

# Sariah in the Elephantine Papyri

“He did travel . . . with . . . my mother, Sariah, and my elder brothers.” (1 Nephi 2:5)

The Book of Mormon introduces Sariah, the faithful wife of the prophet Lehi and mother of Nephi and his brothers (see 1 Nephi 2:5). What can be said about her distinctive name?

The conjectural Hebrew spelling of *Sariah* would be *śryh* and would be pronounced something like *Saryah*. 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 (*śryh*), 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.<sup>1</sup> Line 4 of C–22 lists the personal name, transliterated *śry[h br]t hwś' br ḥr̄mn*. The probable vocalization is *Sariah barat Hoshea<sup>3</sup> bar Ḥarman*, and the text means “Sariah daughter of Hoshea son of Ḥarman.” 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*.

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.<sup>2</sup>

Although *særyh* 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 *særyh* is thought to be the short form of *særyhw*, whose full form is probably pronounced *Saryahu*, featuring the common theophoric element *Yahu* from the divine name *Yahuweh*, or *Jehovah*.<sup>3</sup> The longer form *særyhw* is found only once in the Hebrew Old Testament (see Jeremiah 36:26), but it is also known from several instances on Iron Age seals and clay bullae found in Israel.<sup>4</sup> In the King James Version of the Bible, the nineteen instances of the male name *særyh* and the single appearance of *særyhw* 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 [*idkiyahu*], etc.) Cowley follows the KJV in using the *S-e-r-a-i-a-h* spelling to render *særy[h br]t hwsæ'* as “Seraiah daughter of Hoshea.”<sup>5</sup> The English *Seraiah* spelling is an effort to represent a Hebrew pronunciation of *Sera-yah* or *Sra-yah*, which would essentially mean “Yah has struggled” (the first element of *særyh* and *særyhw* is usually interpreted as deriving from the *særh* root, meaning to “struggle” or “strive”). But in light of evidence from Iron Age seals and clay bullae, Nahman Avigad suggests that *særyhw* may be read *Saryahu*, meaning “Yahuweh is prince (*sær*).” By extension, the shorter name *særyh* 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 (*ksf*), 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 (2 Nephi 5:16). 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 (c. 650 B.C.) or possibly at the outset of the reign of Jehoiakim (c. 609 B.C.). At the time of Sariah’s donation to the temple (419 B.C.), the Jewish 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 revered “the Lord God” (Aramaic *Yahu Elaha*; compare 2 Nephi 5:30). Both women lived among Judahite-Israelite colonies that built their own temples outside the sphere of the temple at Jerusalem (see 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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 wilderness of Judea.<sup>9</sup> 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.

*Research by Jeffrey R. Chadwick, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/2 (1993): 196–200.*

### Notes

1. See Arthur E. Cowley, ed. and trans., *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), xv, 67, inscription 22:4.

2. See Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 320 and plate 11.

3. The divine name *Yahu* is present in Line 1 of Papyrus Cowley #22 (See Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, 66). 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.
4. See Nahman Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 46, 103–4.
5. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, 71.
6. See *Ibid.*, 65.
7. 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.
8. See Hugh W. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 281–82.
9. *Ibid.*, 282; Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kokhba* (Jerusalem: Steimatzky, 1971), 176–77; see Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” What’s in a Name, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 72–73; and Terrence L. Szink, “Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma,” New Light, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 70.