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Title What's in a Name? Alma as a Hebrew Name

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Abstract The name *Alma* appears more frequently in the Book of Mormon than any other name besides *Nephi*. The name has a logical derivation from a Hebrew root that means “youth” or “lad.”

Alma as a Hebrew Name

Paul Y. Hoskisson

Anciently, all proper names had meanings in their language of origin (specialists refer to the body of proper names in a language as its *onomasticon*). It is generally possible to determine the language of origin and often the meaning of proper names, even when they have passed through one or more languages before arriving at the known form. An understanding of proper names can become a key to unlock windows through which we may look to study the language and culture of the people and places who bore those names.

The *What's in a Name?* series will explore proper names in the Book of Mormon. From what languages did they come? What might the names mean? What light does this knowledge shed on the scriptural record?

The study of Book of Mormon names requires, and has had the advantage of, the labor of numerous scholars. As I have worked on the FARMS onomasticon project over the past fifteen years, I have benefited from studies and suggestions by many, especially Jo Ann Carlton Hackett, Hugh W. Nibley, Royal Skousen, Robert F. Smith, John A. Tvedtnes, and John W. Welch.

Alma

The name *Alma* is used more often in the Book of Mormon than any name except Nephi. It has also received more attention from critics and defenders of the Book of Mormon than any other name. Some critics have assumed that Joseph Smith must have got *Alma* from a

Latin word that means “nourishing” and is used as a name for females in some languages descended from Latin. This false assumption has led these people to claim that no divine record in the Hebrew tradition would apply a Latin feminine name to an obviously masculine Book of Mormon prophet.

But no well-informed person would make this mistake today, because the name *Alma*, as Hugh Nibley pointed out years ago,¹ appears in an undeniably Semitic language document, one of the letters of Bar Kokhba, a leader in the Holy Land during the Second Jewish Revolt against the Romans around A.D. 130. The name, used in a business document that was written in the form of a letter, is *Alma ben Yehudah* (*Alma*, son of *Yehudah*). The accompanying photograph displays it, at the end of the fourth line (remember that Hebrew writing flows from right to left) spelled *ʾlm*,² and at the beginning of the fourth line from the bottom, *ʾlmh*.

The initial consonant in the name is written in this letter with an *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, however, the name probably should be derived from the root with an initial *ayin*, *ʾlm*. In the final centuries B.C. and the first centuries A.D., in the spoken language among the Jews the consonants *aleph* and *ayin* began to run together. As a result the letters representing those sounds tended to become interchangeable as well. The same coalescence can be seen in another Semitic tongue, Phoenician, where, for example, both *ʾlm* and *ʾlm*. mean “eternity.”

The root for *Alma*, *ʾlm*, occurs twice in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 17:56 and 20:22) where it means “youth” or “lad.” Both occurrences use a common vowel pattern for nouns in Semitic languages (the pattern is called the *segholate* form). In 1 Samuel 17:56, because of its position in the sentence this word supplies the original vowel, the *a* of the *katl* form. Thus *ʾlm* would have been pronounced *almu* in proto-Semitic, exactly what would be required for the Book of Mormon form, *Alma*. (The final *-u* is the nominative singular masculine case ending. Long before the vowel markings were added to the Hebrew consonantal script of the Old Testament, such vowels had all but disappeared from spoken Hebrew. Even in the earliest Hebrew documents, when case endings theoretically might still have existed in spoken Hebrew, the script normally does not represent any vowels in the writing.)

The final *-a* of *Alma* probably represents a hypocoristic ending. This means that the name was shortened in antiquity as a form of endearment. At the same time, such hypocoristic endings commonly stood for the name of a deity in a drastically shortened form, most often a single final consonant, usually the letter *aleph* but also sometimes the letter *hē*, as the Bar Kokhba letter has it. The significance of the name *Alma* becomes clear from its use as an epithet (a term used to characterize a person or thing) in one of the myth texts from Ugarit. Ugarit was a small city-state on the coast of Syria that flourished

Handwritten text in Ugaritic script on a palm-leaf manuscript. The text is arranged in approximately 25 horizontal lines, with some characters appearing to be in a different script or dialect than the main body of text. The ink is dark and the leaf shows signs of age and wear.

between about 1500 and 1200 B.C., the Late Bronze Age. The language spoken there was closely akin to Hebrew and shared with it many precise poetic structures and vocabulary. In one of the famous epics from Ugarit, a hero named KRT is called *glm^l*, "lad of [the god] El" (KTU 1.14.II.8-9). (The initial sound *g* in this Ugaritic term is equivalent to aleph or ^ʾ in Hebrew.) The Book of Mormon name Alma could be derived from this old Semitic expression, in which case it would mean just what the Ugaritic epithet meant, "lad of God," a rather appropriate label for the two Book of Mormon prophets who bear this name.

Other etymologies are possible, though they are less likely. The Arabic root *'alama* 'alima, "knowing, erudite; distinguished; chief, chieftain" (suggested by both Robert F. Smith and John A. Tvedtnes) gives us plausible meanings. Also, *ʾlm* means "to bind" or "to be dumb" in Hebrew and could possibly mean, with a hypocoristic *aleph* ending, "He [God] is bound." However this root is present in Hebrew only in two unusual verb forms, neither of which would allow the spelling as it appears in the Book of Mormon (of course, the Nephites may have come up with a variant spelling in the centuries between the departure from Jerusalem and Alma's day. □

1. Hugh W. Nibley, review of *Bar-Kochba*, by Yigael Yadin, *BYU Studies* 14/1 (1973): 121.