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What’s in a Word?

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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.
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.” 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 *gw*ei-, meaning “to live” or “life.” The /gw/ sound in Indo-European (IE) became a /kw/ sound in English, spelled as qu-. In Latin and Greek, the IE /gw/ 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 “vigorou” to “energetic” to “rapid.” 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. 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.”

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. 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 encounter 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 ancient 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. The “true” power of revelation implies having the power of the Lord. Joseph Smith was given “power from on high” by the men 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, 26–30). In March 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 “wagons 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, 11:92). 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 race of God” (Joseph and Oliver, 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 fullness of times, when all things “to 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 Ralph 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 Butrint” in Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).


4. “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 Lehi colony were carried out under the direction of the higher priesthood, which comprehends all the duties and functions of the lesser priest” (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], 1:31).

5. 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, in all cases possessed the priesthood would have done likewise” (ibid., 1:223).

6. For a recent review of biblical scholarship on the Temple Scroll see: (1) Yadin, “The Temple Scroll,” 24–25. An excellent discussion of the issue of the restriction of sacrifice to a single sanctuary is from the Department of Archaeology at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. The book in its present form was destroyed in 410 a.d. by the Persians, 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, holding the keys of power and blessings. In fact, that Priesthood is a perfect law of decency, and stands as God’s law to the people, constituting endless lives to the sons and daughters of Adam” (ibid., 322).


10. Ibid., 130, emphasis added.

11. Ibid., 130–32. This may help to explain the fact that the few built temples in Egypt in Elephantine (destroyed in 410 a.c.) and Levantopolis (shut down in a.d. 73) where sacrifice was observed. See Haran, Temples, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah Menahot 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud Menahot 109a.

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Gyritha L. Hallen


4. All Hebrew translations are adapted from the San Diego Dead Sea Scrolls congregation program (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2001).

5. El Libro de Mormon (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993).


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


