

REFORMED EGYPTIAN

And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech. (Mormon 9:32)

In 1829, as Joseph Smith was finishing his translation of the Book of Mormon, a French scholar named Jean-François Champollion was busy preparing the first dictionary and grammar of the Egyptian language, which were published after his death in 1832. Until Champollion, no one had been able to translate ancient Egyptian texts since they fell into disuse in the fourth century A.D. But the Book of Mormon, according to one of its writers, Moroni, was written using “reformed Egyptian” characters, though the Nephites also knew Hebrew (Mormon 9:32-34). Another of its writers, Nephi, said he employed the “language of the Egyptians” to make his record (1 Nephi 1:2).

Egyptian hieroglyphs (Greek meaning “sacred symbols”) were designed to be carved into stone--a slow and tedious process that involved the use of more than 700 characters that were very accurate depictions of things found in real life, such as people, animals, geographical features, heavenly bodies, clothing, and everyday utensils. A cursive (“flowing”) script called hieratic (Greek for “sacred” or “priestly”) was devised to make it possible to write faster and became extensively used on papyrus. Then, around 900 B.C., the Egyptians developed an even more cursive script we call demotic (Greek for “popular”), which, while based on the hieratic, bore little resemblance to the hieroglyphs. So the Egyptians had already reformed their writing system twice before the earliest parts of the Book of Mormon were written around 600 B.C.

OTHER CULTURES USED “REFORMED” EGYPTIAN

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It may seem strange that the ancient Israelites who wrote the Book of Mormon should use an Egyptian writing system. But there are precedents for this practice and we now know that several writing systems of the ancient Near East were borrowed from Egyptian. Perhaps the most notable is the adoption, by the second century B.C., of some Egyptian hieroglyphs to form the alphabetic system used for the Meroitic language spoken anciently in Nubia (now in Sudan). Meroitic also developed a cursive writing system that resembles Egyptian demotic. Modified Egyptian hieroglyphic characters comprised the syllabic system used in writings (some of them on bronze plates) found during archaeological excavations of the ancient Phoenician city of Byblos.

HOW DID THE NEPHITES “REFORM” EGYPTIAN?

When Moroni noted that he was writing his record in reformed Egyptian, he also indicated that his people still used the Hebrew language (Mormon 9:32-34). Similarly, his ancestor Nephi had made “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). This suggests that the Book of Mormon may have been written in Hebrew but using Egyptian script. Evidence for this kind of writing has been discovered in recent years.

For example, a number of northwest Semitic texts (related to Hebrew) are included in three Egyptian magical papyri from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C., the London Magical Papyrus, the Harris Magical Papyrus, and Papyrus Anastasi I. Another Egyptian document, Ostrakon 25759, from the early eleventh century B.C., also has a Semitic text that reads like Hebrew but is written in Egyptian characters.

Papyrus Amherst 63, a document written in Egyptian demotic and dating to the second century B.C., was found in an earthen jar at Thebes, Egypt, during the second half of the

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nineteenth century. Though the script is Egyptian, the underlying language is Aramaic, which is closely related to Hebrew. Among the writings included in the religious text is a paganized version of Psalms 20:2-6. Here, then, we have a Bible passage, in its Aramaic translation, written in late Egyptian characters.

In 1967, Israeli archaeologists discovered at the ancient site of Arad an ostrakon (pottery fragment) from shortly before 600 B.C., the time of Lehi. The text on the ostrakon is written in a combination of Egyptian hieratic and Hebrew characters, but can be read entirely as Egyptian. Of the seventeen words in the text, ten are written in hieratic and seven in Hebrew. This discovery suggests that when Lehi's son Nephi spoke of writing in a language consisting of "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians," he may have used such a combination script. Two more examples of combination Egyptian-Hebrew scripts from the same time period were discovered in the northern Sinai peninsula during the late 1970s.

CONCLUSION

Though ridiculed for his claims about the nature of the original record from which he translated the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith's story has found support during the last half of the twentieth century.¹ Ancient records were sometimes written on metallic plates, and some of the Hebrew and other Semitic texts were written using Egyptian characters, just like the Book of Mormon.

¹ For further information, including bibliography, see John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2, Fall 1996.