

Reformed Egyptian: "In the Language of My Fathers"

© Copyright 1998 by Richard G. Grant.
Free use is granted, with attribution, for any non-pecuniary purposes.



What is Reformed Egyptian?

Moroni said, "We have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters that are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech" (Mormon 9:32).

Some Book of Mormon critics scorn this claim of Book of Mormon language, saying, "there is no such language as Reformed Egyptian" — "there has never been a single example found." Is this a case of deliberate misunderstanding? Of course there's no such language! Moroni says, "in the characters which *are called among us* the *reformed* Egyptian — a small "r," an adjective. Thus, Moroni makes plain that they are the ones who have given this name to their written language, a language "that none other people knoweth" (Moroni 9:34). Also, Moroni says they "altered" the Egyptian characters. They called it "reformed" because they had altered it. They were using altered Egyptian characters to write their non-Egyptian language. Again, our detractors will claim that you can't do that. Well, that may be what they *want* their followers to believe, but it isn't what the facts of history support. First let's better understand the concept of a *reformed* language.

There is an interesting people living in several communities of Northern California. They're called Hmongs. They come from the high hill country of Laos. Their language is ancient and to our ears it's hard to recognize it as speech. Moreover, they have no written language — that is, they have not until recently had a written language. Today, they use the characters of the English language to represent the sounds of Hmong. This could be called *reformed English*. Of course, it's not. It really is nothing like English and the characters we use to write English are not *English characters* — they're Roman. In this sense, English is really *reformed Latin*. Roman characters are used to write many languages. They're even used to render Chinese, Japanese, and Hebrew in a form more accessible to English speaking peoples. This also could be called a *reformed Latin*, however, it's generally called *Romanized Chinese*, *Japanese*, or *Hebrew*.

But, Moroni said that they had *altered* the Egyptian characters. This is more than just using these characters to write another language. The characters were altered, perhaps to accommodate some peculiar characteristic of their spoken language. This is exactly what we do when we *Romanize* Hebrew and other languages.

3068. יהוה: **Y^hôvâh**, *yeh-ho-vaw'*; from 1961; (the) self-Existent or Eternal; *Jehovah*, Jewish national name of God:—*Jehovah*, the Lord. Comp. 3050, 3069.
3069. יהוה: **Y^hôvîh**, *yeh-ho-vee'*; a var. of 3068 [used after 186, and pronounced by Jews as 490, in order to prevent the repetition of the same sound, since they elsewhere pronounce 3068 as 186]:—God.
3070. יהוה יראה: **Y^hôvâh yireh**, *yeh-ho-vaw' yir-eh'*; from 3068 and 7200; *Jehovah will see (to it)*; *Jehovah-Jireh*, a symbolical name for Mt. Moriah:—*Jehovah-jireh*.
3071. יהוה נסי: **Y^hôvâh nissee**, *yeh-ho-vaw' nis-see'*; from 3068 and 5251 with pron. suffix.; *Jehovah (is) my banner*; *Jehovah-Nissi*, a symbolical name of an altar in the Desert:—*Jehovah-nissi*.
3072. יהוה צדקנו: **Y^hôvâh tsidqênûw**, *yeh-ho-vaw' tsid-kay'-noo*; from 3068 and 6664 with pron. suffix.; *Jehovah (is) our right*; *Jehovah-Tsidkenu*, a symbolical epithet of the Messiah and of Jerus.:—the Lord our righteousness.

Shown here is an excerpt from Strong's Hebrew Dictionary. The words are first shown in Hebrew characters, followed by a *romanized* representation of the same word. Note, however, that the Roman characters are *altered*. There is an ô, an â, an î, and a û, that are not part of the English alphabet. These letters are part of the *multinational* alphabet. Many will recognize that these and similar letters are used when writing both Spanish and French.

This *Romanized* version of Hebrew fully represents the principle of *reformed Egyptian*. But, are there any examples of the Egyptian characters or script used to record a language other than Egyptian. Of course there are.

William Hamblin, in a FARMS paper titled, *Reformed*

Egyptian,⁽¹⁾ says that "there are numerous examples of modified (or reformed) Egyptian characters being used to write non-Egyptian languages." He discusses five examples. One is particularly relevant: A recently discovered text written in Egyptian characters has been determined to be an Aramaic language rendering of Psalm 20:2-6 — Egyptian characters used to write a biblical text in a Semitic language. This certainly sounds very much like Moroni's *reformed Egyptian*.

Hamblin's most enlightening discussion has to do with the history of modern written language. He refers to three recent publications (1969, 1987, 1988), each of which describe the derivation of modern alphabets from Egyptian hieroglyphics. He tells of the derivation of the Phoenician alphabet from the Egyptian script, the Greek alphabet from the Phoenician, and the Latin from the Greek. He quotes one of these writers as declaring, "the hieroglyphs live on, though in transmute [or could we not say reformed?] form, within our own alphabet."

What is this Book of Mormon Egyptian Connection?

Nephi said, "I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the *language of the Egyptians*" (1 Nephi 1:2). Why is Egyptian here identified by Nephi as his father's language? We would expect that Lehi's language would be Hebrew. Certainly, Moroni implies, some thousand years after Lehi that Hebrew is the spoken language of the Nephite people.

It's now known that the cultural relationship between Israel and Egypt was very close. Egyptian was the language of culture and learning. Thus it is postulated that Lehi, obviously a wealthy and educated man, would be fluent in Egyptian. Further, over the years the theory has been argued that Lehi might have been a trader and as such would have been very much involved in the then existing commerce between Israel and Egypt. All this may be fully true, and appears to be supported by Lehi's familiarity with desert travel, his ability to just pick up and go with little preparation, and even the naming of his sons. Notice, the groupings: Laman and Lemuel, followed by two Egyptian names, Nephi and Sam, then two Hebrew names, Jacob and Joseph. Nibley suggests the possibility of a tribe of *Manasseh* relationship with the names Laman and Lemuel. Are these three pairs of sons each representative of a specific period in the life of their father?

Yes, Lehi was educated and may have been a trader and a traveler, but this doesn't answer all the questions we might have about his association with Egyptian. The trader hypothesis gives good reason for Lehi to know Egyptian, but Nephi called Egyptian "*the language of my father.*" Further, King Benjamin told his sons:

For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings, and teach them to his children, that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so fulfilling the commandments of God, even down to this present time (Mosiah 1:4).

Benjamin says that the Brass Plates were written in Egyptian! Why were they written in Egyptian? They were Hebrew Scripture. They should have been written in Hebrew.

The *word of God* as recorded on these plates was very important and great effort and divine intervention was required to obtain them. But, why was this particular copy of the scriptures so important? A wealthy man, a community leader, a prophet: wouldn't Lehi already have his own copy of Scripture scrolls? Nephi gives us a hint as to the special nature and importance of this particular copy of sacred record. He explains: "And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children *the language of our fathers*" (1 Nephi 3:19).

"The language of *our fathers.*" Can Nephi be saying anything other than, "Egyptian was the language of our fathers"? Remember Nephi's opening declaration concerning language identifies Lehi's language as Egyptian.

As to the Brass Plates, the Book of Mormon says nothing about their origin and little about their history. Our only hint comes again from Nephi's remark that "Laban also was a descendant of Joseph, *wherefore he and his fathers* had kept the records [the brass plates]" (1 Nephi 5:16). Isn't Nephi saying that these Brass Plates were the copy of the Scripture that was maintained by the descendants of Joseph. Robert Millet speculates that it may have been kept by the tribe of Ephraim.⁽²⁾ Brother Millet continues: "In suggesting how it was that the families of Ephraim and Manasseh (from whom Lehi and Ishmael were descendants) came to settle in Jerusalem, Sidney B. Sperry has written:

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians when its capital of Samaria capitulated to Sargon II in 722 BC. The forebears of Laban may have fled to Jerusalem to prevent the sacred records from falling into alien hands. Lehi's grandfather or great-grandfather may have left his northern home for Jerusalem in order to prevent his children from intermarrying and making religious compromises with the foreigners brought into the land by the Assyrians (43-44)."

John Sorenson, in an interesting study of language in Mesoamerica, suggests that the Brass Plate record may have begun with Joseph in Egypt.⁽³⁾ Remember, Joseph's wife was Egyptian, his language and culture were Egyptian, and his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were Egyptian. It would be natural for this family to want a copy of their sacred history written in Egyptian. While our current

biblical record begins with the writings of Moses, this doesn't mean that there was no written record in Joseph's time. Once this Egyptian record was begun, it would be natural for the descendants of Joseph to continue to keep their record in what to them had become the *language of Scripture*. Perhaps, for these descendants of Joseph, Egyptian was even more than the language of Scripture. Nephi said, "the language of our fathers."

How does the Brass Plates Egyptian compare to the Book of Mormon reformed Egyptian? At least by Moroni's time they must have been different. Moroni said that they called it "reformed" because *they* had altered the characters. Was this written language of Moroni the same as the written language of Lehi and Nephi? A thousand years had passed and Moroni says that they had altered both the Egyptian and the Hebrew. Great changes take place in language in just hundreds of years. It would seem probable that Nephi and Moroni wrote in very different languages, even different characters. Perhaps, Nephi's record was not in a *reformed* Egyptian at all. It would seem logical that it would be in the *language of Scripture* that Nephi found on the Brass Plates.

At the same time, it seems obvious that Moroni was not writing in a comfortable and familiar script. He is constantly concerned about "imperfections" in this written record (Mormon 8:17; 9:31, 33; Ether 12:23-25). That Moroni is not expressing an inadequacy in his ability to formulate his thoughts into words is made clear: "and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record" (Mormon 9:33). His concern seems specifically to be this, perhaps unfamiliar and apparently difficult to engrave, language in which Moroni must write. It's his skill in writing (engraving) this *reformed Egyptian*, the difficulty of avoiding mistakes, of making the writing clear and intelligible, this appears to be at the core of Moroni's concern.

Do we today have any copies of these Book of Mormon Egyptian characters? *Maybe*. A document known as the "Anthon Transcript" purports to be such a copy. First a little history.

The Anthon Transcript

Joseph tells us that shortly after receiving the gold plates he made a copy of some of the characters found on those plates, together with their translation. These were given to Martin Harris, a wealthy farmer who had shown interest in Joseph's work. Martin was instructed to take them "to some of the most learned men of this generation and ask them for the translation thereof."⁽⁴⁾

Martin Harris reported that he took these characters to Professor Charles Anthon at Columbia College, in New York City, and to a Dr. Mitchell, probably also in that same city. While little is known of Dr. Mitchell, the identification of Professor Anthon and his credentials are clear. Professor Anthon was, perhaps, the most knowledgeable man in America on the subject of ancient languages.

Martin's story of his visit to Anthon is well known. He reported that he "presented the characters which had been translated, with the translation thereof" to the professor, who "stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian." Martin further reported that Professor Anthon identified the characters as Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic, "and he said they were true characters." Martin then tells of receiving a certificate, "certifying to the people of Palmyra that they were true characters," after which Anthon is reported to have torn up the certificate on learning of the origin of the gold plates.

That Martin did in fact visit Charles Anthon is well attested by two letters from Professor Anthon concerning this visit. In each, Anthon denies that he had told Harris that the characters were legitimate. In addition to Anthon's denial of his claim, there is another problem with Martin Harris' story. He reported that Anthon said that "the translation was correct." Anthon, with all his brilliance and training could not have determined the accuracy of the translation. In 1828 no one in the world "had seen much translated from Egyptian." Further, as Stanley Kimball so colorfully states, "Even a reincarnated Egyptian could not have translated the characters because the 'reformed Egyptian' had

been so changed that 'none other people knoweth our language.'"(5)

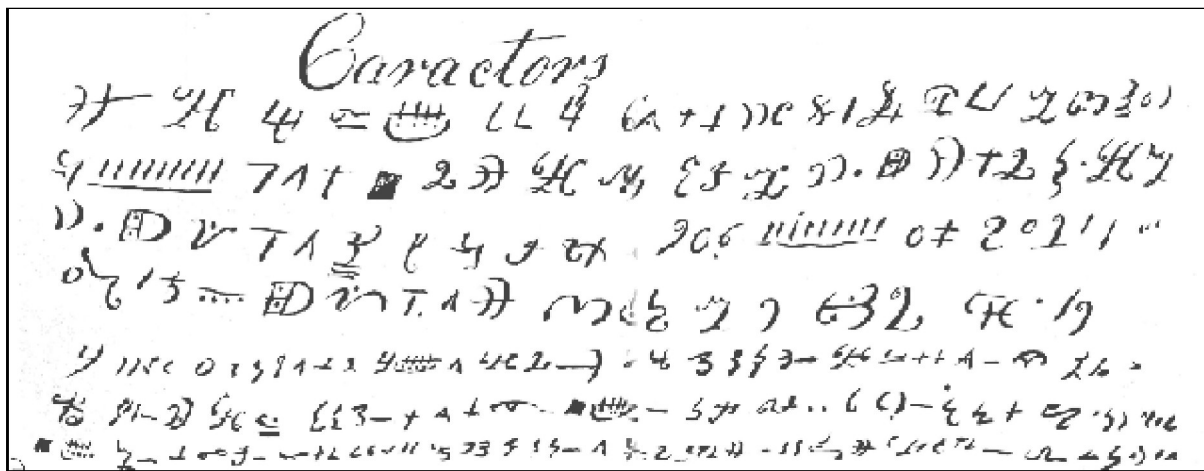
Did Martin just make-up this Anthon response to make Joseph feel good? Not very likely. Martin was a most apprehensive and cautious supporter. Yet, on returning from his visit with Anthon and Mitchell he devoted himself and his means to the support of Joseph Smith's work. He aided in the translation, braved the ridicule of his wife, and he mortgaged his farm to pay for the printing. He later was excommunicated from the church and lived the rest of his life in the shadow of ridicule from both members and non-members. In spite of it all, he never denied his testimony of any aspect of his involvement in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

What about Anthon's two letters denying Martin Harris' report of this visit? Detractors have made much of these letters. Professor Anthon was a respected professional. His declarations as to his statements to Martin Harris must be respected and cannot be lightly set aside. *Or can they?* Remember Anthon wrote two letters. Our critics seldom refer to both. Why? Anthon couldn't keep his stories straight. In his first letter he states that he refused to give Harris an opinion in writing. In the second he describes a written opinion, "given without any hesitation," to the effect that the characters "appeared to be merely an imitation of various alphabetical characters, and had . . . no meaning at all connected with them."(6) Kimball comments, "Aside from Anthon's acknowledged brilliance, the sources reveal him as also a rather crotchety bachelor, a petty taskmaster with no outside interest, and a man of no religious association. The two letters were not written by the detached scholar, but by an uncritical, emotional man trying to rid himself of any connection with people he did not and could not understand."(7)

What happened to the transcript of characters Martin Harris took to Anthon? Years later David Whitmer claimed to have this transcript. Nothing is know of how he might have obtained it. Upon his death it was given to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and remains in their possession. Numerous copies have been widely circulated and commented upon. There are none today who claim the ability to translated this document. However, there are some interesting things that can be said about it.

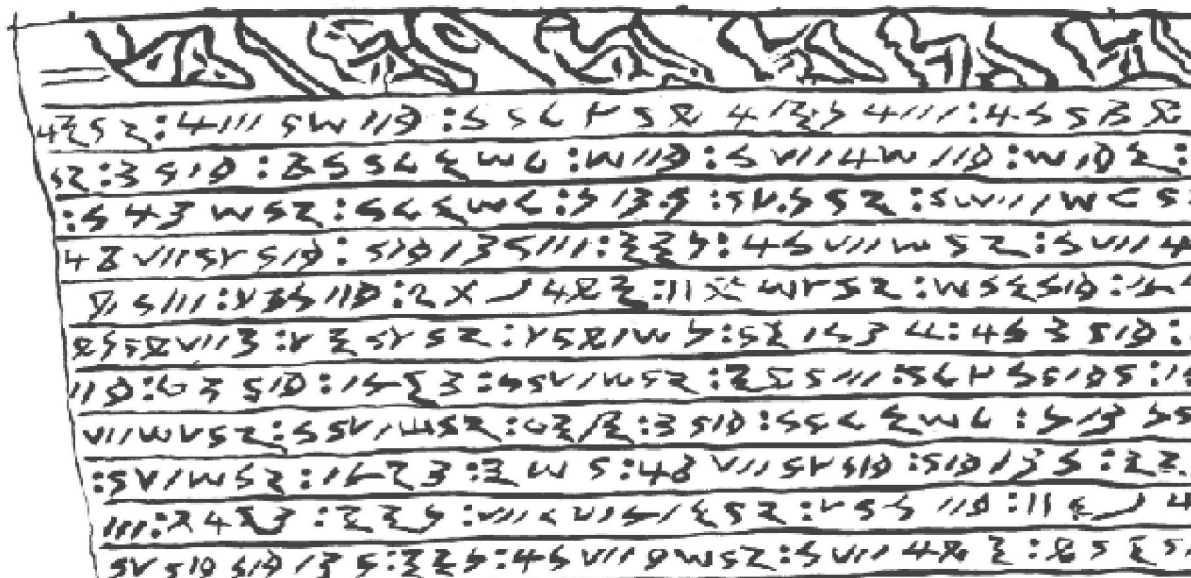
Two Interesting Coincidences

Has Reformed Egyptian Been Found In Africa?



Shown above is a facsimile of the Anthon Transcript. Below is a representation of a portion of an ancient Nubian document (modern Sudan). These people are believed to have escaped from Egypt in about 651 B.C. Their writing, called Meroitic, is recognized to be a modified form of Egyptian script.

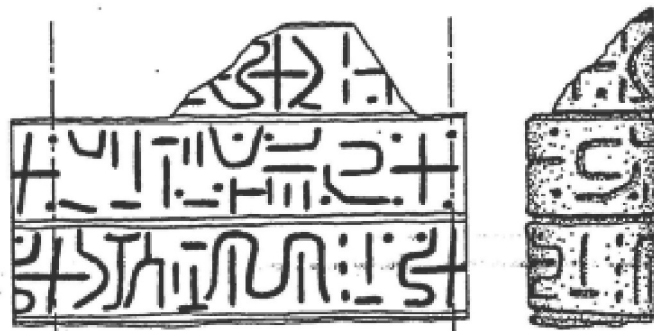
Similar to the Anthon Transcript, the script of this document has also never been deciphered.



Note the similarity in many of the characters in these two documents. Also note the overall resemblance in the two scripts. Remember, each is acknowledged to be a unique modification of its parent Egyptian script.

Anthon Transcript and Mayan Texts

In another interesting coincidence two Mesoamerican cylinder seals have been shown to contain characters that are remarkably similar to the characters of the Anthon Transcript.⁽⁹⁾ A cylinder seal (sometimes called a "roller stamp") is a ceramic cylinder usually embossed with some form of characters or official symbols. Such cylinders were used anciently to record, usually in wax, an official seal. By rolling the cylinder over the wax the words and symbols embossed on the cylinder were imprinted in the soft wax.



Shown here is one of these cylinder seals together with its rolled image. This cylinder was found at Tlatilco in the Valley of Mexico. Of the 28 characters identifiable on this cylinder, 26 have been show to have a close relationship to Anthon characters. The second cylinder, found in La Venta, Tabasco, is but a small fragment with a mere ten characters preserved. However, for

all ten characters, Anthon Transcript equivalents have been identified.

Conclusion

- | Yes, *reformed* Egyptian does exist.
- | Whatever the true opinion of Charles Anthon, something in that experience convinced Martin Harris.
- | We have today a probable example of the Book of Mormon reformed Egyptian characters. The characters shown in that example do bear a strong resemblance to some other characters found in both the old and new worlds.

References:

1. My material on reformed Egyptian has been primarily drawn from *Reformed Egyptian*, by William Hamblin, published by FARMS.
2. Millet, Robert, "The Influence of the Brass Plates," in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, Monte Nyman, & Charles Tate, ed., p. 208.
3. Sorenson, John, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, Noel Reynolds, ed., pp. 450-51.
4. Smith, Lucy Mack, *History of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, (1954), p. 114. See also, Joseph Smith — History, 1:62-63.
5. Kimball, Stanley B. "The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems," *BYU Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 335. Also available in a FARMS paper by the same name. Much of this section of this discussion draws on material found in this paper.
6. Kirkham, Francis W., *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Special Fourth Edition, Vol. 1 p. 420.
7. Op. Cit., Kimball, p. 339.
8. Jones, Carl Hugh, *The 'Anthon Transcript' and Two Mesoamerican Cylinder Seals*. This is a FARMS reprint of a paper presented in 1969 to The Society for Early Historic Archaeology (S.E.H.A). Carl Hugh Jones was at that time the curator of anthropology at the Nebraska State Historical Society. This paper also includes an extensive study of the characters found in the Anthon Transcript.