



KnoWhy #4
January 5, 2016

Illustration by Jody Livingston

DID ANCIENT ISRAELITES WRITE IN EGYPTIAN?

“Yea, 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

The Know

As Nephi introduces himself, he explains that he writes using “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.” Moroni later describes this as “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32–34).

What might be “reformed Egyptian” or “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” employed by Nephi?

Substantial evidence suggests that some ancient Israelites used Egyptian writing with Hebrew influences. Here are seven clues.

First, Israelite texts at the time of Lehi employed numbers and signs from an ancient Egyptian script called hieratic.¹ There are over 200 samples of hieratic found in the regions of Israel and Judah.²

Second, LDS scholars John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks³ collected examples of texts written in a Hebrew-related language being transcribed in hieratic Egyptian dating to 600 years before Lehi.⁴ They also shared an example of Psalms 20:2–6 written in Aramaic translation using Egyptian characters. This example dates to about 400 years after Lehi’s time.⁵

Third, archaeologists have also found Egyptian hieratic writing on broken pieces of pots from an Israelite city dating to Lehi’s time. As scholars explain, “the text ... is written in a combination of Egyptian hieratic and Hebrew characters but can be read entirely as Egyptian.”⁶

Fourth, “evidence for the commingling of Hebrew and Egyptian scripts was discovered ... in the Sinai Peninsula ... [dating to] the sixth and seventh centuries BC”⁷

Fifth, a 2012 study by Dr. David Calabro suggests that the use of Egyptian hieratic in ancient Israel “point[s] to the development within Judah of a unified, extensive hieratic tradition,” a tradition which “appears to have been independent of those attested in Egypt during that time.”⁸

Sixth, Calabro also notes that “the use of hieratic signs [in some inscriptions] extends beyond simply inserting them as symbols to substitute for Hebrew words,” but rather retain their Egyptian meanings.⁹ This is true, even as the order of hieratic signs is “contrary to common Egyptian practice ... but in accordance with expected Hebrew word order as well the probable word order in spoken Egyptian.”¹⁰

Finally, and most significantly, Calabro explains that one inscription from the Sinai is “the first example of hieratic unilateral signs in [eighth and seventh century BC] Judah.” [xi] Taken together, the evidence “indicates a widespread presence of scribes educated in this Judahite variety of Egyptian script.”¹¹ Perhaps this is the “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” referred to by Nephi the scribe/prophet.

The Why

Despite rampant “Egypt-o-mania” in the early nineteenth century, the notion of Jews writing in Egyptian was an unimaginable concept,¹³ and Joseph Smith was roundly

criticized on this point by early Book of Mormon critics.¹⁴ In this respect, the Book of Mormon has aged better than its detractors.

Several LDS researchers have explored the implications for the Book of Mormon of Egyptian writing in these Israelite hieratic texts. First, John S. Thompson in the 2004 volume *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, shows that many Egyptian scribes and teachers came to Canaan during the height of the New Kingdom's power, suggesting that in Lehi's day, "scribes having a knowledge of Egyptian had existed in the area for quite some time and had maintained a tradition of writing Egyptian."¹⁵

Second, as noted above, Calabro's analysis pointing to a long-standing scribal tradition teaching a "Judahite variety" of Egyptian writing dovetails nicely with Nephi's statement about "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2).

Third, Neal Rappleye has argued, based on Calabro's findings, that both Nephi's writing and script were principally Egyptian, with some Hebrew elements, such as Hebrew word order and scribal practices, mixed in.¹⁶

As Ricks and Tvedtnes concluded,

The implication is clear: Scribes or students contemporary or nearly contemporary with Lehi were being trained in both Hebrew and Egyptian writing systems. The use of Egyptian script by Lehi's descendants now becomes not only plausible but perfectly reasonable in the light of archaeological discoveries made more than a century after Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.¹⁷

Further Reading

Neal Rappleye, "Learning Nephi's Language: Creating a Context for 1 Nephi 1:2," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 151–159.

John S. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 259–276.

John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 156–163; reprinted as "Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 237–243.

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Notes

1 Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 311: "Documents from the kingdoms of both Israel and Judah ... of the eighth and seventh centuries [BC] contain Egyptian hieratic signs (cursive hieroglyphics) and numerals;" curiously, those hieratic signs "had ceased to be used in Egypt after the tenth century [BC]." (brackets add)

2 Stefan Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 20.

3 John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 156–163; reprinted as "Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 237–243.

4 Tvedtnes and Ricks, "Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," in *Pressing Forward*, 238: "a number of northwest Semitic texts are included in Egyptian magical papyri. These are mostly incantations that, instead of being translated from the original Semitic language into Egyptian, were merely transcribed in Egyptian hieratic." The texts in question were written with what Albright termed the "Egyptian Syllabic Orthography," using standard Egyptian symbols in combinations designed to transliterate Semitic words. In some cases, whole Semitic texts were written in Egyptian script. See Wolfgang Helck, "Asiatische Fremdworte im Ägyptischen," in *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1971), 528–29.

5 Tvedtnes and Ricks, "Semitic Texts," 239. They comment, "For years, Egyptologists struggled with the text but could make no sense of it. The letters were clear, but they did not form intelligible words in Egyptian. In 1944, Raymond Bowman of the University of Chicago realized that, while the script is Egyptian, the underlying language is Aramaic. ... Here, then, we have a Bible passage, in its Aramaic translation, written in late Egyptian characters." They reference Raymond A. Bowman, "An Aramaic Religious Text in Demotic Script," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 3 (1944): 219–31.

6 Tvedtnes and Ricks, "Semitic Texts," 239.

7 Tvedtnes and Ricks, "Semitic Texts," 240–41. On one ostrakon, intermixed with Egyptian measures and numbers is the Hebrew *ālāphim* ("thousands") and the Hebrew symbol for shekel (a weight measure). Tvedtnes and Ricks conclude, "At both Arad and Kadesh-Barnea, [Israel] there were, in addition to the 'combination texts' discussed, other ostraca written entirely in either Hebrew or Egyptian hieratic" (additional formatting added).

8 David Calabro, "The Hieratic Scribal Tradition in Preexilic Judah," in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, BAR International Series 2397, ed. Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee (Oxford, Eng.: Archaeopress, 2012), 77.

9 Calabro, "The Hieratic Scribal Tradition," 79.

10 Calabro, "The Hieratic Scribal Tradition," 78.

11 Calabro, "The Hieratic Scribal Tradition," 81.

12 Calabro, "The Hieratic Scribal Tradition," 83.

13 A search of Rick Grunder's comprehensive *Mormon Parallels: A Bibliographic Source* (LaFayette, NY: Rick Grunder – Books, 2008) turns up five sources (on pp. 268, 270, 628, 774–775, and 1612) which he suggests could be the source of this idea. Two of these (pp. 628, 774–775) simply talk about Moses learning Egyptian while in Egypt, and the other three all describe a concept of prophetic writing (such as the Book of Revelation) being "hieroglyphic" in the sense of being highly "symbolic." Yet, the writings of the Book of Mormon are strikingly lacking in the sorts of highly symbolic prophecies usually associated with this concept.

14 Gimel, "Book of Mormon," *The Christian Watchman* (Boston) 12/40 (October 7, 1831): "The plates inscribed in the language of the Egyptians, see page 5. As Nephi was a descendant from Joseph, probably Smith would have us understand, that the Egyptian language was retained in the family of Joseph; of this, however, we have no evidence." La Roy Sunderland, "Mormonism," *Zion's Watchman* (New York) 3/7 (February 17, 1838): "On p. 16 they say that the 'records' about which this book contains so much, were written in 'the language of our fathers.' Now, the language of Jacob and all his descendants, was Hebrew, but we have before shown, that the language in which this book professes to have been written, was 'reformed Egyptian,' a language which no person ever spake since the world was made."

15 John S. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 266–267; see also and Aaron P. Schade, "The Kingdom of Judah: Politics, Prophets, and Scribes in the Late Preexilic Period," also in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, 315–319.

16 Neal Rappleye, "Learning Nephi's Language: Creating a Context for 1 Nephi 1:2," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 151–159.

17 Tvedtnes and Ricks, "Semitic Texts," 241.