Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri

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The Book of Mormon name Sariah does not appear as a female name in the Bible but has now been identified in a reconstructed form in an Aramaic papyrus. A Jewish woman living at Elephantine in Upper Egypt during the fifth century BC was identified as Sariah daughter of Hoshea.
Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri

Jeffrey R. Chadwick

The Book of Mormon introduces Sariah, the faithful wife of the prophet Lehi and mother of Nephi and his brothers (1 Nephi 2:5). The conjectural Hebrew spelling of Sariah would be šryn and would be pronounced something like Sar-yah. The skeptic might suggest that this name was an invention of Joseph Smith, since Sariah does not appear in the Bible as a female personal name. However, in a significant historical parallel to the Book of Mormon, the Hebrew name Sariah, spelled šryn, has been identified in a reconstructed form as the name of a Jewish woman living at Elephantine in Upper Egypt during the fifth century B.C.

The reference to Sariah of Elephantine is found in Aramaic Papyrus #22 (also called Cowley #22 or C-22) and appears in Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C. Although the language of the documents is Aramaic, A. E. Cowley specifies that the names are in fact Hebrew. Line 4 of C-22 lists the personal name šryn brt ḫws br ḫrmn. The probable vocalization is Sariah barat Hoshea' bar Harman, and the text means “Sariah daughter of Hoshea son of Harman.” Cowley had to reconstruct part of the text, supplying the final h of Sariah and the initial b-r of barat, but the spacing is adequate, and the comparative context of the papyrus leaves little doubt that the reconstruction is accurate. The extant final t of barat assures us that the person was a daughter, not a son, and, after the letters b-r are supplied, there is only room for one additional letter—the final h of Sariah.

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2 Ibid., xv.
3 Ibid., 67.
A more recent and exhaustive work on the Elephantine Papyri, *Archives from Elephantine*, published in 1968 by Bezalel Porten, concurs with Cowley’s reconstruction and translation. The Porten volume includes significant research concerning the Jewish military colony on Elephantine Island and also contains a black-and-white photo of C-22, including Line 4.

Although šryḥ is not found as a female name in the Bible, it is well documented as a male name in ancient Israel, appearing nineteen times in the Hebrew Old Testament, representing eleven different men. The male name šryḥ is thought to be the short form of šryhw, whose full form is probably pronounced Saryahu, featuring the common theophoric element Yahu from the divine name Yahweh, or Jehovah. The longer form šryhw is found only once in the Hebrew Old Testament (Jeremiah 36:26), but it is also known from several instances on Iron Age seals and clay bullae found in Israel. In the King James Version of the Bible, the nineteen instances of the male name šryḥ and the single appearance of šryhw are all rendered in English as Seraiah. (The English equivalents of many biblical Yahu names omit the final syllable, such as Isaiah [Yeshayahu], Jeremiah [Yirmyahu], Zedekiah [Zidkiyahu], etc.) Cowley follows the KJV in using the S-e-r-a-i-a-h spelling to render šry[h br]t hwś as “Seraiah daughter of Hoshea.”

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5 Ibid., plate 11.
7 The divine name Yahu is present in Line 1 of Papyrus Cowley #22. Cowley believed it not to be a short form of YHWH but rather an “earlier form.” In any case, both forms of the name represent the same Israelite Deity. Cowley also prefers the transliteration Ya’u, maintaining that the h of Aramaic Yahu “seems to be a mere vowel-sign” (Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, xviii), a position with which I disagree. Regarding the name YHWH, usually rendered Yahweh with vowels, I prefer the longer Yahuweh, with the middle u preserving a lengthened oo sound evident in the theophoric yahu element of many Israelite proper names.
Sra-yah, which would essentially mean “Yah has struggled” (the first element of šryh and šryhw is usually interpreted as deriving from the šrh root, meaning to “struggle” or “strive”). But in light of evidence from Iron Age seals and clay bullae, Nahman Avigad suggests that šryhw may be read Saryahu, meaning “Yahuweh is prince (ṣr).” By extension, the shorter name šryh would be read Sar-yah, both in the case of the eleven biblically noted men and in the case of the female from Elephantine. And by the same extension, rather than Cowley’s Seraiah spelling, the Book of Mormon Sariah spelling would more correctly represent the name of our lady of Elephantine.

But what had she done, this Sariah of Elephantine, to merit mention in Papyrus C-22? Line 1 indicates a contribution to Yahu Elaha, “the Lord God.” And while the purpose of the monetary offering is not explained, Cowley believes that it was for the expenses of the Jewish temple on Elephantine Island. He also dates the donation and the writing to the year 419 B.C.

The complete text of Line 4 indicates that Sariah had donated two sheqels of silver (kṣf), a generous subscription given the generally high value of silver in ancient Egypt.

It is of particular note here that there was a Jewish (i.e., Israelite) temple at Elephantine, since this would parallel the existence of the temple “like unto the temple of Solomon” that Nephi built in the New World. The Elephantine temple was built and used by the military colony of Jewish mercenaries and their families who lived on the island, which was known to them as Yeb, a name meaning ivory. (Elephantine was the Greek name of the island.) This colony had probably been established at a time when Judah was a subservient ally of Egypt, perhaps as early as the reign of Manasseh (ca. 650 B.C.) or possibly at the outset of the reign of Jehoiakim (ca. 609 B.C.). At the time of Sariah’s donation to the temple (419 B.C.), the Jewish

10 Yahu Elaha is the Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew Yahuweh Elohim, which is traditionally rendered in English as “the Lord God” (KJV renders it “the LORD God,” with “LORD” in all capitals representing the presence of the name Yahuweh in the Hebrew text). Cowley prefers “Ya’u the God” (Cowley, Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C., xviii), but I believe this creates a false distinction between the deity worshipped in the land of Israel and the one worshipped at Elephantine—a distinction that did not in reality exist, since it was the same deity being worshipped in both cases.


12 Ibid., 66.
military garrison (known by the Hebrew word *degel*, meaning "banner") protected the interests of the Persian Empire in the southern part of Egypt.

The Elephantine Papyri were discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century (prior to 1903), far too late for Joseph Smith to have known of the female name *Sariah* in Papyrus C-22. For Latter-day Saint students today, however, the historical parallels between Sariah of Elephantine and Sariah the wife of Lehi are interesting, even if coincidental. Aside from sharing the same Hebrew name and the same Judahite-Israelite background, both women lived a great distance from Jerusalem. One’s location would indicate that she probably used Egyptian as a language in addition to Aramaic, whereas the other’s husband and at least one son were schooled in “the language of the Egyptians” as well as their native Hebrew tongue (1 Nephi 1:2).

Both women reverenced “the Lord God” (Aramaic *Yahu Elaha*; cf. 2 Nephi 5:30). Both women lived among Judahite-Israelite colonies that built their own temples outside the sphere of the temple at Jerusalem (2 Nephi 5:16), a practice which we are beginning to understand was not uncommon among Israelites both in the land of the Bible and of the Book of Mormon.

Of course, this is not the first time that a Book of Mormon proper name which appeared to defy the normal rules of gender has been vindicated by the archaeological discovery of an ancient Jewish document. In 1973 Hugh Nibley pointed out that those who maintained that *Alma* was a Latin female personal name out of place in the Book of Mormon would have to rethink their positions. The reason for this was Yigael Yadin’s discovery of the Hebrew male personal name *Alma ben Yehuda* (Alma son of Yehuda) in a land deed among the Bar Kokhba Letters from the

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13 Numerous instances of the name/title *the Lord God* are found in the Book of Mormon. A few from the time Sariah wife of Lehi was presumably alive are 1 Nephi 13:32; 14:25; 19:11; 21:22; 22:8, 11; 2 Nephi 1:9; 2:16; 3:5; 4:4, 7; 5:21, 22, 30; 6:6, 9, and 12 (not including Isaiah quotations).

14 In addition to the temple built by Nephi in the New World, small shrines built at Arad and Beersheba in ancient Judah also qualify as temples “like unto the temple of Solomon” in their tripartite form and function.

wilderness of Judea.  As with the Alma episode, Latter-day Saint students may now be assured that the appearance of the female Hebrew name Sariah in the Book of Mormon stands vindicated—vindicated by the single line in Papyrus C-22 that mentions the donation of Sariah barat Hoshea, Sariah daughter of Hoshea.

16 Ibid., 282; Yigael Yadin, Bar Kokhba (Jerusalem: Steimatzky, 1971), 176–77.