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Title Notes and Communications: Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters

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Abstract An Egyptian script was possibly used to write Hebrew text on the Nephite record. Documents from the correct location and time period have texts and languages in varying scripts that lend credence to this scribal phenomenon.

NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters

John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks

The Book of Mormon indicates that it was written using Egyptian characters, called by Moroni “reformed Egyptian,” though the Nephites also knew Hebrew (see Mormon 9:32–34). Nephi 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). Evidently, the brass plates of Laban also contained Egyptian characters, for King Benjamin informed his sons that, without a knowledge of Egyptian, Lehi would not have been able to read them (Mosiah 1:3–4).

Latter-day Saint scholars have long been divided on the issue of the language in which the Book of Mormon is written.¹ Some have proposed that the Nephite record was simply written in Egyptian,² while others have suggested that the Nephite scribes

¹ See the discussion by Brian D. Stubbs, “Book of Mormon Language,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:179–81.

² Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988 [1st ed., 1952]), 14–18. James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949 [1st ed., 1913]), 291–92, seems to have been the first to note that the “reformed Egyptian” of Moroni’s time (Mormon 9:32) need not have been the same as the writing system described by Nephi in 1 Nephi 1:2.

used Egyptian script to write Hebrew text.³ While either of these is possible, this present study will elicit evidence for the latter.⁴

Non-Latter-day Saint scholars and others have long scoffed at the idea that an Israelite group from Jerusalem should have written in Egyptian and mocked the term “reformed Egyptian” as nonsense. Since Joseph Smith’s time, we have learned a great deal about Egyptian and Israelite records and realize that the Book of Mormon was correct in all respects.

³ Janne M. Sjodahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1927), 14; George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1955), 1:4, 6–7; Sidney B. Sperry, “The Language and Script of the Book of Mormon,” in *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1950), 28–38; Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 31–39; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 74–78 and 363 n. 28; John A. Tvedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Study,” *BYU Studies* 11/1 (1970, also FARMS reprint): 50; John A. Tvedtnes, “Since the Book of Mormon is largely the record of a Hebrew people, is the writing characteristic of the Hebrew language?” *I Have a Question, Ensign* (October 1986): 64–66, reprinted in *A Sure Foundation: Answers to Difficult Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 21–26; John A. Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 77–91; Stephen D. Ricks, “Language and Script in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Update, Insights* (March 1992): 2. Bruce R. McConkie similarly believed that “the record on the plates was written in reformed Egyptian, meaning in the Hebrew tongue by means of Egyptian characters that had been altered to meet the Nephite needs.” *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 448. Joseph Smith said of the last of the plates, containing what became the Book of Mormon’s title page, “the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general” (*HC* 1:71). Though not a conclusive statement regarding the writing found on the plates (Egyptian could be written right-to-left, left-to-right, or top-to-bottom), it is consistent with the underlying language being Hebrew and the Nephite scribes being proficient in the Hebrew language.

⁴ Kevin L. Barney, in his “Enallage in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 114 n. 4, wrote, “Presumably, at least part of Nibley’s concern with the Hebrew-transliterated-into-Egyptian theory is the dearth of significant precedent for such a procedure.” While the precedent was unknown when Nibley first wrote of the subject in 1952, it has now been firmly established, as this present study shows.

The ancient Egyptians used three types of writing systems. The most well known, the hieroglyphs (Greek for “sacred symbols”), comprised nearly 400 picture characters depicting things found in real life. A cursive script called hieratic (Greek for “sacred”) was also used, principally on papyrus. Around 700 B.C., the Egyptians developed an even more cursive script that we call demotic (Greek for “popular”), which bore little resemblance to the hieroglyphs.⁵ Both hieratic and demotic were in use in Lehi’s time and can properly be termed “reformed Egyptian.” From the account in Mormon 9:32, it seems likely that the Nephites further reformed the characters.

While it is clear that the Book of Mormon was written in Egyptian characters, scholars are divided on whether the underlying language was Egyptian or Hebrew. Recent discoveries have provided evidence that at least some ancient Israelite scribes were, like the Nephite scribes, acquainted with both languages.

A number of northwest Semitic texts are included in Egyptian magical papyri. These are mostly incantations that, instead of being translated, were merely transcribed in Egyptian hieratic.⁶ The underlying language is a Northwest Semitic tongue, an early form of Hebrew/Canaanite.⁷ The texts include the *London Magical*

⁵ John Gee has drawn our attention to what Egyptologists have called “abnormal hieratic,” which could be termed a “reformed Egyptian” script. He has also noted that the Egyptian demotic script has been engraved on metal, including a bronze palette. See his “Two Notes on Egyptian Script,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 162–65.

⁶ 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. Semitic words written in the syllabic orthography are sometimes found in late Egyptian documents in the midst of Egyptian sentences; these are clearly borrowings. In the texts we list here, whole Semitic texts, rather than borrowed words, are written in Egyptian script. For a brief overview of some of the texts, 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.

⁷ Hebrew is part of the Canaanite language family, usually called Northwest Semitic. This includes later forms of the Canaanite language, called Phoenician and Punic. Closely related is Ugaritic, known from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century B.C. inscriptions at the northwest Syrian city of Ugarit, and

Papyrus (fourteenth century B.C.),⁸ the *Harris Magical Papyrus* (thirteenth century B.C.),⁹ *Papyrus Anastasi I* (thirteenth century B.C.),¹⁰ and Ostrakon 25759 recto.¹¹ The latter dates to the early eleventh century B.C., the time of Israel's judges. While a Semitic text appears on one side, the verso has a text that is pure Egyptian, though whether there is a connection between the two is unknown. In any event, it is clear that some Egyptian scribes were sufficiently versed in the Northwest Semitic tongue that they were able to transliterate it using their own writing system.

Closer to Lehi's time are Israelite documents from the ninth to sixth centuries B.C., from which we learn that the Israelites adopted the Egyptian hieratic numerals and mingled them with Hebrew text.¹² More important, however, are Hebrew and Aramaic

less closely related is Eblaite, known from second millennium B.C. inscriptions from nearby Ebla.

⁸ Richard C. Steiner, "Northwest Semitic Incantations in an Egyptian Medical Papyrus of the Fourteenth Century B.C.E.," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51/3 (1992): 196–97. Steiner briefly mentions the other Northwest Semitic texts noted herein and also draws our attention to a later Arabic text written in Coptic characters; see Joshua Blau, "Some Observations on a Middle Arabic Egyptian Text in Coptic Characters," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979): 215–62. Also of interest is the fact that the works of some medieval Jewish scholars were written in Hebrew using Arabic script. Maimonides, often considered the greatest of the rabbis, wrote his most well-known work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, in Arabic using Hebrew script.

⁹ Thomas Schneider, "Mag.pHarris XII, 1–5; Eine kanaanäische Beschwörung für die Löwenjagd?" *Göttinger Miszellen* 112 (1989): 53–63.

¹⁰ William F. Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography* (New Haven: Yale, 1934), 33, 37, 42; Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert, *Die satirische Streitschrift des Papyrus Anastasi I* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1986), 152.

¹¹ Ariel Shisha-Halevy, "An Early North-West Semitic Text in the Egyptian Hieratic Script," *Orientalia* n.s. 47 (1978): 145–62. An ostrakon (plural ostraca) is a piece of pottery on which writing appears. In the ancient Near East, when a jar was broken, pieces suitable for writing were kept, much as we keep "scratch paper."

¹² R. A. Stewart MacAlister, *The Excavation of Gezer* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1912), 2:276, 283, 285–87, 291; David Diringer, "On Hebrew Inscriptions Discovered at Tell-ed-Duweir (Lachish)—III," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (July–October 1943): 89–99; J. W. Crowfoot, G. M. Crowfoot, and Kathleen M. Kenyon, *The Objects from Samaria* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1957), 11–13, 16–18, 29–32; Yigael Yadin, "Ancient Judaeon Weights and the Date of the Samaria Ostraca," in *Scripta*

texts—languages used by the Jews of Lehi's time—that are written in Egyptian characters. One of these is *Papyrus Amherst 63*, a document written in Egyptian demotic and dating to the second century B.C.¹³ The document had, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, been preserved in an earthen jar and was discovered in Thebes, Egypt, during the second half of the nineteenth century. 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 1944, Raymond Bowman of the University of Chicago realized that, while the script is Egyptian, the underlying language is Aramaic.¹⁴ Bowman managed to translate portions of the text, but it did not become the object of serious study until the 1980s.¹⁵

Hierosolymitana (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 8:9–25; Yohanan Aharoni, "The Use of Hieratic Numerals in Hebrew Ostraca and the Shekel Weights," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 184 (December 1966): 13–19; Ivan T. Kaufman, "New Evidence for Hieratic Numerals on Hebrew Weights," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 188 (December 1967): 39–41; Anson F. Rainey, "Semantic Parallels to the Samaria Ostraca," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (January–June 1970): 45–51.

¹³ The Latter-day Saint notice of this document was made by Ricks, "Language and Script in the Book of Mormon," 2.

¹⁴ Raymond A. Bowman, "An Aramaic Religious Text in Demotic Script," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 3 (1944): 219–31.

¹⁵ S. P. Vleeming and J. W. Wesselius, "An Aramaic Hymn from the Fourth Century B.C.," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 39/5–6 (September–November 1982): 501–9; S. P. Vleeming and J. W. Wesselius, "Betel the Saviour," *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap* 28 (1983–84): 110–40; Charles F. Nims and Richard C. Steiner, "A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2–6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (January–March 1983): 261–74; Richard C. Steiner and Charles F. Nims, "You Can't Offer Your Sacrifice and Eat It Too: A Polemical Poem from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43/2 (1984): 89–114; Richard C. Steiner and Charles F. Nims, "Ashurbanipal and Shamash-Shum-Ukin: A Tale of Two Brothers from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 60–81; Richard C. Steiner, "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script: The Liturgy of a New Year's Festival Imported from Bethel to Syene by Exiles from Rash," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111/2 (1991): 362–63; and Steiner, "Northwest Semitic Incantations," 191–200; "Bible's Psalm 20 Adapted for Pagan Use," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11/1 (January–February 1985): 20–23; Ziony Zebit, "The Common Origin of the Aramicized Prayer to Horus and of Psalm 20," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110/2 (1990): 213–28. See also John Gee, "La Trahison des Clercs: On

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 1965, during excavations at the southern Judean site of Arad, a number of ostraca were found. Most of the documents were written in Hebrew and dated to ca. 598–587 B.C.¹⁶ One, however, dating “to the seventh century B.C.,” was written in Egyptian hieratic.¹⁷ Here, then, was evidence that Egyptian writing was known in an Israelite city. This was not surprising, for Egyptian documents from an earlier time had been discovered at the Phoenician (Lebanese) city of Byblos.

More significant, however, was an ostrakon uncovered at Arad in 1967.¹⁸ Dating “toward the end of the seventh century B.C.,” it reflects usage 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. However, all the words written in Hebrew can be read as Egyptian words, while one of them, which occurs twice, has the same meaning in both Egyptian and Hebrew.¹⁹ Of the ten words written in hieratic script, four are numerals (one occurring in each line).²⁰ One symbol, denoting a measure of capacity, occurs four times (once in each of the four lines), and the remaining Egyptian word occurs twice. Thus, while seventeen words appear on the ostrakon, if one discounts the recurrence of

the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon, “*Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 96–97 n. 147.

¹⁶ Yohanan Aharoni, “Hebrew Ostraca from Tel Arad,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 16/1 (1966): 1–7.

¹⁷ Shlomo Yeivin, “A Hieratic Ostrakon from Tel Arad,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 16/3 (1966): 153–59.

¹⁸ The first Latter-day Saint notice of the significance of the Arad materials for Book of Mormon language was made by John A. Tvedtnes, “Linguistic Implications of the Tel-Arad Ostraca,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 127 (October 1971): 1–5, and in abbreviated form in “The Language of My Father,” *New Era* (May 1971): 19.

¹⁹ This is the preposition *m*, which means “from” in both languages. Hebrew and Egyptian are distantly related, so this word is a cognate.

²⁰ The text is a simple inventory of grains from different places.

words, only six words are written in hieratic (of which four are numerals), and six in Hebrew.

The text of the ostracon is integral, rather than a bilingual.²¹ Yeivin, who translated and studied the text, wrote, "The two scripts provide supplementary information and they are intermingled. One cannot, however, be sure how the scribe who wrote the text read it, whether in Hebrew throughout, pronouncing all the apparent hieratic signs in their Hebrew equivalents, or in a mixed sort of jargon, giving the Egyptian values to the hieratic signs."²²

Because the inscription was discovered in Israel, Yeivin never considered the possibility that all the words might have been read as Egyptian, which seems more likely in this case. One thing, however, is certain. The scribe who wrote the text knew both Hebrew and Egyptian writing systems and commingled them in a single text. Perhaps this is what Nephi meant when he said that the language of his record consisted of "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2).²³

Additional evidence for the commingling of Hebrew and Egyptian scripts was discovered during archaeological excavations at Tell Ein-Qudeirah (biblical Kadesh-Barnea) in the Sinai Peninsula during the latter half of the 1970s. Several ostraca of the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. were uncovered. One ostracon, written mostly in hieratic characters, consists of a column of Egyptian measures and five columns of numbers. Along with the Egyptian,

²¹ A bilingual has a text in one language followed by a translation of the *same text* in another language. Many bilingual (and trilingual) inscriptions are known from the ancient Near East.

²² Shlomo Yeivin, "An Ostracon from Tel Arad Exhibiting a Combination of Two Scripts," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 55 (August 1969): 98–102.

²³ It remains to be determined when an Israelite or Nephite scribe would have used an Egyptian symbol instead of a Hebrew (alphabetic) letter. While some Egyptian characters are alphabetic in nature, representing a single sound, others are syllabic or ideographic and can represent whole words or syllables. This does not mean that they must be read with an Egyptian meaning, however. Akkadian scribes in Mesopotamia borrowed syllabically written words from their Sumerian predecessors but assigned them a "translation" equivalent in their own language, rather than the Sumerian pronunciation. It is possible that the Nephites, whenever possible, used Egyptian symbols that represented two or more consonants (Egyptian symbols often represent three consonants, sometimes four or five) whenever it would take less space on the plates to write the Egyptian rather than the Hebrew.

the Hebrew word *ʾālāphîm* (“thousands”) appears twice (with the hieratic “ten” in the numeral “10,000”), while the Hebrew symbol for “shekel” (a weight measure) appears twenty-two times. Because of the order of the numerals in each column, it may be a scribal practice in writing numbers.

A second ostrakon contains three vertical columns of numbers. The left-hand column has the Hebrew word *garah*, the smallest unit of Hebrew measure, after each hieratic numeral. Because the numerals are in order, Rudolph Cohen, the archaeologist who discovered the texts, concluded that “this writing is a scribal exercise.” This view is supported by the discovery, at the same site, of a small ostrakon with several Hebrew letters, in alphabetic order, evidently a practice text.²⁴

At both Arad and Kadesh-Barnea, there were, in addition to the “combination texts” discussed, other ostraca written entirely in either Hebrew or Egyptian hieratic. 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.

²⁴ For photos of the ostraca and a brief discussion, see Rudolph Cohen, “The Excavations at Kadesh-Barnea 1976–78,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 44/2 (1981): 98–99; Rudolph Cohen, “Did I Excavate Kadesh-Barnea?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 7/3 (May–June 1981): 25–30.