

What is Reformed Egyptian?

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According to Hugh Nibley, the “father” of contemporary Mormon scriptural and theological scholarship, “The Book of Mormon can and should be tested.”¹ With this statement, one can totally agree.



Background

The Angel Moroni supposedly showed Joseph Smith the location of golden plates, upon which were written the text of the Book of Mormon. Smith claimed it was written in “Reformed Egyptian.” The major problem here is that this language simply does not exist. “Reformed Egyptian” is not a language found in the ancient world. Ancient Egyptian had numerous dialects (Archaic, Old, Middle, Late, Demotic, and Coptic), but a “reformed” dialect was not one of them.

It is likely that Smith may have chosen Egyptian as his source language because he was unaware that French scholar Jean Francois Champollion had recently deciphered the language (the first translation of the Rosetta Stone was not published until 1822). Until that time, hieroglyphs were mysterious and unknown. Although it is speculative to say, Smith may have thought that the language was unreadable and would remain so, and therefore believed his grand story would never be proven false.

Reformed Egyptian and the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon uses the term “reformed Egyptian” in only one verse, Mormon 9:32, which says that “the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, [were] handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech” and that “none other people knoweth our language.”²

The book also says that its first author, Nephi, used the “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2) to write his record which constitutes the first two books of the Book of Mormon. The abridgment that the Book of Mormon says was prepared by Mormon and Moroni nearly a thousand years later in approximately AD 380,

¹ Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed., Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 16.

² The prophet-historian Moroni (Mormon 9:32-34).

containing most of the balance of the book, was written in "reformed Egyptian" because it took less space than Hebrew, which Hebrew had also been altered after the people left Jerusalem.³

However, did the Hebrews who left Jerusalem and came to the Americas speak Egyptian? This is highly unlikely because it is a known fact that the Hebrews spoke Hebrew, and their records were kept in Hebrew. Egyptians were their enemies. It is as absurd to think that Hebrew prophets would have written their sacred history in Egyptian as it is to think that American History would have been written in Russian.

Furthermore, in Mormon 9:32, 34, it is stated that the language was "reformed Egyptian" and that no other people knew their language. There is no known language called "reformed Egyptian."⁴

It is quite interesting that Mormon scholars are quick to point out that other scripts were developed to write Egyptian through the centuries and have hypothesized that the term "reformed Egyptian" refers to a form of Egyptian writing similar to other modified Egyptian scripts such as hieratic, a handwritten form of hieroglyphics thousands of years old by the first millennium BC, or early Demotic, a simplified derivative of hieratic, which was used in northern Egypt fifty years before the time that the Book of Mormon states that prophet-patriarch Lehi supposedly left Jerusalem for the Americas.⁵ A form of Egyptian hieratic, called Palestinian hieratic, was used in Palestine during the time frame of the Lehi departure.⁶ However, the careful scholar will certainly understand that a "hypothesis" is little more than an educated guess and not a proof that can be set in stone.

Although accounts of the process differ, Joseph Smith is said to have translated the reformed Egyptian characters engraved on golden plates into English—*perfect King James English, I might add*—through various means, including the use of a seer stone or the

³ According to the Book of Mormon prophet Moroni (more than a thousand years after Nephi began the record): "And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also ..." (Mormon 9:33)

⁴ Higley, Dennis & Rauni, "The Truth About Mormonism."

<https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/the-truth-about-mormonism/> Retrieved: March 1, 2021.

⁵ Hamblin, William J. (2007). "Reformed Egyptian" (PDF). *FARMS Review*. **19** (1). Archived from the original (PDF) on 2016-05-14. Retrieved 17 March 2017.

⁶ Wimmer, Stephan (2008). *Palastinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebraischen Schrift*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 10–55. ISBN 978-3447058629.

interpreter stones, or both.⁷ Smith later said that when he had finished the translation, he returned the plates to the angel Moroni, and therefore they are unavailable for study.⁸

The Anthon Transcript

The "Anthon Transcript" is a piece of paper on which Joseph Smith is said to have transcribed reformed Egyptian characters from the golden plates—the ancient record from which Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon. A manuscript known as the "Caractors" document was previously thought to be this transcript. However, handwriting analysis has suggested that this document was written by John Whitmer, one of the Eight Witnesses.⁹ Since the actual Anthon Transcript was taken to New York in the winter of 1828, and John Whitmer was not affiliated with the Mormon Church until June 1829, the "Caractors" document therefore cannot be the Anthon Transcript.

Joseph Smith said that when this sample of Reformed Egyptian was presented by his colleague Martin Harris to Columbia College professor Charles Anthon, a noted classical scholar, that Anthon had attested to the characters' authenticity in writing but had then

⁷ Michael Morse, Smith's brother-in-law, said that he watched Smith on several occasions and said his "mode of procedure consisted in Joseph's placing the Seer Stone in the crown of a hat, then putting his face into the hat, so as to entirely cover his face." Michael Morse interview with William W. Blair, May 8, 1879, in *EMD*, 4: 343. Morse was clearly awed by Smith's ability to dictate as he did and called it "a strange piece of work." David Whitmer said that at one point "the plates were not before Joseph while he translated, but seem to have been removed by the custodian angel." David Whitmer Interview with the *Chicago Times*, August 1875, in *EMD*, 5: 21. Whitmer also stated that "after affixing the magical spectacles to his eyes, Smith would take the plates and translate the characters one at a time. The graven characters would appear in succession to the seer, and directly under the character, when viewed through the glasses, would be the translation in English." *Chicago Tribune*, 15 December 1885 in *EMD*, 5: 124. Isaac Hale said that while Joseph was translating, the plates were "hid in the woods." "Mormonism, *Susquehanna Register and Northern Pennsylvanian* 9 (May 1, 1834): 1 in *EMD* 4: 286–87. "No primary witness reported that Joseph used [the plates] in any way." Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 2–5.

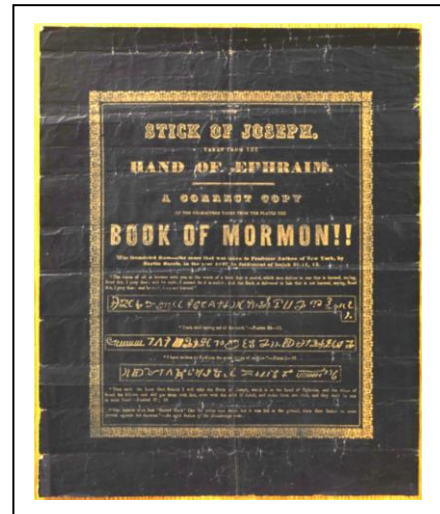
⁸ "Joseph Smith Interview with Peter Bauder, October 1830" in *EMD*, 1: 17; "Joseph Smith Interview with Leman Copley, 1831" in *EMD*, 1: 24–25. Yet even after Smith had returned the plates to the angel, other early Latter Day Saints testified that an angel had also showed them the plates. Grant Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 201. In 1859, Brigham Young referred to one of these "post-return" testimonies: "Some of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, who handled the plates and conversed with the angels of God, were afterwards left to doubt ... One of the Quorum of the Twelve, a young man full of faith and good works, prayed, and the vision of his mind was opened, and the angel of God came and laid the plates before him, and he saw and handled them, and saw the angel." *Journal of Discourses*, June 5, 1859, 7:164.

⁹ "The 'Caractors' Document: New Light on an Early Transcription of the Book of Mormon Characters, *Mormon Historical Studies*, vol. 14, No. 1". *www.academia.edu*. Retrieved 2015-12-09.

ripped up his certification after hearing that the plates had been revealed by an angel.¹⁰ Anthon wrote, to the contrary, that he had believed from the first that Harris was the victim of fraud.¹¹

In 1844, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints published a broadside about the Book of Mormon called "The Stick of Joseph" that reprinted some "reformed Egyptian" characters that resemble those on the first three lines of the "Caractors" document. The broadside said that the characters were those that had been shown to Anthon.¹²

But it is unlikely that the characters on the broadside came directly from the "Caractors" document because Whitmer was excommunicated in 1838 and took his papers with him.¹³



Mainstream Scholars Lampoon Reformed Egyptian

It is interesting that standard language reference works contain *absolutely no reference* to "reformed Egyptian." No non-Mormon scholars acknowledge the existence of either a "reformed Egyptian" language or a "reformed Egyptian" script as it has been described in Mormon belief. For instance, in 1966, John A. Wilson, professor of Egyptology at the University of Chicago, wrote, "From time to time there are allegations that picture writing has been found in America. ... In no case has a professional Egyptologist been able to recognize these characters as Egyptian hieroglyphs. From our standpoint there is no such language as 'reformed Egyptian'."¹⁴

¹⁰ Joseph Smith—History 1:63–65.

¹¹ See *Early Mormon Documents* 4:377–86.

¹² James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 57.

¹³ "Appendix 2, Document 3. Stick of Joseph, 1844," p. [1], The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 16, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-2-document-3-stick-of-joseph-1844/1>

¹⁴ John A. Wilson, March 16, 1966, cited in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), ch. 5. Richard A. Parker, department of Egyptology at Brown University, wrote, "No Egyptian writing has been found in this [Western] hemisphere to my knowledge". Parker to Marvin Cowan, March 22, 1966, in Jerald and Sandra Tanner *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), ch. 5. In the same letter Parker said, "I do not know of any language such as Reformed Egyptian". In 1959, Mormon archaeologist Ross T. Christensen said that

Anthropologist Michael D. Coe of Yale University, an expert in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican studies, has written, "Of all the peoples of the pre-Columbian New World, only the ancient Maya had a complete script."¹⁵ Fifteen examples of distinct writing systems have been identified in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, many from a single inscription.¹⁶

Out on a Limb Suggestions

It is important to remember that Mormon studies of reformed Egyptian are necessarily limited to whatever linguistic evidence can be obtained from the text of the Book of Mormon plus the extant seven-line "Caractors" document that may or may not be the symbols said to have been copied from the gold plates.¹⁷ Although some Mormons have attempted to decipher the "Caractors" document, according to Brigham Young University Egyptologist John Gee, "the corpus is not large enough to render decipherment feasible."¹⁸

"reformed' Egyptian" is a "form of writing which we have not yet identified in the archaeological material available to us". Book of Mormon Institute, December 5, 1959, BYU, 1964 ed., p. 10, cited in Jerald and Sandra Tanner *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), ch. 5. In 1956 a request for review of the Caractors Document was made to three recognized Egyptologists, Sir Alan Gardiner, William C. Hayes, and John A. Wilson. Gardiner replied that he saw no resemblance with "any form of Egyptian writing." Hayes stated that it might be an inaccurate copy of something in hieratic script and that "some groups look like hieratic numerals," adding that "I imagine, however, that the inscription bears a superficial resemblance to other scripts, both ancient and modern, of which I have no knowledge." Wilson gave the most detailed reply, saying that "This is not Egyptian writing, as known to the Egyptologist. It obviously is not hieroglyphic, nor the "cursive hieroglyphic" as used in the Book of the Dead. It is not Coptic, which took over Greek characters to write Egyptian. Nor does it belong to one of the cursive stages of ancient Egyptian writing: hieratic, abnormal hieratic, or demotic."

https://www.academia.edu/31894670/1956_Statements_of_Egyptologists_on_the_Caractors_Document. Earlier in 1956 Hayes had provided his analysis of his assertion of hieratic numerals within the Caractors Document. https://www.academia.edu/38458222/2002_Sunstone_article_Dr._Hayes_analysis_of_Caractors_Document_characters_as_numerals.

¹⁵ Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), preface.

¹⁶ Macri, Martha J. (1996). "Maya and Other Mesoamerican Scripts," in *The World's Writing Systems*. England: Oxford. pp. 172–182.

¹⁷ NOTE: Some Mormons also accept the Kirtland Egyptian papers and Frederick G. Williams note as genuine. "BYU". "100 Years". *Reformed Egyptian*.

¹⁸ See Some Notes on the Anthon Transcript Archived 2016-09-24 at the Wayback Machine by John Gee. Various LDS Church authors have made the attempt. In the February 1942 issue of *Improvement Era*, Ariel L. Crowley, a Mormon attorney from Boise, Idaho, presented evidence that the "Caractors" document characters could be of Egyptian origin. See The Anthon Transcript. He discussed Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic in relation to hieratic and demotic Egyptian, the "Caractors" document characters, and Martin Harris's report that Anthon mentioned those languages when he reviewed the transcript. He also

That being said, we still discover that various Mormon scholars tend quite often to “go out on a limb” with speculations—some quite wild, actually—that they have arrived at a legitimate conclusion as to exactly what Reformed Egyptian actually is. For example, Terryl Givens has suggested that the characters are early examples of Egyptian symbols being used “to transliterate Hebrew words and vice versa,” that Demotic is a “reformed Egyptian,” and that the mixing of a Semitic language with modified Egyptian characters is demonstrated in inscriptions of ancient Syria and Palestine.¹⁹ Other Mormon apologists have suggested that the characters resemble those of shorthand (!) for various languages²⁰ including Hebrew,²¹ Demotic (Egyptian),²² Hieratic (Egyptian),²³ Coptic (Egyptian),²⁴

presented 194 pairs of photographs comparing characters from the Anthon Transcript with similar or identical characters in recognized Egyptian works such as the *Book of the Dead* and the Rosetta Stone. Stan and Polly Johnson, in the book *Translating the Anthon Transcript* (Parowan, Utah: Ivory Books, 1999) argue that the Anthon transcript corresponds to Ether 6:3–13 in the present Book of Mormon. However, John Gee notes that if the so-called Anthon transcript is the actual piece of paper that Martin Harris took to Charles Anthon, it is safe to assume that the characters came from the text they were then translating (the 116 missing manuscript pages, which contained a record from the time of Lehi to the time of King Benjamin). Thus, Ether should not be a logical source for the transcript's contents. See Some Notes on the Anthon Transcript by John Gee.

¹⁹ Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 132–33.

²⁰ Tracking the White Salamander - Chapter 6 Part A. Utlm.org. Retrieved on 2010-12-12; The Anthon Affair by Jerome J. Knuijet. Thedigitalvoice.com (2000-04-15). Retrieved on 2010-12-12; The Anthon Transcript - SHIELDS. Shields-research.org (1969-11-13). Retrieved on 2010-12-12; Stubbs, Brian Darrel (1992), “Book of Mormon Language”, in Ludlow, Daniel H (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, New York: Macmillan Publishing, pp. 179–181, ISBN 0-02-879602-0, OCLC 24502140; Archived September 27, 2010, at the Wayback Machine.

²¹ David E. Sloan (1996). “The Anthon Transcripts and the Translation of the Book of Mormon: Studying It Out in the Mind of Joseph Smith.” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. 5 (2): 57–81. Archived from the original on 2010-03-01. Retrieved 2010-12-12; “Some Problems Arising from Martin Harris’ Visit to Professor Charles Anthon” (PDF).

²² See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 149–150, and archive.

²³ Later in E.B. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled*, Anthon recalled that the characters were not hieroglyphics. See Anthon Transcript and *David E. Sloan* (1996). “The Anthon Transcripts and the Translation of the Book of Mormon: Studying It Out in the Mind of Joseph Smith”. *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. 5(2): 57–81. Archived from the original on 2010-03-01. Retrieved 2010-12-12.

²⁴ “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters – Maxwell Institute JBMS”. Archived from the original on 2007-06-07. Retrieved 2007-06-14.

Mayan/Olmec,²⁵ and Irish ogham ciphers.²⁶ Hugh Nibley argued that a "revealed text in English" is preferable to trying to understand the original language.²⁷

Astounding! One would almost think that the entirety of these Mormon scholars might be Irish—and that they have repeatedly “kissed the blarney stone” with these wild contrivances! To suggest that they have crawled “out on a limb” is putting it mildly. It reminds me of the old debating technique: If you cannot win the argument with facts, then smother your opponent with baloney!

At least one Mormon scholar, David Bokovoy, makes a more reasonable assertion—*albeit a wrong one*—that because the word "reformed" in the Book of Mormon text is not capitalized, it should not be seen as part of the title of the language, but an adjective describing the type of Egyptian that Nephi used. "According to this definition," Bokovoy argues, "archaeologists have uncovered important examples of reformed Egyptian, including hieratic and Demotic."²⁸ In addition, he references a verse in which Moroni states that the initial writing had been changed over the years:

“And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech. ... But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof.”²⁹

Thus, it appears the Moroni himself was the very first one to befuddle the facts! Tsk! Tsk!

²⁵ Anthon in *Mormonism Unveiled*, compared the characters to Mexican calendars. See "*New Light: "Anthon Transcript" Writing Found?*". *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. 8 (1): 68–70.

²⁶ [Review of William L. Moore "Mitchill Affair" Article](#). Solomonspalding.com. Retrieved on 2010-12-12.

²⁷ "A revealed text in English is infinitely to be preferred to an original in a language that no one on earth could claim as his own. It frees the members and leaders of the Church as it frees the investigating world from the necessity of becoming philologists or, worse still, of having to rely on the judgment of philologists, as a prerequisite to understanding this great book. At the same time, it puts upon the modern world an obligation to study and learn, from which that world could easily plead immunity were the book in an ancient language or couched in the labored and pretentious idiom that learned men adopt when they try to decipher ancient texts." Hugh Nibley, "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study," *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (1989), 97.

²⁸ "The FARMS Review 18/1 (2006)". Archived from the original on 2019-05-12. Retrieved 2019-03-13.

²⁹ Mormon 9:32, 34.