

# Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters

*“We have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian.” (Mormon 9:32)*

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 [his] 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 (see 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. Some have proposed that the Nephite record was simply written in Egyptian, while others have suggested that the Nephite scribes used Egyptian script (“the language of the Egyptians”) to write Hebrew text (“the learning of the Jews”). While either of these is possible, this present study will elicit evidence for the latter.

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 is correct in all respects.

The ancient Egyptians used three types of writing systems. The most well known, the hieroglyphs (Greek for “sacred symbols”), comprised nearly four hundred 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. 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.

Recent discoveries have provided evidence that at least some ancient Israelite scribes were, like the Nephite scribes, acquainted with both Hebrew and Egyptian. For example, 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.<sup>1</sup> The underlying language is a Northwest Semitic tongue, an early form of Hebrew/ Canaanite.<sup>2</sup> The texts include the London Magical Papyrus (fourteenth century B.C.), the Harris Magical Papyrus (thirteenth century B.C.), Papyrus Anastasi I (thirteenth century B.C.), and Ostrakon. 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 opposite side 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.<sup>3</sup> More important, however, are texts in Hebrew and Aramaic—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. 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 Egyptian. In 1944, Raymond Bowman of the University of Chicago realized that, while the script is Egyptian, the underlying language is Aramaic.<sup>4</sup> Bowman managed to translate portions of the text, but it did not become the object of serious study until the 1980s. Among the writings included in the religious text is a paganized version of Psalm 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 c. 598–587 B.C.<sup>5</sup> One, however, dating “to the seventh century B.C.,” was written in Egyptian hieratic. 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Of the ten words written in hieratic script, four are numerals (one occurring in each line). 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 words, only six words are written in hieratic (of which four are numerals), and six in Hebrew.

The text of the ostrakon is integral, rather than a bilingual.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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).<sup>10</sup>

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 ostrakon, written mostly in hieratic characters, consists of a column of Egyptian measures and five columns of numbers. Along with the Egyptian, the Hebrew word *’ālāphīm* (“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.

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.

Research by Stephen D. Ricks, originally published as a FARMS Update in *Insights* (March 1992): 2, and by John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, originally published in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–63.

## Notes

1. 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.

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

3. See R. A. Stewart MacAlister, *The Excavation of Gezer* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1912), 2:276, 283, 285–87, 291; David Diringer, “On Ancient 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 Judaean Weights and the Date of the Samaria Ostraca,” in *Scripta 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.

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

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

6. 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.

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

8. 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.

9. Shlomo Yeivin, “An Ostrakon from Tel Arad Exhibiting a Combination of Two Scripts,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 55 (August 1969): 98–102.

10. 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.