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## Reformed Egyptian and Book of Mormon Language

Author(s): Michael R. Ash

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# 18

## *Reformed Egyptian and Book of Mormon Language*

While describing his departure from Jerusalem at about 600 B.C., Nephi wrote, “I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2). About one thousand years later, the Nephite prophet Moroni informed his readers that the Book of Mormon was written “in the characters which are called among us the *reformed Egyptian*, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech.”

And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also.... But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared a means for the interpretation thereof (Mormon 9:33–34).

The critics assure us of three glaring errors regarding “reformed Egyptian.” First, Jews did not and would not use the pagan language of the Egyptians—especially when writing scripture. According to critics, devout Israelites, such as the Lehites, would have been horrified to write scripture in any language other than the sacred Hebrew. To write it in Egyptian would be sacrilege.

Second, argue the critics, there is no such thing as “reformed Egyptian.” *Real* scholars, they claim, are unaware of such a fictional script.

Third, there is no trace of the Hebrew language among modern Indians. If Lehites had really populated the New World, they argue, surely some trace of their language would have survived.

## *Jews Did Not Use Egyptian?*

Nearly half a century ago, Hugh Nibley observed that the Egyptian culture played a significant role in 600 B.C. Palestine. As correctly described in the Book of Mormon, this influence was strictly in culture and language. The Book of Mormon, for example, never mentions Pharaoh or the Egyptian government. As recent studies indicate, the influence of the Egyptian language played a powerful part in the lives of all people in Lehi's world. Near contemporaries of Lehi declare that foreigners—including Jews—were all instructed in the language of Egypt. Recently discovered ivories, seals, and inscriptions “all tell the same story: overwhelming and unexpected preponderance of Egyptian influence...”<sup>1</sup> For example, some Hebrew and Aramaic texts—languages used by the Jews of Lehi's time—were written in Egyptian characters. One such text, the *Papyrus Amherst 63*, presented an enigma for scholars. For years Egyptologists struggled with the text, unable to make meaning of it. Finally, in 1944 it was discovered that while the characters were Egyptian, the underlying text was Aramaic. A portion of the text translated to a version of Psalms 20:2–6. A number of similar discoveries have since come to the attention of Bible scholars.

In 1997, for instance, the *Biblical Archaeological Review* ran an article about some recently discovered inscribed potsherds (from about Lehi's day) that contained a script composed of Hebrew characters and a modified form of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Evidence suggests that only Israel—and not any neighboring communities—had adopted this modified Egyptian-Hebrew script.<sup>2</sup> The growing evidence for this co-joining of Hebrew and Egyptian writing systems has caused some Near Eastern scholars to conclude that scribes and students of Lehi's day were being trained in both Hebrew and Egyptian writing systems. How did Joseph Smith know this in 1830?

## *Reformed Egyptian Did Not Exist?*

Non-LDS scholars have never heard of “reformed Egyptian.” But what does that mean? It is important to note that “reformed Egyptian” is not a proper name; the “reformed” is an adjective synonymous with altered or modified. This descriptive phrase is probably unique to the Nephites—Moroni says that it was given this name “among us.” Similarly, the terms *cuneiform* and *hieroglyphics* are modern non-Egyptian terms for scripts from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Neither the Mesopotamians nor the Egyptians used such terms for their script, but this does not lead to the conclusion that these people or their writing did not exist.

Additionally, according to Moroni, reformed Egyptian was unique; it was handed down and altered by the Nephites and unknown to any other people (Mormon 9:34). Why would we think that reformed Egyptian would be commonly found anywhere else?

We are told that the Nephite script was altered to accommodate their mode and tools for writing as well as modifications for their “manner of speech” (v. 32). This

is not an uncommon practice. Other basic writing systems have undergone changes over time, especially when it was necessary to accommodate new writing materials. The ancient Egyptians, for example, used three different types of writing systems:

- **Hieroglyphic** (Greek for “sacred symbols”) utilized nearly 400 picture characters depicting things found in real life.
- **Hieratic** (Greek for “sacred”) was a cursive script used primarily on papyrus.
- **Demotic** (Greek for “popular”) was an even more cursive script.

The latter two were used during Lehi’s day and can properly be called “reformed Egyptian.” There are currently enough historical examples of modified or reformed Egyptian texts to validate the Book of Mormon’s claim to the same phenomenon.

### *Hebrew was Unknown in Ancient America?*

Near Eastern language expert Dr. Brian Stubbs argues for a possible link between Uto-Aztecan (a family of about 30 Native American languages) and Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> As a professional linguist, Dr. Stubbs avoids the pitfalls of amateurs who simply point to similar words between two different languages.

Any two languages can have a few similar words by pure chance. What is called the *comparative method* is the linguist’s tool for eliminating chance similarities and determining with confidence whether two languages are historically—that is, genetically—related. This method consists of testing for three criteria. First, consistent sound correspondences must be established, for linguists have found that sounds change in consistent patterns in related languages. For example, German *tag* and English *day* are cognates (related words), as well as German *tür* and English *door*. So one rule about sound change in this case is that German initial *t* corresponds to English initial *d*. Some general rules of sound change that occur in language family after language family help the linguist feel more confident about reconstructing original forms from the descendant words or cognates, although a certain amount of guesswork is always involved.

Second, related languages show parallels in specific structures of grammar and morphology, that is, in rules that govern sentence and word formation. Third, a sizable lexicon (vocabulary list) should demonstrate these sound correspondences and grammatical parallels.

When consistent parallels of these sorts are extensively demonstrated, we can be confident that there was a sister-sister connection between the two tongues at some earlier time.<sup>4</sup>

## SHAKEN FAITH SYNDROME

Of the thousands of Uto-Aztecan (UA)/Hebrew word pairs that Stubbs has uncovered—all in accordance with the phonological rules applied in professional linguistic studies—these are just a few examples:<sup>5</sup>

| Hebrew/Semitic                | Uto-Aztecan                  |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>baraq</i> (lightning)      | <i>berok</i> (lightning)     |
| <i>sekem/sikm</i> (shoulder)  | <i>sikum/sikm</i> (shoulder) |
| <i>kilyah/kolyah</i> (kidney) | <i>kali</i> (kidney)         |
| <i>mayam/meem</i> (water)     | <i>meme-t</i> (ocean)        |

How has Dr. Stubbs’ work been received by non-LDS linguists? For an answer to this question one need only turn to the past president of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, Dr. Roger Westcott. Westcott, a non-LDS Rhodes Scholar, is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Linguistics at Drew University, founder of Drew’s anthropology program, and author of 500 publications including 40 books. Expressing his favorable opinion of Stubbs’ research and noting the numerous UA/Hebrew word parallels, Westcott explains that these examples are not merely coincidental but instead follow “systematic sound-shifts” and other linguistic models just as we find present in the studies of other known language family connections.<sup>6</sup> While the conclusions remain tentative, some of the details of this ongoing research look promising.

It is also possible that we may never find traces of Hebrew among Native American languages for the simple reason that Lehi’s mother tongue might have all but disappeared shortly after their arrival in the New World. When Moroni writes about reformed Egyptian, he also explains that “the Hebrew hath been altered by us also” (Mormon 9:33).

Like other ancient civilizations (such as Egypt) most New World inhabitants would not have been literate. While ancient Americans had a sophisticated writing system, it is likely that knowledge of this system was limited to the civic officials or the priestly class. From the Book of Mormon we infer that training and devotion were necessary to competently master their difficult writing system. King Benjamin, for example, “caused that [his sons] should be taught all the languages of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding” (Mosiah 1:3). Moroni, who had mastered the art himself, lamented that the Lord had not made the Nephites “mighty in writing” (Ether 12:23).

A likely scenario is that the Lehites—who represented a small incursion into a larger existing native populace (see Chapter 15)—embraced the habits, culture, and language of their neighbors within a very short period after their arrival in the New World. This is what we generally find when a small group merges into a larger group. The smaller group usually takes on the traits of the larger (or, at least, the more powerful) group, not the other way around. It is not unusual, however, for at least some

of the characteristics of the smaller group to show up in the larger group's culture. Thus, the Lehites would have become Mesoamericans. We see, therefore, the necessity to *teach* the Old World language to a few elite in order to preserve, not only the traditions, but also to maintain a continuation of scribes who could *read* the writings of past generations and the brass plates that were brought with the Lehites.

Even with such instruction, however, the *script* was most likely an altered form of Egyptian—perhaps adapted to Mesoamerican scripts—and altered according to their language. This suggests that ideas and motifs that originated in the Old World were adapted to a script that could be conveyed with New World motifs, or at least New World glyphs. Under such conditions, would there be any reason to expect that we would find “Hebrew” among the Native Americans?

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