

REFORMED EGYPTIAN

William J. Hamblin

What Is “Reformed Egyptian”?

Critics of the Book of Mormon maintain that there is no language known as “reformed Egyptian.”¹ Those who raise this objection seem to be operating under the false impression that reformed Egyptian is used in the Book of Mormon as a proper name. In fact, the word *reformed* is used in the Book of Mormon in this context as an adjective, meaning “altered, modified, or changed.” This is made clear by Mormon, who tells us that “the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, [were] handed down and altered by us” and that “none other people knoweth our language” (Mormon 9:32, 34). First we should emphasize that Mormon is describing Egyptian characters, or what we today would call a script or writing system. It is the form or shape of the characters or symbols that was altered by the Nephites. Nephite reformed Egyptian is thus a unique script. It derived from the Egyptian writing systems but then was modified and adapted to suit Nephite language and writing materials.

The fact that modern linguists and philologists are not aware of a script known as reformed Egyptian is irrelevant since Mormon tells us that the script was called reformed Egyptian “by us”—that is, by the Nephites; they may have been the only people to use that descriptive

1. See William J. Hamblin, review of *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, by Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 264–65.

phrase. For example, both the terms *cuneiform* and *hieroglyphics* are non-Egyptian terms for the scripts of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt.² The Mesopotamians did not call their writing system cuneiform, nor did the Egyptians call their writing system hieroglyphics.³ Nevertheless, we would not insist that the Mesopotamians and Egyptians never existed because they did not call their writing systems by the same names used by modern historians, philologists, and archaeologists.

Does the Book of Mormon's assertion that the Nephites took Egyptian characters and modified them to write Hebrew words make historical and linguistic sense?⁴ It is a common phenomenon for a basic writing system to undergo significant changes in the course of time, especially when written with new writing materials.⁵ Turning specifically to Egyptian, there are numerous examples of modified (or reformed) Egyptian characters being used to write non-Egyptian languages, none of which were known in Joseph Smith's day.

Examples of "Reformed Egyptian"

Egyptian hieratic and demotic. The Egyptian language was written in three related but distinct scripts. The oldest is hieroglyphic script, dating to around 3000 BC; it was essentially a monumental script for stone inscriptions. Hieratic, a second script, is a modified form of Egyptian hieroglyphics used to write formal documents on papyrus with brush and ink, and demotic is a cursive script.⁶ Thus, both

2. The term *cuneiform* was first used in the nineteenth century, while *hieroglyphics* was the Greek term for the Egyptian writing system.

3. For a general introduction on hieroglyphics, see W. V. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphics* (London: Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications, 1987).

4. John Gee summarizes the evidence and analysis on the subject, arguing for a Hebrew-based language written in an Egyptian-based script in his "La Trahison des Clercs: On the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 79–83, 94–99.

5. Michelle P. Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), provides examples of the wide array of scripts of the Roman alphabet, many of which are unrecognizable without training.

6. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphics*, 21–24.

the hieratic and demotic scripts could be considered “reformed” or modified versions of the original hieroglyphic script. These are both examples of writing the Egyptian language in reformed versions of the Egyptian hieroglyphic script; there are also several examples of the use of reformed or modified Egyptian characters to write *non-Egyptian* languages.

Byblos Syllabic texts. The earliest known example of mixing a Semitic language with modified Egyptian hieroglyphic characters is the Byblos Syllabic inscriptions (eighteenth century BC), from the city of Byblos on the Phoenician coast.⁷ This script is described as a “syllabary [that] is clearly inspired by the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, and in fact it is the most important link known between the hieroglyphs and the Canaanite alphabet.”⁸ Interestingly enough, most Byblos Syllabic texts were written on copper plates. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to describe the Byblos Syllabic texts as a Semitic language written on metal plates in reformed Egyptian characters,⁹ which is precisely what the Book of Mormon describes.

Cretan hieroglyphics. Early forms of writing in Crete apparently developed from a combination of “Egyptian hieroglyphic, Mesopotamian cuneiform and Phoenician native signs into one single, new pictographic script.”¹⁰ Note again that there is a mixture of Semitic (Mesopotamian and Phoenician) and Egyptian writing systems, precisely as described in the Book of Mormon.

Meroitic. Meroitic, the script of ancient Nubia (modern Sudan), “was first recorded in writing in the second century BC in an ‘alphabetic’

7. For basic summary and bibliography, see David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:178–80. For a detailed linguistic study and translation, see George E. Mendenhall, *The Syllabic Inscriptions from Byblos* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1985). The original publication with full plates and transcriptions is M. Dunand, *Byblia Grammata: Documents et recherches sur le développement de l’écriture en phénicie* (Beirut: Ministère de l’éducation nationale et des beaux-arts, Direction des Antiquités, 1945); photographs and transcriptions of all the documents can be found on pp. 71–138.

8. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:178b.

9. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 105.

10. Jan Best and Fred Woudhuizen, eds., *Ancient Scripts from Crete and Cyprus* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 4.

script consisting of twenty-three symbols, most of which were borrowed or at least derived from Egyptian writing. . . . The script has two forms, hieroglyphic and cursive.”¹¹ Meroitic hieroglyphic signs were “borrowed from the Egyptian . . . [and] the cursive script derived mainly from the Egyptian demotic script.”¹²

Psalm 20 in demotic Egyptian. Scholars have also deciphered an Aramaic version of Psalm 20:2–6 that was written in demotic Egyptian characters.¹³ This is precisely what the Book of Mormon claims existed: a version of the Hebrew scriptures in the Hebrew language, but written using Egyptian characters.

Proto-Sinaitic and the alphabet. Semitic speakers of early second millennium BC Syria and Palestine seem to have adopted reformed or modified versions of both Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform into syllabic and alphabetic systems of writing. Ultimately, this reformed Egyptian script became the basis for the Phoenician alphabet, from which nearly all subsequent alphabets derive.¹⁴ “The Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions were written in a Semitic language, and . . . their letters were the prototypes for the Phoenician alphabet. The letters are alphabetic, acrophonic in origin, and consonantal, and their forms are derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs.”¹⁵ “Since the Canaanite/Phoenician syllabary formed the basis of the Greek alphabet, and the

11. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphics*, 61.

12. Jean Leclant, “The Present Position in the Deciphering of Meroitic Script,” in *The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Deciphering of Meroitic Script* (Paris: Unesco, 1978), 112.

13. Stephen D. Ricks, “Language and Script in the Book of Mormon,” *Insights* (March 1992): 2; 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 (1983): 261–74; 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 (1991): 362–63; for a full bibliography, see Gee, “La Trahison des Clercs,” 96–97 n. 147. See also 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.

14. Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982). I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), x–xi, provides a chart illustrating the derivation of the Phoenician and all subsequent alphabets from Egyptian hieroglyphics.

15. Benjamin Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium BC* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 106.

Greek in turn of the Latin, it means, in the words of Gardiner, that ‘the hieroglyphs live on, though in transmuted [or could we not say reformed?] form, within our own alphabet.’”¹⁶ In a very real sense, our own Latin alphabet is itself a type of reformed Egyptian since the ultimate source of our characters is Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Conclusion

There are thus a number of historical examples of Semitic or other languages being written in “reformed” or modified Egyptian script; the Book of Mormon account is entirely plausible on this point.

16. Davies, *Egyptian Heiroglyphics*, 60. The same page provides a chart illustrating the transformation of heiroglyphics into the alphabetic symbols of our Latin alphabet.

