



Type: Magazine Article

---

## New Approaches to the Book of Mormon Study, Part VII

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 57, No. 5 (May 1954)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 308–309, 326, 330

---

**Abstract:** This series vividly displays internal and external evidences to test whether the Book of Mormon is or is not a forgery, using the standard scholarly criteria for detecting forged writings. The author offers insightful comments on methodology for studying the Book of Mormon, evaluating evidence, using newly discovered documents, metal plates, literary criticism, poetry, lower criticism, and history. Nibley also comments on animals, weights and measures, and the use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon. The seventh part discusses the original language and translation of the Book of Mormon.

# New Approaches to BOOK OF MORMON Study

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

PART 7

AT PRESENT the problem of the original language of the Book of Mormon is one which seems to be stirring considerable interest in some quarters. It would be a very difficult, and perhaps a useless task to separate possible Egyptian elements in the Book of Mormon from the Hebrew elements. For one thing, Egyptian influence is now known to have been far stronger in Hebrew itself than we hitherto supposed,<sup>79</sup> so that when we think we are dealing with a Hebraism, it might well be an Egyptianism as well, and who is to say whether the Egyptian flavor of the text is not actually stronger than the Hebrew? Such speculations are a waste of time however, in view of Mormon's declaration that his people have altered the conventional ways of writing both Egyptian and Hebrew to conform to their own peculiar manner of speech, i.e. both the writing and the language had been changed, so that the prophet can state that none other people knoweth our language. (See Mormon 9:32-34.) Nephite was simply Nephite, as English is English, whatever its original components may have been.

Why all this concern, then, about the language or languages of the Book of Mormon? If we had the original text, which we do not, and if we could read it, which we cannot, any translation we might make of it would still be inferior to that which we have given, as we claim it was, by the gift and power of God. If we had the original text, scholars would be everlastingly squabbling about it and getting out endless new and revised translations, as in the case of the Bible. In fact, if our English text of the Book of Mormon came to us in any other way than by revelation it would be almost worthless! For members and investigators could ask of every verse: "But how do we know it is trans-

lated correctly?" 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.

To the question, "What was the original language of the Book of Mormon?" The real answer is: it is English! For the English of the Book of Mormon comes by revelation, and no one can go beyond revelation in the search for ultimate sources. Let us, then, rejoice in the text we have and

not attempt to reconstruct it in Hebrew or Egyptian so that we can then analyze and translate what we have written!

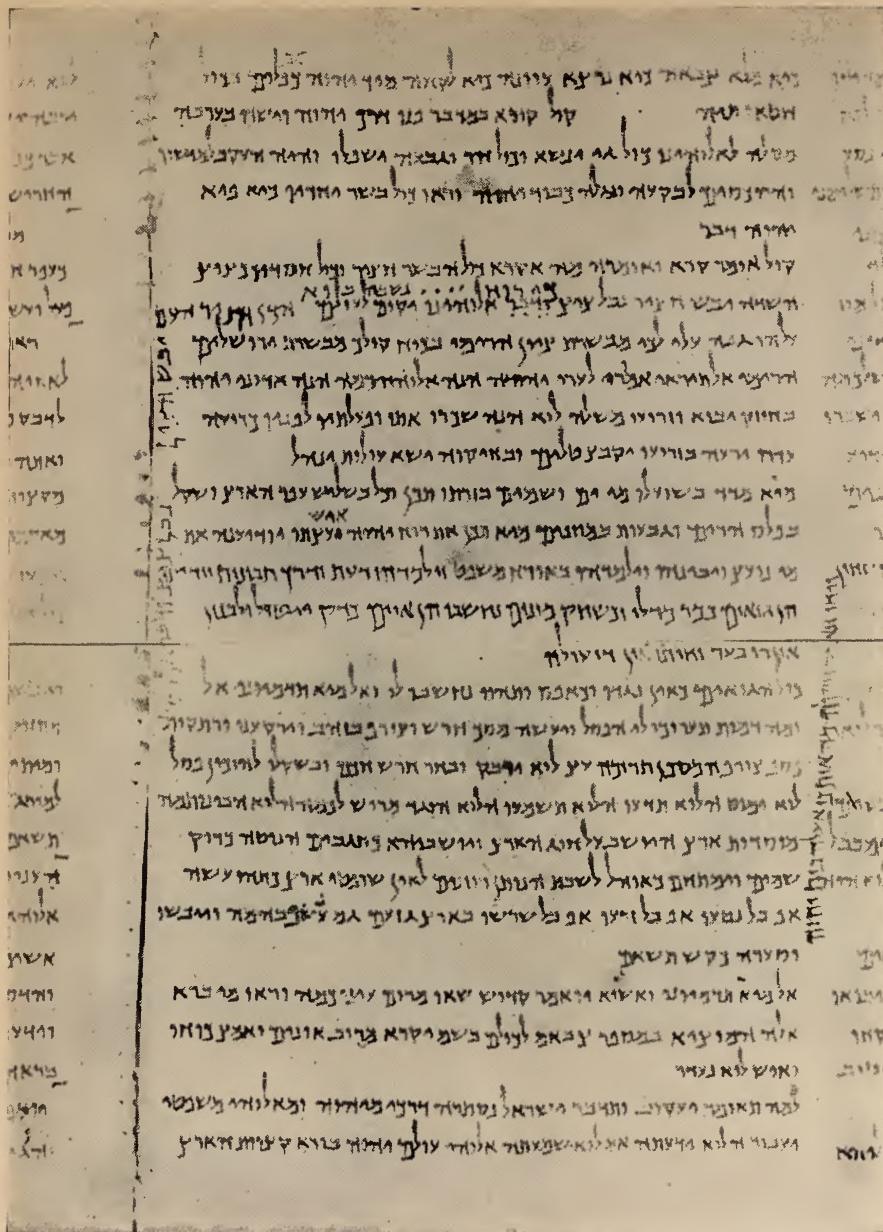
Yet, lest anyone charge the Book of Mormon with claiming to be beyond criticism, it supplies us with a goodly number of untranslated words that still await the attention of the philologist. There are the proper names, divided, as we have already noted, almost equally between Egyptian and Hebrew, which is what we would expect in view of Nephi's and Mormon's remarks about both languages being used and corrupted by the Nephites. In regard to Hebrew names, D. W. Thomas in 1950 confirmed our own observation in *Lehi in the Desert* (p. 33), that "the strong tendency (of Book of Mormon names) to end in *-iah* is very striking, since the vast majority of Hebrew names found at Lachish end in the same way, indicating that *-iah* names were very fashionable in Lehi's time."

Thomas notes that a "striking" peculiarity of Hebrew names in the age of Jeremiah is "the many personal names which end in *-iah*."<sup>80</sup> The same authority observes that the Lachish fragments prove the language of Zedekiah's time to have been classical Hebrew of a type which "aligns itself more especially with . . . the Book of Jeremiah," thereby vindicating the long-questioned accuracy and antiquity of the Biblical records that purportedly come down to us from the time of Lehi.<sup>81</sup>



—Photograph by John C. Trever. Courtesy, "The Biblical Archaeologist."

The Isaiah Scroll, one of the priceless documents found by the Bedouin of Palestine, is being examined by Dr. John C. Trever, director of the Department of the English Bible for the International Council of Religious Education. These Scrolls are in possession of Athanasium Yeshue Samuel (right), of the Syrian Metropolitan.



—Courtesy "Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research."  
A reproduction of a page from the Isaiah Scroll.

A well-known peculiarity of Book of Mormon names is that a very large percentage of them end in -m or -n. A glance at a name-list will show that mimmation is overwhelmingly favored for Jaredite names, while nunation is the rule for Nephite and Lamanite ones. Within the past year, Jirku has declared that it is now known for certain that mimmation was still current in the Semitic dialects of Palestine and Syria between 2100 and 1800 B.C., when the nominative (the subjective) case singular still ended in -m.<sup>82</sup> From Egyptian and Hittite records it is now clear that the dialects of Palestine and Syria dropped this mimmation in the first half of the second millennium B. C. This old -m ending is preserved in the Bible only

in a few pre-Hebrew words used in incantations and spells: *Teraphim*, *Sanwerim*, *Urim*, and *Thummim*.<sup>83</sup> It is significant to Latter-day Saints that the last two words are not, as has always been supposed, Hebrew plural forms, but are archaic words in the singular. This means that the conventional attempts to determine the nature of Urim and Thummim from classical Hebrew are worthless and, as Jirku points out, that Urim and Thummim stands for two single implements or objects, and not for a multiplicity of things. To judge by proper names in the Book of Mormon, the language of the Jaredites was related to a pre-Hebrew mimmated language that has left its

marks in a few very old and holy words in the Old Testament.

On no point have we been more often assailed since the appearance of the "Lehi" articles than our liberal use of the word *Jew* to describe Lehi and his contemporaries. A Jew is a member of the tribe of Judah, it is true, but that is not the whole story. The name is applied by experts today to any citizen of the ancient Jewish state or of Jerusalem, no matter what his tribe; to any inhabitants of Judaea, no matter what his tribe, religion, or citizenship; to anyone accepting the Jewish religion, no matter what his family background; to anyone descended from a family that had once practised that religion, no matter what his present religion. The subject has recently received full treatment at the hands of Professor Solomon Zeitlin, whose conclusions may be helpful. The term *Hebrew*, according to Zeitlin, is never applied to the Israelites either in the Law or the Prophets.<sup>84</sup>

After the exile the people were called Judaeans, only rarely Israel, and "later the name *Israel* disappears, and that of *Jews* takes its place entirely." In the time of Josephus, all inhabitants of Judaea, whether Jews or not, were called Judeans, and in the Second Commonwealth all proselytes were also called Judaeans (*Jews*).<sup>85</sup> At that time the country itself was called *ha-eretz*, "the Land," as it is today, and the people were never called either Hebrews or Israelites. "The term *Jews* was applied in Egypt to the inhabitants who settled there and followed the same religion as the inhabitants of Judaea," regardless of ancestry or country of origin.<sup>86</sup> "When Paul was in Judaea," says Zeitlin, "he called himself a Judacan . . . while when he was in the Diaspora he called himself a Hebrew or Israeli, as the people (*Jews*) of the Diaspora did."<sup>87</sup> Since the Christians called themselves Israelites from the beginning, the Jews in order to combat their claims readopted the name of Israel, which they have employed freely to the present time.<sup>88</sup>

Throughout history, the determining factor of what makes one a Jew has always been some association with the geographical area of Judaea, and since ". . . Lehi . . . dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days" (1 Ne. 1:4), the best possible designation for him is *Jew*,

(Continued on page 326)

## NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

(Continued from page 309)

regardful of his ancestry. Nephi's formula, "the Jews who are at Jerusalem," makes it perfectly clear that he was acquainted with other settlements of Jews, and in his use of the term one may detect an undeniable feeling of detachment, if not of hostility, towards those city Jews. The Lachish Letters distinguish between the Jews of the country and the Jews of the city, and this distinction is also found in Nephi's account.

In Omni 15, we read that "... the people of Zarahemla came out from Jerusalem at the time that Zedekiah, king of Judah, was carried away captive into Babylon." Though this agrees with II Kings 25:7 and Jeremiah, scholars have doubted it. "Before the Chaldaean army laid siege to Jerusalem," according to Albright, "the Jewish King died or was assassinated, and his young son, Jehoiachin, went into exile in his place."<sup>89</sup>

It is with considerable surprise the experts now learn that in the Babylonian lists of prisoners brought to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem "Jehoiachin is called 'the son of the king' of Judah," instead of king. While, according to Thomas, "it is possible that this is a mere scribal error," Weidner "suggests that the designation . . . may have been deliberately chosen, the Babylonians regarding Zedekiah as the legitimate king of Judah."<sup>90</sup> Along with that, it is notable that in the Book of Mormon Zedekiah plays absolutely no role at all, all government and dirty work being left, apparently, entirely to "the elders of the Jews." This view is substantiated in a new book by Hoelscher, who shows Zedekiah as a helpless puppet in the hands of "the potentates at the court, who now appear as sworn enemies of the Prophet whose predictions of disaster they regard as treasonable."<sup>91</sup> The prophet in question was Jeremiah, whom Lehi supported, thereby incurring the wrath of the same "elders" who attempted to liquidate him as well as Jeremiah. Hoelscher tells us that Jeremiah met with the weak king "in secret interviews," vainly attempting to persuade him to give up the fatal alliance with Egypt.<sup>92</sup> The decision of policy in "secret interviews" is exactly what we meet with in First Nephi, where the

elders hold their councils in the deep of night. The "hysteria and gloom" that reigned in Lehi's Jerusalem are further reflected in an Aramaic letter discovered at Saqqarah in 1942 and dating from the time of Jeremiah: King Adon appeals to Pharaoh for aid in the very same terms that his ancestors used in calling upon Egypt in the Amarna age, centuries before: "The armies of the King of Babylon have come, they have reached Aphek . . . do not forsake me."<sup>93</sup>

The Babylonian lists of prisoners to which we have just referred contain, along with the Jewish names, a respectable proportion of Egyptian names. This is what we find in the Book of Mormon name list as well, but the resemblance goes farther, for the Egyptian names in the Old World list show, according to D. H. Thomas, that it was popular at the time to name children after famous Egyptian rulers of the past.<sup>94</sup> If the reader will consult our section on "Strange Names" in *Lehi in the Desert*, he will discover that a surprisingly large number of Egyptian names found among the Nephites were those of early Egyptian kings and heroes. The legendary first king of Egypt was Aha, whose name means "warrior," and, significantly enough, in the Book of Mormon this name is bestowed by a Nephite commander-in-chief on his son. Other royal and hero-names in the Book of Mormon are Himni, Korihor, Paanchi, Pakumeni, Sam, Zeezrom, Hem, Manti, Nephi, Zenoch. Zeniff is certainly cognate with Arabic Zaynab, best-known from the Latinized name of Zenobia, next to the Queen of Sheba the most famous woman of the East.

The Babylonian captive-list also includes Philistine, Phoenician, Elamite, Median, Persian, Greek, and Lydian names—all sweepings of a campaign into Lehi's country.<sup>95</sup> The variety of name-types in the Book of Mormon is thus well substantiated. Another list of names showing the same variety of national types as the Babylonian and Book of Mormon rosters is the much earlier Tell Ta'anek list, in which the element *bin* is prominent, e.g. Bin-da-ni<sup>2</sup>-wa (cf. Book of Mormon Abinadi), as well as the -zi-ra and -andi combinations, the latter interpreted as East Canaanitish.<sup>96</sup>

Lehi's life in the desert receives

new illustration steadily with new studies and explorations in the sand. In a recent study, Shalem has shown that the best evidence for the stability of climatic conditions in the East is the Bible itself; Shalem claims that man himself has been the main factor in changing the climate of Palestine from time to time, and notes that there has been a "capital change" of climate in that country as a result of the return of the Jews to the Land in our own time. Yet even while he pleads for the scriptures as the best guide to the understanding of the problem, this investigator passes by the words of the prophets in silence.<sup>97</sup>

As if they had not done enough already, our invaluable Scrolls supply the best explanation to date for Lehi's peculiar fondness for the desert. As a merchant and a Manassite he cannot have escaped something of a desert background, but how do his exploits on the sand fit with his status as an orthodox Jew? From the Scrolls we learn that there existed among the Jews certain groups distinguished for their piety, prophetic zeal, and annoying insistence on a literal and not-too-distant coming of the Messiah. The Apocrypha teach us that such groups and such teachings were not confined to any one period of Jewish history but run like a scarlet cord through its whole texture. "Almost all our fathers," says Nephi, the son of Helaman, "testified of the coming of Christ, and have looked forward, and have rejoiced in his day which is to come."

Now the Scrolls teach us that such holy men and their followers were wont to organize themselves in "encampments," actually living "outside the towns in desert regions," where "they lived if not actually in tents at least in very simple dwellings. They thus avoided the corruption of the towns and once again realized the ideal of the nomad life handed down in the oldest of Israel's traditions."<sup>98</sup> As Israel of old, they were deliberately escaping from the wicked world to the air of the desert, carrying out in the life of the tent dwellers a symbolism which the Latter-day Saints preserve to this day when they speak of the "stakes" and the "center stake" of Zion. The earliest Arabic commentary on government is a poetic exposition in which, according to

(Continued on page 330)

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

## NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

(Continued from page 326)

Noeldeke, we find not a brief for kingship but the "truly Arabic" concept of a free society in which the best rule by consent of all the governed:

No people are well off without proper leadership;  
And there are no leaders when the more ignorant rule.  
As the tent cannot be set up without poles,  
And the poles cannot stand without the tent-stakes round about,  
Even so, when both poles and stakes cooperate,  
In that day has been achieved the goal which before  
Was only partly attained.\*

(To be continued)

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

\*Thus Albright, following Gardiner notes that the recently discovered Chester Beatty Papyri prove the Song of Songs to be of Egyptian origin, W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press), p. 21.

\*\*D. W. Thomas, in *Palest. Explor. Quart.*, 1950, p. 2.

\*\**Ibid.*, p. 4.

\*\*A. Jirku, "Die Mimation in den nordsemitischen Sprachen und einige Bezeichnungen der altisraelitischen Mantik," *Biblica*, XXXIV (1953), pp. 78f.

\*\**Ibid.*, p. 80.

\*\*Solomon Zeitlin, "The Names Hebrew, Jew and Israel: a Historical Study," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XLIII (1953), 367, it is

used only in connection with slaves or with foreigners (non-Jews).

\*\**Ibid.*, p. 368.

\*\**Ibid.*, pp. 369f.

\*\**Ibid.*, p. 371.

\*\**Ibid.*, pp. 374f.

\*\*W. F. Albright, "A Brief History of Judah from the Days of Josiah to Alexander the Great," *Biblical Archaeologist*, Feb. 1946 (IX.i), p. 2.

\*\*D. W. Thomas, in *Palest. Explor. Quart.*, 1950, p. 5.

\*\*G. Hoelscher, *Geschichtsschreibung in Israel* (Lund, 1952), p. 193.

\*\*See *Lehi in the Desert*, pp. 112f.

\*\*D. W. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 8. The remarkable resemblance of this to the Amarna letters, upon which Thomas comments, justifies occasional use of Amarna material to illustrate the Book of Mormon, notably with regard to proper names.

\*\**Ibid.*, p. 7.

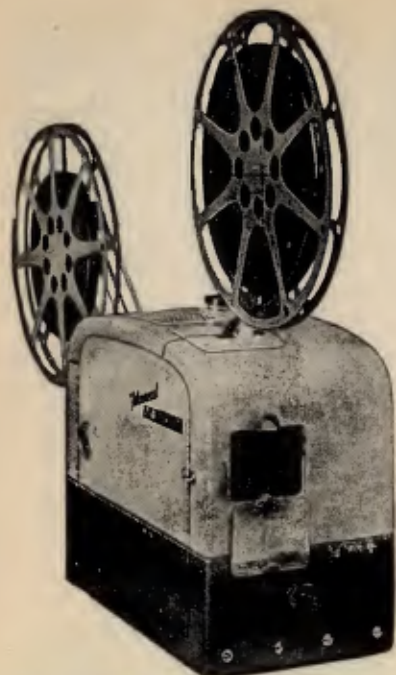
\*\**Loc. cit.*

\*\*A. Gustavs, "Die Personennamen in den Tontafeln von Tell Ta'annek, I," in *Ztschr. des Dt.-Palästina-Vereins*, 50 (1927), and 51 (1928), pp. 191, 198, 207. There are 9 Subaraean, 5 Asia Minor (Hittite), 1 Egyptian, 1 Sumerian, 1 Iranian, 1 Kossaeen, 1 Indian, 10 Akkadian (Babylonian), 21 Canaanitish, 2 Amorite, and 5 Arabic (Aramaic?) names, *ibid.*, pp. 209f.

\*\*N. Shalem, "La Stabilité du Climat en Palestine," *Revue Biblique*, LVIII (1951), 54, 74.

\*\*Dupont-Sommer, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

\*\*Th. Noeldeke, *Delectus Veterum Carminum Arabicorum* (Berlin, 1890), p. 4, with note.



See the "Specialist" at  
**DESERET BOOK COMPANY**

Your Bell and Howell  
Special Representative

(See full page advertisement on the  
"Specialist" on opposite page.)

## Complete Film Offerings

•  
**Feature Films**  
for Ward Entertainments

•  
**Educational Films**  
for use in M. I. A.—

**Relief Society**  
**Primary and**  
**other classes**

**Deseret**  
**BOOK CO.**

44 E. So. Temple  
**DIAL 3-6716**

**Audio-Visual Aids**  
1400 Indiana Avenue

## THE FACE OF KITTY FRANKLIN

(Continued from page 324)

any more. He brings liverwurst sandwiches to eat for lunch almost every day. Sometimes he wrinkles his forehead when he listens, like he is thinking real hard. He is a good top spinner. His nose is kind of long but seems to come to a sudden stop. . . ."

These youngsters! What devastating observers they were! It was, by and large, Miss Barlow couldn't help but think, good, clean fun, with the chips falling where they might. Only, of course, the presence of Kitty Franklin made it different. It would only be natural for her to be extra sensitive about things.

Now it was Ellie Winters who was reading her essay. "Sam Leland is a good ball player and can hit the ball far. He wears a heavy red sweater with a hole at the elbow. He spills the ink from his inkwell sometimes. Miss Barlow scolds him because he doesn't write too good and

is sloppy about things. I think his father is a fireman or something. . . ."

More than half of the essays had been read, now. Sooner or later she'd have to call on Joe Woodlin. It occurred to Miss Barlow that it would be best not to wait until the very end to call on Joe. For one thing, that in itself might call attention to it, might make sweet little Kitty feel more self-conscious than ever.

Marilyn Johnson was reading now: "Susie Goldson is almost my best friend. She goes to camp for two weeks in the summer. Her folks are pretty rich and live in a kind of big brick house. They have a big collie dog. Susie isn't so smart in school, but she is good about sharing her lunch. She got something in her eye the other day. She can't seem to understand fractions. . . ."

Miss Barlow always had had the feeling that there was something just

(Continued on page 332)

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA