Mormon female name Sariah by myself in 1993.33 The female name Sariah does not appear in the Bible, just as the male name Lehi does not. Yet both appear in the Book of Mormon. That we can now identify both the Jewish/Hebrew names Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri and Lehi in the Samaria Papyri and on Ostracon 2071 represents two significant steps forward in corroborating the authenticity of heretofore unique Book of Mormon names.

Notes

2. The King James Version of Judges 15:19 has “jaw” (ilyy) and “Lehi” (iliary) in that one verse.


10. The drawing of Ostracon 2071 appears in Hugh Nibley, “Lehi in the Desert,” part 2, Improvement Era, February 1950, 104. It is not clear whether the caption that appeared with the
drawing was prepared by Nibley or by the magazine’s editors.

11. Hugh Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1957), 251, with notes on p. 407. This book was released in a second edition in 1964 (Deseret Book) and in a third edition (with slight alterations) in 1988; see Hugh Nibley, "Proper Names in the Book of Mormon," in An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 3rd ed., CWHN 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 290, 500 n. 31. Why Nibley thought it was "mysterious" that Lehi would mean "cheek" is unclear since this is common knowledge among students of Hebrew. But he may have meant that it was mysterious for a term meaning "cheek" to be considered as a personal name since body parts are rarely used in ancient Hebrew personal names. And Paul Haupt could not have been referring to the name on Ostracon 2071 since the publication by Haupt to which Nibley refers in his notes is dated 1914 ("Heb. lēhî, cheek, and lîy-, jaw," Journal of Biblical Literature 33 [1914]: 290–95), and the ostracon was not discovered until 1939.


13. The caption for the drawing of the ostracon in the book edi-

14. When Nibley did his original research, examples of similar instances). Avigad characterizes the names as Hebrew, Ammonite, Moabite, Aramaic, and possibly Phoenician (however he does not identify any of the above as having any Arabic elements). The list above also does not include several names with the distinctive Ammonite avagd element.

15. The pronunciation ḥēl- was much shorter and less detailed sentence reference to Nelson Glueck and Lehi is the same in Improvement Era. And curiously, the drawing in Since Cumorah did not appear in context with Nibley’s text reference to the Glueck find—it appeared 133 pages later in a discussion on Egyptian names: 193 (1967 ed.), 169 (1988 ed.).

14. When Nibley did his original research, examples of l-h-y as a name element were to be found only in non-Hebrew contexts. This article will demonstrate, of course, that a Hebrew example from the territory of ancient Israel exists.

15. The pronunciation luhai, as suggested by Albright, seems to be supported by the spelling ăbâr, lăbî, among the Jewish/Arabic names of the Persian period in Egypt. See Betzalel Porten and Jerome A. Lund, Aramaic Documents from Egypt: A Key-Word-in-Context Concordance, ed. Stephen A. Kaufman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 366.


27. Cross, "Personal Names in the Samaria Papyri," 77, 82.

28. For the name, see Georges Dossin, ed. and trans., Correspondance Féminine (Paris: Geuthner, 1978), letter 1412; for the transcription and translation of this letter, see ibid., 202–3. The find spot, Mari, lies on the Euphrates River, about 11 kilometers north of the Iraq/Syrian border. At the time, Mari was ruled by Amorites who used the Old Babylonian language, but their names betray their West Semitic origin and heritage.

29. lehiwi appears to be a normal qātīl noun form found in all Semitic languages. The qātīl forms morph in Hebrew into segholate forms—that is, lāwî would become, because it is final weak, lehi.