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 *gwei-, 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 “vigorous” 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
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.

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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 phrase “power to get the full account” means “power of God to get the full account.” The phrase “the power of God to get the full account” means “power of the Lord to get the full account.”

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 about 2454–46.

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 the Lehite colony. (see D&C 20:8, 9).

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:

“...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 records 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 time, 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 Ralph Seybold

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 related to the sacrifice of Lehi and the Nephites beyond the injunctions in the Book of Mormon see Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 245–46.


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 Lehite colony were carried out under the direction of the higher priesthood, which comprehends all the duties and authorities of the higher priesthood” (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, Doctrinal Commentary on the Books 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 suggests that all remnants of Israel, wherever they had been scattered, if they possessed the priesthood would have done likewise” (ibid., 1:223).


8. Minaschem Haran, Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clar- endon, 1978), 459–64. This commentary is highly recommended as a model presentation of biblical scholarship to an educated lay audience.

9. Ibid., 26–42.

10. This is the prevailing view among modern scholars. In the classic documentation of the literal meaning of the Hebrew word, chief priest, the book of Deuteronomy—

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