

# Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint  
Faith and Scholarship**

## **More Evidence for Alma as a Semitic Name**

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**Article Print**

**Pages 415–428**

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)  
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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# More Evidence for Alma as a Semitic Name

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Neal Rappleye and Allen Hansen

**Abstract:** *Beginning with Hugh Nibley, several Latter-day Saint scholars have highlighted a deed found among the Bar Kokhba documents as evidence of the name Alma as a Jewish male name in antiquity. Here we highlight a second attestation of the same name used for a Jewish male from a slightly earlier period, as well as other evidence from Hebrew toponymy that helps corroborate not only that Alma is a Hebrew name, but also supports the etymology proposed by Latter-day Saint scholars and is suggestive of wordplays previously identified in the Book of Mormon text. Past critics have mocked the name Alma as a feminine name, but since this criticism has now been answered, some have pivoted to claiming that Alma was, in fact, a man's name in Joseph Smith's time and place. We investigate this claim and demonstrate that the evidence for Alma as a male name in the United States—and specifically upstate New York—during the early 1800s has been vastly overstated. Overall, this combination of data suggests that Alma in the Book of Mormon is better accounted for by the ancient rather than modern evidence.*

In a recently released episode of the documentary series *A Marvelous Work*, Dr. Donald W. Parry, professor of the Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls at BYU, mentioned the attestation of the name *Alma* in an ancient legal deed as evidence supporting the appearance of the name in the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> Parry was referring to the

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1. Book of Mormon Central, "The Allegory of the Olive Tree," YouTube video, 14:04–15:02, 29 February 2024, [youtube.com/watch?v=hXtUbMgOBXg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXtUbMgOBXg). See also Book of Mormon Central, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon:

attestation of one *ʾlmʾ bn yhwḏh* (אלמא בן יהודה) in the Bar Kokhba documents (ca. 135 AD), which Yigael Yadin initially rendered “Alma son of Judah.”<sup>2</sup> This document was first brought to the attention of Latter-day Saints in 1973 by Hugh Nibley, in a review of Yadin’s work on the Bar Kokhba documents, and has been noted by several other Latter-day Saint scholars since then.<sup>3</sup> A Semitic name transliterated as *Alma* has also been found in documents from the third millennium BC at Ebla,<sup>4</sup> and the Nabataean form *Almu* (*ʾlmw*) occurs as a male name in Hawran in a fourth century BC context.<sup>5</sup> But the Bar Kokhba

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Donald W. Parry,” YouTube video, 9:12–10:25, 12 March 2004, youtube.com/watch?v=RMgiOhU1CCY.

2. Y. Yadin, “Expedition D—The Cave of Letters,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 12, no. 3/4 (1962): 250, 253; Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (New York: Random House, 1971), 176. This name occurs again in the signatures at the end of the deed, but is spelled slightly differently: *ʾlmh bn yhwḏh*, “Almah son of Judah,” Yadin, as cited and discussed in *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, sv, “Alma,” last modified 7 September 2023, onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=ALMA; later rendered the name *ʾAllima*, based on the assumption that it was an Aramaic name meaning “the strong one.” No other scholars commenting on this name have followed this Aramaic proposal but rather tend to prefer Hebrew etymologies, as discussed later in this paper. The fact that the text uses the Hebrew *bn* and not the Aramaic *br* for “son” suggests a Hebrew etymology is more likely.
3. Hugh Nibley, “Review of *Bar-Kochba* by Zigaal Yadin,” *BYU Studies* 14, no. 1 (1974): 121, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol14/iss1/12/; reprinted as “Bar-Kochba and the Book of Mormon,” in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1989), 281. See also Daniel C. Peterson, “Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 145–46; Paul Y. Hoskisson, “What’s in a Name? Alma as a Hebrew Name,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1997): 72–73, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1192&context=jbms; Donald W. Parry, *Preserved in Translation: Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), 130, 134; Stephen D. Ricks et al., *Dictionary of Proper Names and Foreign Words in the Book of Mormon* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2022), 17–18.
4. Terrence L. Szink, “Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 70, scholarypublishingcollective.org/uip/jbms/article-abstract/8/1/70/274684/Further-Evidence-of-a-Semitic-Alma; Terrence L. Szink, “The Personal Name ‘Alma’ at Ebla,” *Religious Educator* 1 (2000): 53–56, rsc.byu.edu/vol-1-no-1-2000/personal-name-alma-ebla.
5. L. Y. Rahmani, “A Hoard of Alexander Coins from Tel Tsippor,” *Schweizer Münzblätter* 16, no. 64 (1966): 131, 133, e-periodica.ch/digbib/view

deed from the second century AD was long thought to be the only example of the name in Hebrew.

## Examining New Evidence

New evidence now provides additional support for the name *Alma* as a Hebrew male name in antiquity. An ossuary recovered from the Batn el-Hawa neighborhood of Jerusalem in 1942, and dated to sometime between the first century BC and the first century AD, bears an inscription which reads, *yhw d h bn 'lm'* (יהודה בן אלמא), "Judah son of Alma."<sup>6</sup> These are the same two names as found in the Bar Kokhba deed, but in the opposite relationship — Judah is the son, and Alma the father in this instance. Since Alma occurs as a patronym, once again there can be no question that the individual is male. Furthermore, since this ossuary is dated to before 70 AD, and Alma is the name of the *father*, it indicates that the name Alma likely goes back to the first century BC.<sup>7</sup>

Both L. Y. Rahmani and Tal Ilan consider it a variant of the name *Elam* (*'lm*; אֵלָם), which is the patronym of a priest from the days of Herod mentioned by Josephus (Joseph b. Elam) and attested frequently (with

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?pid=smb-001%3A1963%3A13%3A%3A484#484. Rahmani cites an inscription which reads *'lmw br 'nmw br rglw*, indicating that Almu is a "son" (*br*) and thus male.

6. L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority and Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 107; Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I: Palestine, 330 BCE–200 CE* (Tubingen: Mohr Seibeck, 2002), 361; Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 221; Hannah M. Cotton et al., eds., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae, vol. I: Jerusalem, part 1: 1–704* (New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 292–93. Rahmani and Hachlili render the name *Illma*, but it is identical, in Hebrew, to the one originally rendered *Alma* by Yadin. Cotton et al. note that both *Illma* and *Alma* are possible.
7. Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, 361, dates this ossuary to pre-70 AD (see p. 52 for explanation of dating), while Cotton et al., *Corpus Inscriptionum*, 292, dates it to either the first century BC/AD. Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 21–22, provides a date range of 20 BC to 70 AD for the construction of ossuaries in Jerusalem. Even if we assume that Judah's ossuary is from the latter part of that date range and he died relatively young (say, around 40), his father would be a generation *older* (ca. 30 years), placing his birth (and thus naming) sometime around the late first century BC or perhaps very early in the first century AD. If Judah was older, perhaps between ages 60 to 70, then his father was likely born roughly a hundred years or so earlier, more definitively placing his birth and naming in the first century BC.

variant spellings) in the Talmud.<sup>8</sup> Ilan accounts for the final aleph (א) as an Aramaic suffix added as an “extension of a biblical name,” but also notes that sometimes “the א suffix is the abbreviation of theophoric names with יה into ה or א,” a form “already documented in the First Temple Hebrew seals.”<sup>9</sup> The shortened theophoric form has been favored by Latter-day Saint scholars for the Book of Mormon Alma.<sup>10</sup> Since shortened theophoric names could be written with either a ה or an א at the end, the variant spelling that occurs in the signature line of the Bar Kokhba deed, where the name is spelled ’Imh (“Almah”) with a final ה, instead of a terminal א, may support this explanation.

The meaning of ’Im (אִמַּא) in Hebrew is “mute,”<sup>11</sup> but Hoskisson and others have noted, “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.”<sup>12</sup> This raises the possibility that the root for the name Alma was not “mute,” but ’Im (אִמַּא), “lad” or “youth.” Alma would thus be the hypocoristic of ’Im’l (“lad of God”) or ’Imyhw (“youth of YHWH”).<sup>13</sup> Significantly, Alma is first introduced as a “young man” in Mosiah 17:2. As Matthew L. Bowen, an expert in Semitic languages and literature, explains, “The

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8. See Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 107; Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, 361.

9. Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, 25–26. One difficulty with Ilan’s explanation of the final aleph in ’Im’ is that the name *Elam*—with an initial aleph (א)—does not occur the Hebrew Bible. Thus, if this is an example the Aramaic aleph suffix being added as “an extension of a biblical name” it is presumably a variant spelling of the name ’ylm (אֵלִים)—spelled with an initial ayin (ע)—also often translated as *Elam* in English Bibles. This would actually support the hypothesis proposed by Hoskisson and other Latter-day Saint scholars that the name should actually begin with an ע not an א (see n.12) but does not support the supposition of Ilan and Rahmani that the name means “mute” (see n.11).

10. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” 72–73; Ricks et al., *Dictionary of Proper Names*, 17–18; Hoskisson, *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, sv, “Alma.” See also Kevin L. Barney, “A More Responsible Critique,” *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 127.

11. Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries*, 107; Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names*, 361; Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs*, 221.

12. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” 72. See also Ricks et al., *Dictionary of Proper Names*, 18.

13. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” 72–73; Ricks et al., *Dictionary of Proper Names*, 17–18. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 76, also suggested that the name Alma could mean “young man.”

introduction of Alma as a figure and name into the Book of Mormon text is immediately juxtaposed with a description of Alma the Elder as a 'young man'—i.e., as an *'elem*—in Mosiah 17:2. Thus, this narrative biographical introduction exactly matches the proposed (and far-and-away most likely) meaning of the name."<sup>14</sup> Bowen also notes echoes in the narrative of another homographic Hebrew root which means "to hide" or "to conceal": "Following Alma's biographical introduction, Mormon places tremendous emphasis on Alma's 'hidden' activities, raising the possibility of a paronomastic treatment of Alma's name in terms of the Hebrew root *'-l-m* ('conceal') and its synonyms (see e.g., Mosiah 17:4; 18:1, 3, 5)."<sup>15</sup>

Spelling Alma with an initial ayin (ע), rather than an aleph (א), also receives support from Hebrew toponymy.<sup>16</sup> A village in modern Israel, in the northern Galilee area only a few kilometers south of the border with Lebanon, is called *Alma* (עלמה)—spelled with an initial ע rather than an א. The name goes back to at least the period of the Crusades (twelfth to thirteenth century), when it is mentioned in the writings

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14. Matthew L. Bowen, "Striking While the Irony Is Hot: Hebrew Onomastics and Their Function within the Book of Mormon Text," in *Perspectives on Latter-day Saint Names and Naming: Names, Identity, and Belief*, ed. Dallin D. Oaks, Paul Baltes, and Kent Minson (New York: Routledge, 2023), 233. This was first proposed in Matthew L. Bowen, "'And He Was a Young Man': The Literary Preservation of Alma's Autobiographical Wordplay," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* 30, no. 4 (2010): 2–3, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol30/iss4/3/](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol30/iss4/3/).

15. Bowen, "Striking While the Irony Is Hot," 234. Bowen's arguments are more elaborately developed in Matthew L. Bowen, "Alma—Young Man, Hidden Prophet," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 343–53, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/alma-young-man-hidden-prophet/](http://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/alma-young-man-hidden-prophet/), reprinted in Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2018), 91–100; Matthew L. Bowen, "'He Did Go About Secretly': Additional Thoughts on the Literary Use of Alma's Name," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 197–212, [journal.interpreterfoundation.org/he-did-go-about-secretly-additional-thoughts-on-the-literary-use-of-almas-name/](http://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/he-did-go-about-secretly-additional-thoughts-on-the-literary-use-of-almas-name/), reprinted in Matthew L. Bowen, *Ancient Names in the Book of Mormon: Toward a Deeper Understanding of a Witness of Christ* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2023), 233–45.

16. We would like to thank Matt Roper for first bringing this possibility to the attention on one of the authors. See also John A. Tvedtnes, "Hebrew Names in the Book of Mormon" (Presentation, Thirteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, August 2001), 3, 6n41, [ldssoul.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/tvedtnes-HebrewNames.pdf](https://ldssoul.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/tvedtnes-HebrewNames.pdf).



of Benjamin of Tudela.<sup>17</sup> One manuscript variant renders the name as 'Alem or 'Elem.<sup>18</sup> Leopold Zunz's conjectural form, 'Ulma, can be rejected.<sup>19</sup> There was a Jewish village at the site of Alma at least as far back as the third century AD based on the finding of an inscribed synagogue lintel.<sup>20</sup> In general, there was a continuity in the Jewish settlements and place names of the Upper Galilee that could lend support to *Alma* being the original name of the village.<sup>21</sup> Another synagogue lintel from the fourth to fifth centuries AD contains an inscription that Joseph Naveh reconstructed as "May the Ruler of the world ('*almah*) bless this effort ('*amlah*)." While it is tempting to view this wordplay as evidence for the place name *Alma*, this was a common Aramaic phrase that appears in synagogues at Hammath Gadera, next to the biblical Gadara, and at Susiya.<sup>22</sup> The Jewish community of *Alma* is attested as late as the sixteenth century but appears to have ended by the seventeenth century. Many of the families left for the village of Peki'in where they bore the surname '*Almani*.<sup>23</sup>

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17. "Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela," in *Early Travels in Palestine*, ed. Thomas Wright (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), 89. See also Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Holy Men in a Holy Land: Christian, Muslim and Jewish Religiosity in the Near East at the Time of the Crusades*, Hayes Robinson Lecture Series, no. 9 (London: University of London, 2005), 21–22. The earliest English translation we have thus far identified was published in London in 1840, with a second volume of notes published in 1841. See A. Asher, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*, 2 vols. (London: A. Asher, 1840–1841).
  18. MS Epstein, which would seem to date from fifteenth to sixteenth century Italy and has no vocalization. See M. N. Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Critical Text, Translation and Commentary* (London: Henry Frowde; Oxford University Press, 1907), xiv–xv. "[T]he spelling of persons and places in E often differs from that in the text of Asher." The precise implications require further study and are beyond the scope of our paper.
  19. Leopold Zunz, *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela* (New York: Hakesheth Publishing, 1900), 2:109. Zunz based this on *Oulammos* in Eusebius's *Onomasticon*, but this was an erroneous LXX translation of *Luz* in Genesis 28:19. See R. S. Notley and Z. Safrai, *Eusebius, Onomasticon: A Triglott Edition with Notes and Commentary*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), xxxiv.
  20. The same artisan in the inscription, Jose the Levite son of Levi, is known from the Bar'am synagogue lintel partially preserved in the Louvre. See Joseph Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1978), 19–20, 22–23. Bar'am itself is not mentioned by name until the thirteenth century, yet would have been a prosperous village.
  21. J. Braslawski, "The Synagogue Remains at Kefr Dalâtâ," *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society* 2 (1933/34): 14–20.
  22. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic*, 23–24, 54–57, 121–22.
  23. I. Ben-Zvi, *Erez Israel Under Ottoman Rule: Four Centuries of History*



The village appears as *ʿAlma el-Khait* on a list of toponyms in Israel gathered by Edward Robinson from local informants during his travels in the Holy Land in the 1830s.<sup>24</sup> Edward H. Palmer indicated that the toponym *Alma* was a common personal name as well and thought it was etymologically related to *Almaniyah* or *Alman*, the Hebrew form being עלמון (*ʿlmwn*), which appears in Joshua 21:18 (Almon).<sup>25</sup> This biblical *Almon* could plausibly be the name *Alma* with the *-on* suffix common to place names affixed at the end.<sup>26</sup> A variant tradition in 1 Chronicles 6:60 records the name as *Alemeth* (*ʿlmt*; עלמת), which also appears as a personal name in 1 Chronicles 7:8; 8:36; and 9:42.<sup>27</sup> Scott C. Layton argues that the etymology of the biblical Almon/Alemeth derives from the Semitic root *\*ǧlm*—the same root from which Hebrew *ʿlm*, “young man, lad” is derived—and Ran Zadok indicates that the toponym *ʿAlma* also comes from either this root or the root for “concealed, hidden” (*ʿlm*) discussed above.<sup>28</sup> Thus,

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(Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1955), 190.

24. E. Robinson and E. Smith, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petrea: A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1841), 3:134.
25. E. H. Palmer, *The Survey of Western Palestine: Arabic and English Name Lists* (London: Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1881), v, 17, 40, 61, 66.
26. For the *-on* suffix in place names, see E. Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll* (I Q Isaa) (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 114; Yoel Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land: Preservation and History* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 284–86; John A. Tvedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 2:195. For the *-on* suffix as a phenomenon occurring in both personal and place names, see A. Hurvitz, “Ακκαρων = Amqar(r)una = אִמְקָרִי,” *Lešonenu* 33, no. 1 (1968): 22–24.
27. According to Elitzur, most place names ending in *-at/th* had the *-t/th* dropped in late antiquity, leaving an *aleph* or *aleph-heh* ending. He further notes that there are cases like the biblical *Aqrabath*, which became *Aqrabah* after the Muslim conquest but appears more often in the written sources as *Aqraba*. If the *-at* suffix changed during the Roman-Byzantine era to *-it* then that was preserved in the Arabic forms. The shift from *Alemeth/Almat/Almit* is well documented. If the transition to an *-it* suffix did not occur with the northern *Alma*, that might explain its medieval form. See Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names*, 269, 272, 391.
28. Scott C. Layton, “The Semitic Root *\*ǧlm* and the Hebrew Name *ʾĀlœmœt*,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102, no. 1 (1990): 80–94, [academia.edu/77575399/The\\_Semitic\\_Root\\_ǧlm\\_and\\_the\\_Hebrew\\_Name\\_ʾĀlœmœt](http://academia.edu/77575399/The_Semitic_Root_ǧlm_and_the_Hebrew_Name_ʾĀlœmœt); Ran Zadok, “Notes on Modern Palestinian Toponymy,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 101, no. 2 (1985): 156–57, [jstor.org/stable/27931263](http://jstor.org/stable/27931263).

the evidence related to this Hebrew toponym further strengthens the case that *Alma* is an acceptable English rendering of a Hebrew name connected to Semitic roots that are echoed in the Book of Mormon narrative about Alma the Elder.

### The Name Alma in Joseph Smith's Day

For many years, detractors of the Book of Mormon have ridiculed the Book of Mormon's use of the name Alma for male prophets in antiquity. Infamous Evangelical counter-cultist Walter Martin wrote, "Alma is supposed to be a prophet of God and of Jewish ancestry in *The Book of Mormon*. In Hebrew Alma means a betrothed virgin maiden—hardly a fitting name for a man."<sup>29</sup> In 1973, Hugh Nibley observed that "the name in the Book of Mormon that has brought the most derision on that book, and caused the greatest embarrassment to the Latter-day Saints . . . is the simple and unpretentious Alma. Roman [Catholic] priests have found in this obviously Latin and obviously feminine name (who does not know that Alma Mater means fostering mother?) gratifying evidence of the ignorance and naivete of the youthful Joseph Smith."<sup>30</sup> Such criticisms have continued well into the twenty-first century. For instance, in 2002, a critic suggested that "modern potential sources for the name Alma could be, among others, the phrase *alma mater* or even the transliterated Hebrew word for 'virgin' or 'young woman'."<sup>31</sup>

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29. Walter Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism*, rev. ed. (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1978), 327. See also Robert McKay, "What Is the Gospel?" *Utah Evangel* 31, no. 8 (August 1984): 4. See also John Smith, "That Man Alma," *Utah Evangel* 33, no. 3 (April 1986): 2. We thank Matt Roper for these sources.

30. Nibley, review of Bar-Kochba, 121; Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 281. For an example of a critic identifying the name Alma as Latin, see Charles A. Shook, *Cumora Revisited: "The Book of Mormon" and the Claims of the Mormons Re-examined from the Viewpoint of American Archaeology and Ethnology* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1910), 500. Others claimed that the name (along with others in the Book of Mormon) was "unbiblical" and "philologically impossible" (presumably as Hebrew). See James Williams, "The Law and the Book of Mormon," *Law Magazine and Review: A Quarterly Review of Jurisprudence* 24 (1898–1899): 140; M. A. Sbresny, *Mormonism: As It Is To-Day* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1911): 24–25.

31. Thomas J. Finley, "Does the Book of Mormon Reflect an Ancient Near Eastern Background?" in *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement*, ed. Francis Beckwith, Carl Mosser, Paul Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 355. See also Marian Bodine, "The Book of Mormon Vs The Bible," *Christian Research Institute*, last

In the face of clear and compelling evidence that *Alma* was a Semitic, masculine name in antiquity, however, some critics have now resorted to searching genealogical records found online through Ancestry.com for examples of men named Alma in the early 1800s.<sup>32</sup> Latter-day Saint apologist Kevin L. Barney actually noted this data more than 20 years ago but wisely cautioned "that the male gender of these individuals has not yet been independently verified," and thus "more research needs to be undertaken to verify that the database correctly reflects the gender of these individuals."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, we have found that Barney's caution is more than warranted. Out of forty-two male Almas listed on an Ancestry.com search for people born between 1780 and 1820 and connected in some way to Wayne County, New York, or the surrounding region, only four were males when the search results were compared with the available records (see chart in the appendix). This means that roughly nine times out of ten, a "male" Alma was actually a misgendered woman.

These false positives seem mostly due to issues with the search engine, but there were a few genuine oddities. The 1870, United States Federal Census listed Alma Cram as male.<sup>34</sup> However, the 1850 census listed her (correctly) as a female, alongside her husband, Ebenezer Cram, with the same children and the right ages for all listed.<sup>35</sup> The 1870 entry would thus appear to be a clerical error. One Alma Johnson was male but when the census record is read carefully, you can see he was actually an Alva, not an Alma.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Alma

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updated 13 April 2023, [equip.org/articles/the-book-of-mormon-vs-the-bible/](http://equip.org/articles/the-book-of-mormon-vs-the-bible/). Gabriel Hughes, "What the Mormons Believe about Joseph Smith," Pastor Gabe's Old Blog, 24 May 2016, [pastorgabehughes.blogspot.com/2016/05/the-following-is-first-chapter-of-book.html](http://pastorgabehughes.blogspot.com/2016/05/the-following-is-first-chapter-of-book.html). Once again, we thank Matt Roper for these sources.

32. This argument was previously addressed by Daniel C. Peterson, "Does the Name 'Alma' Challenge the Historicity of the Book of Mormon?," *Meridian Magazine*, 1 August 2019, [latterdaysaintmag.com/does-the-name-alma-challenge-the-historicity-of-the-book-of-mormon/](http://latterdaysaintmag.com/does-the-name-alma-challenge-the-historicity-of-the-book-of-mormon/).
33. Barney, "A More Responsible Critique," 128n54. Barney noted that one of his examples "was married to someone with the given name 'Amasa' (usually a male name, as in 'Amasa Lyman')," suggesting that it was, in fact, a woman.
34. US Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Palmyra, Wayne Co., NY (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), accessed at [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com).
35. US Census Bureau, 1850 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Oswego, Oswego Co., NY (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), accessed at [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com).
36. 1865 New York State Census, Population Schedule, South Bristol, Ontario

Parkhurst was male, but appears to actually be named Ahira—the two names actually look remarkably similar when written in cursive, save for the dot over the *i*, which is apparent on the lone 1875 New York state census record for this supposed Alma.<sup>37</sup> Alma Pratt was another male, but we do not know whether he was even in the United States prior to 1830, as he was born on the Isle of Man around 1817, and we were unable to find immigration records.<sup>38</sup> In fact, no records besides one in the 1870 census could be found to corroborate any information about this Alma.<sup>39</sup> Alma Frary was male, though typically listed as Almon or Almond. It is unclear whether Alma was a nickname or whether it reflects how the census clerk might have misheard the name Almon pronounced.<sup>40</sup> Because of the parameters of the Ancestry.com search, most of these individuals may not have resided in Wayne County at all, let alone where the Smiths may have encountered them.

It is clear that the search results of Ancestry.com cannot be taken at face value, and when the data is combed more closely, it indicates that as a male name, *Alma* was exceptionally rare in Joseph Smith's

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Co. (Albany, NY: New York State Archives), accessed at [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com).

37. 1875 New York State Census, Population Schedule, Mendon, Mendon Co. (Albany, NY: New York State Archives), accessed at [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com). Numerous records for an Ahira Parkhurst from the same place, the same age, and with a wife and children the same names and ages corroborates this reading of the name.
38. US Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Rochester Ward 1, Monroe Co., NY (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), accessed at [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com).
39. The 1870 census identifies Alma A. Pratt as a "shoe dealer" staying in a hotel in Rochester, NY, at the time of the census. This makes it likely that he was only passing through the area when the census taker happened to arrive in Rochester. Even broadening the geographic scope of our search parameters, however, we have been unable to identify any other records for an Alma A. Pratt. In Rochester, city directories (accessible on Ancestry.com) from the 1860s to 1880s include a shoe dealer named L. A. Pratt, who can be identified as Luther A. Pratt, a long-term resident originally born in 1826 in Connecticut. An Almond or Almon Pratt is also listed in Rochester city directories from this time, but he is identified as a physician and does not appear to be the same person as our Alma. We appreciate the assistance of Jared Riddick, archivist for Scripture Central, in tracking down this information.
40. US Census Bureau, 1870 United States Federal Census, Population Schedule, Mexico, Oswego Co., NY (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), accessed at [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com). All other records on this person accessible at [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com), including other state and federal censuses, list him as either Almon or Almond.

time and place. Furthermore, the fact remains that it was not known to be a *Hebrew* name until after the Book of Mormon was published.<sup>41</sup> Thus, if we are to hypothesize that the name Alma was randomly chosen by Joseph Smith from his environment, then it must be admitted that (1) it is much more likely he would have thought of it as a *feminine* name, and (2) it is quite the remarkable coincidence that it is not only a legitimate rendering of a Hebrew masculine name, but also interplays with narrative contexts relevant to its likely Hebrew etymology. While some might be inclined to consider this a lucky guess, that is much harder to do when considered within the broader context of Book of Mormon onomastics, wherein numerous non-biblical names have either been attested in Hebrew or Egyptian inscriptions discovered long after the Book of Mormon was published, or to have credible ancient Near Eastern etymologies and to be employed in the narrative in ways that interplay with those meanings precisely as is commonly done in biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>42</sup>

## Appendix

Table 1 lists persons named *Alma* and listed as "male" on Ancestry.com born between 1780 and 1820 and having some connection to Wayne County, New York, (or neighboring counties) during their lifetimes. The "correct sex" was determined by examining the records attached to their names on Ancestry.com. Out of forty-two total, only four were actually male. Of these four, three—Alma (actually Alva) Johnson, Alma (actually Almon) Frary, and Alma (actually Ahira) Parkhurst appear to be misrecordings of more traditionally masculine names, and that may very well be the case with the fourth one as well (though this could not be verified). In any case, actual men named *Alma* appear to be relatively rare in the early nineteenth century.

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41. The earliest English publications we have been able to find that document the toponym Alma (in Israel) are Asher in 1840, based on medieval Hebrew documents, and Robinson and Smith in 1841, based on knowledge obtained by local informants during their travels in the Holy Land in 1838 (see n. 17 and 24). Furthermore, in nineteenth-century sources, it was presented as an Arabic toponym. It would not be until much later that it was known to be Hebrew in origin, and to also be a male personal name in antiquity.

42. See Ricks et al., *Dictionary of Proper Names*; Bowen, *Name as Key-Word*; Bowen, *Ancient Names in the Book of Mormon*.

**Table 1.** Incidents of Alma found in census records.

Name	Listed Sex	Correct Sex
Alma Cram	Male	Female
Alma Benham	Male	Female
Alma Huntley	Male	Female
Alma Smith	Male	Female
Alma Bacon	Male	Female
Alma Hubbard	Male	Female
Alma Rice	Male	Female
Alma Warner	Male	Female
Alma Rew/Rue	Male	Female
Alma Johnson	Male	Female
Alma (Alva) Johnson	Male	Male
Alma Huntley	Male	Female
Alma Benedict	Male	Female
Alma Barnet/Barnett	Male	Female
Alma Caroline Spoor	Male	Female
Alma Coe	Male	Female
Alma Mills	Male	Female
Alma Cleveland	Male	Female
Alma Jenks	Male	Female
Alma Almira/Elmira Palmer	Male	Female
Alma Crowl	Male	Female
Alma Cornelia Williams	Male	Female
Alma Hannah Harned	Male	Female
Almira "Alma" Hall	Male	Female
Loney Alma Parks	Male	Female
Amy Alma Southworth	Male	Female
Laura Alma Beach Huntington	Male	Female
Alma (Ahira) Parkhurst	Male	Male
Alma A Pratt	Male	Male
Alma Terrell	Male	Female
Alma Rees	Male	Female
Alma Smith (b. 1819)	Male	Female
Alma Snyder	Male	Female
Alma Anna Wilson	Male	Female

Name	Listed Sex	Correct Sex
Alma P. Twaddle	Male	Female
Alma Lucas	Male	Female
Alma Janet/Jeanette Seymour	Male	Female
Almira (Alma) Beebee	Male	Female
Alma Quick	Male	Female
Alma J(enks) Tiedman	Male	Female
Alma "Almy" Partelow	Male	Female
Alma Ann Stone	Male	Female
Alma (Almon) Frary	Male	Male



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