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Abstract This article explains the benefits of studying specific words in the context of the Book of Mormon. Focusing on the origin of a word provides additional meaning and insight to a particular verse of scripture and helps the reader better understand the intended meaning of the author.



WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Cynthia L. Hallen

Asking the question “What’s in a word?” can be a fruitful method for studying the scriptures for several reasons:

1. The study of words (called philology) can clarify Book of Mormon terms that were familiar to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries but that may seem obscure to today’s readers. For example, to modern readers the adjective *quick* usually means “speedy,” but in Joseph Smith’s time, the word *quick* also meant “alive, living, as opposed to dead or unanimated.”¹ A careful reader would notice that *quick* means “alive” rather than “speedy” in Helaman 3:29, “lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful.”

2. A fuller knowledge of the denotations, connotations, and origins of English words may aid those who are translating the Book of Mormon into non-English languages. For example, the word *quick* in English has the same origin as the word *vivus* in Latin and *bios-* in Greek. They all share the same reconstructed Indo-European root **g^wei-*, meaning “to live” or “life.”² The /g^w/ sound in Indo-European (IE) became a /kw/ sound in English, spelled as qu-. In Latin and Greek, the IE /g^w/ lost the velar /g/ sound, and the labial /w/ became a /v/ or a

/b/, leading to *vivus* and *bios-*. The meaning of the word *quick* gradually narrowed in English from “alive” to “lively” to “vigorous” to “energetic” to “rapid.”³ A Spanish translator could use the noun *vivos* to correspond to *quick* in Moroni 10:34, “the eternal Judge of both quick and dead,” and the adjective *rápido* to represent *quick* in 3 Nephi 7:15, “their quick return from righteousness,” in order to achieve an accurate translation.

3. Although the base language of the Book of Mormon is now English in Joseph Smith’s translation, the original dialect of the records was an adaptation of Hebrew learning and Egyptian language (1 Nephi 1:2). Thus Semitic language roots can also be helpful for obtaining scriptural insights.⁴ The “speedy” meaning of the adverb *quickly* appears in a Hebrew transliteration as *maher* in the Old Testament: “They have turned aside quickly out of the way” (Exodus 32:8). The “living” definition of the adjective *quick* in the Old Testament appears as *hayyim* in a passage about being buried alive: “if . . . the earth openeth her mouth . . . and they go down quick into the pit; then ye shall understand that these men have provoked the Lord” (Numbers 16:30). However, in Isaiah 11:3,

which is restated in 2 Nephi 21:3, the adjective *quick* has neither *maher* nor *hayyim* as its root: “[the Spirit of the Lord] shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord.” Instead, the Hebrew form *hariyho* appears for *quick*, with connotations of “delight,” “sensitivity,” “perception,” and “touch.” This Hebrew nuance is effectively captured in the Spanish translation of the Book of Mormon, where *quick* transfers into *penetrante*, meaning “keen” or “profound” instead of “rapid” or “alive.”⁵

4. Often the roots of words form a poetic network of associations that endorse the truths of the gospel. The history of English words may reveal insights about sacred teachings contained in the Book of Mormon. For example, the words *tree* and *truth* are both derivatives of the Indo-European root **deru-*, which means “firm,” “solid,” or “steadfast,” often referring to objects made of wood.⁶ When we apply this knowledge to the vision of the tree of life received by Lehi and Nephi (1 Nephi 8 and 11), the “tree” of life is also the “truth” of life, a reminder that Christ was crucified on a tree (1 Peter 2:24) and that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Other derivatives of the root **deru-* in English include

the following: *true, trow, troth, betroth, trust, tryst, and endure*. Nephi's admonition to "endure to the end" (2 Nephi 31:20) means trusting God, waiting upon the Lord, and espousing the truth. A person who trusts in the Lord is like a tree by a river (Psalm 1:1–3; Jeremiah 17:7–8). Those who nourish the word will pluck sweet, pure, and precious fruit with confidence from the "tree springing up unto everlasting life" (Alma 32:41–43).

5. According to 2 Nephi 11:4, all things typify or bear record of Christ. Thus, language can be a type of Christ, and words can bear record of him. Words can bear record of Christ not only in standard definitions but also in their underlying etymological roots and derivatives. The tongue of every nation, kindred, and people can testify of Christ in its own way, and the linguistic history of sacred terms or scriptural words in a language can provide insights about our relationship to the Lord.

This column will present material from scholarly reference tools that can enhance our understanding of the words we en-

counter in our scripture study. In the early 19th century (paralleling the restoration of the gospel), Europe and the United States experienced a philological renaissance. Lexicographers published the family history of English words in great works such as Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* and James Murray's *Oxford English Dictionary*. Further research in comparative historical linguistics has reconstructed the lineage of English back into the Indo-European family of languages, as recorded in Calvert Watkins's appendix to the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

Another useful reference tool is the latest edition of a computerized scripture concordance WordCruncher program that enables us to search for words and references in English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Old Testament Hebrew, and New Testament Greek. Some comparative historical linguists believe that Indo-European languages (such as English and Greek) are genetically related to Afro-Asiatic languages (such as Hebrew and Arabic) through a common an-

cient linguistic ancestor called Nostratic, which is in turn related to other language families that point back to one common mother tongue. Although all languages have been altered substantially by language change and language contact over the centuries, from time to time we see underlying similarities in sound, meaning, structure, and cultural traditions.

The Prophet Joseph Smith returned the gold plates to Moroni for safekeeping, so we cannot consult the original text of the Book of Mormon for linguistic insights as we might consult Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic source texts for information about the Bible. However, we can search out the meanings of words in the languages and texts that are available to us. If you are interested in knowing the history and meaning of a particular word in the Book of Mormon, we invite you to submit a request by e-mail to Cynthia_Hallen@byu.edu. We will consider including your "What's in a Word" question in a future edition of this journal. 📖

building of temples to reveal the ordinances of the temple for both the living and the dead (see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 224, 307–8, 323).

12. To have “power” to get the full account implies having the power of the Lord. Joseph Smith was given “power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon” (D&C 20:8; see D&C 113:3–4). Since the 24 plates are in an unknown language, the translator must have the power of God to get the full account. Another implication, although unstated, is that the translator will be led to find the plates. Moroni definitely led Joseph Smith to “find” the Book of Mormon plates (Joseph Smith—History 1:42–54). Limhi’s people found the gold plates of the Jaredites (see Ether 1:2; Mosiah 21:27; 28:11) that Ether had hidden in a manner that they might be found (see Ether 15:33). Wasn’t the Lord involved in their finding those plates? We can expect that the Lord, in his own due time, will lead someone of his choosing to find the 24 plates.
 13. While Joseph the Prophet was translating the Bible, the information on Enoch was revealed to him (November–December 1830). Several years later, he recorded more information about Adam’s blessing his posterity three years before his death (see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 38–40). In March of 1835 Joseph included this information in the Doctrine and Covenants revelation now known as section 107.
 14. How all of these things can be included upon just 24 plates is a question that is not answered in the Book of Mormon. While many theories have been advanced, they are all speculative, and so the question will remain unanswered in this paper, other than to note that there may be other Jaredite records among the “wagon loads” seen by Joseph and Oliver.
 15. The Lord revealed to Oliver Cowdery that there were “engravings of old records which are ancient” that he could be privileged to translate (see D&C 8:1, 11; 9:2). While the Book of Abraham was received as a part of those ancient records, the revelations given to Oliver refer to more than one record. Furthermore, the Book of Abraham was only partially translated. Oliver said concerning this record: “When the translation of these valuable documents will be completed, I am unable to say; neither can I give you a probable idea how large volumes they will make; but judging from their size, and the comprehensiveness of the language, one might reasonably expect to see a sufficient [sic] to develop much upon the mighty acts of the ancient men of God” (*Messenger and Advocate*, Dec. 1835, 236). The Lord may have also been referring to the ancient records of the Nephites and Jaredites in his promise to Oliver.
- Many records have been kept and preserved throughout the world for the dispensation of the fulness of times, when all things in Christ will be gathered together (see Ephesians 1:9–10). This article acknowledges these many other records but has focused only on those mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Lehi’s Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness David Rolph Seely

1. Unfortunately there is very little information about the Nephite temples in the Book of Mormon. The most complete study of the Nephite temples to date is John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).
2. For a brief discussion of some of the issues relating to the sacrifice of Lehi and the Nephites beyond the injunctions in Deuteronomy 12, see *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 71.
3. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 99.
4. Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 245–46.
5. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 320.
6. “As a prophet, Lehi held the Melchizedek Priesthood and by that authority offered sacrifice (*Teachings*, p. 181). . . . The Book of Mormon writers made no attempt to elaborate upon the nature or types of their offerings. The Aaronic Priesthood was the province of the tribe of Levi, and thus was not taken by the Nephites to America. It would appear, therefore, that the sacrifices performed by the Lehite colony were carried out under the direction of the higher priesthood, which comprehends all the duties and authorities of the lesser” (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], 1:31).
7. McConkie and Millet further explain: “A covenant-centered religion required a covenant sanctuary. The fact that the Nephites constructed a temple suggested that all remnants of Israel, wherever they had been scattered, if they possessed the priesthood would have done likewise” (*ibid.*, 1:223).
8. For a recent review of biblical scholarship on Deuteronomy 12, see Bernard M. Levinson, “The Innovation of Cultic Centralization in Deuteronomy 12,” in *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23–52. An excellent discussion of the issue of the restriction of sacrifice to a single sanctuary can be found in Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 459–64.
9. The interpretation of Leviticus in terms of the so-called secular slaughter is much debated. See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 366 n. 43; and Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 112–13.
10. Menachem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 459–64. This commentary is highly recommended as a model presentation of biblical scholarship to an educated lay audience.
11. *Ibid.*, 26–42.
12. This is the prevailing view among modern scholars. In the classic documentary hypothesis, the literary strand D—chiefly the book of Deuteronomy—is dated to the middle of the seventh century b.c. While most scholars who hold this view agree that there is older material in Deuteronomy, they believe that the book in its present form was edited in the seventh century and its laws were first applied in their entirety by King Josiah. For a balanced and readable presentation of this view, see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, xix–xxvii; and Moshe Weinfeld, “Deuteronomy, Book of,” *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:168–83.
13. See, for example, Alexander Rofé, “The Strata of Law about the Centralization of Worship in Deuteronomy and the History of the Deuteronomistic Movement,” in *Congress Volume: Uppsala 1971* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 221–26; Baruch Halpern, “The Centralization Formula in Deuteronomy,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981): 20–38; and Levinson, “Innovation of Cultic Centralization,” 24–25.
14. A. C. Welch, “The Problem of Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 48 (1929): 291–306.
15. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 65–84.
16. See Ellis Rasmussen, “Deuteronomy,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:378–79.
17. Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh (see Alma 10:3).
18. The priesthood that Alma₂ held is described as “the high priesthood of the holy order of God” (Alma 4:20; compare 13:1–12, which describes the priesthood of the Nephites as the Melchizedek Priesthood). Responding to the question of whether the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away when Moses died, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “All Priesthood is Melchizedek, but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but that which brought the ministry of angels remained. All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 180). He also taught: “What was the power of Melchizedek? ‘Twas not the Priesthood of Aaron which administers in outward ordinances, and the offering of sacrifices. Those holding the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood are kings and priests of the Most High God, holding the keys of power and blessings. In fact, that Priesthood is a perfect law of theocracy, and stands as God to give laws to the people, administering endless lives to the sons and daughters of Adam” (*ibid.*, 322).
19. Translations of the Temple Scroll from Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983).
20. Yadin, *Temple Scroll* 1.315–20, 2.233–39; Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Deuteronomistic Paraphrase of the Temple Scroll,” *Revue de Qumran* 15 (1992): 558–61; and “Sacral and Non-Sacral Slaughter,” in *Time to Prepare the Way in the Wilderness*, ed. Devorah Dimant and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 69–84.
21. Aharon Shemesh, “Three-Days’

Journey from the Temple’: The Use of this Expression in the Temple Scroll,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 6/2 (1999): 126–38; and *idem*, “A New Reading of Temple Scroll 52:13–16. Does this Scroll Permit Sacrifices Outside the Land of Israel?” *Proceedings of the International Congress, Fifty Years of the Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. Vanderkam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 400–410.

22. Shemesh, “Three-Days’ Journey,” 126–27; emphasis added.
23. *Ibid.*, 130; emphasis added.
24. *Ibid.*, 130–32. This may help to explain the fact that the Jews built temples in Egypt in Elephantine (destroyed in 410 b.c.) and Leontopolis (shut down in A.D. 73) where sacrifice was offered. See Haran, *Temples*, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah *Menahot* 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 109a.

What’s in a Word? Cynthia L. Hallen

1. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (San Francisco, Calif.: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1928).
2. Calvert Watkins, ed., appendix to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
3. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “quick” (www.oed.com).
4. All Hebrew transliterations are adapted from the WordCruncher scripture concordance program (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2001).
5. *El Libro de Mormón* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993).
6. *American Heritage Dictionary*.

New Light

1. For example, see the April 2001 issue of *Insights*, the FARMS newsletter, for observations about the limits of radiocarbon dating even at its best.

Out of the Dust

1. John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 98–100.
2. See Harry E. D. Pollock and Clayton E. Ray, “Notes on Vertebrate Animal Remains from Mayapan,” *Current Reports* 41 (August 1957): 638; this publication is from the Department of Archaeology at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. See also Clayton E. Ray, “Pre-Columbian Horses from Yucatan,” *Journal of Mammalogy* 38 (1957): 278.
3. Henry C. Mercer, *The Hill-Caves of Yucatán: A Search for Evidence of Man’s Antiquity in the Caverns of Central America* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1896), 172.
4. Robert T. Hatt, “Faunal and Archaeological Researches in Yucatán Caves,” *Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bulletin* 33, 1953. See Peter J. Schmidt, “La entrada del hombre a la península de Yucatán,” in *Orígenes del Hombre Americano*, comp. Alba González Jácome (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1988), 250.
5. Schmidt, “La entrada,” 254.