



Type: Magazine Article

---

## Notes on the Book of Mormon III

Author(s): J. M. Sjodahl

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 30, No. 8 (June 1927)

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

Page(s): 696–700

---

**Abstract:** This series discusses the gold plates, the burial of the plates at the Hill Cumorah, the Urim and Thummim, the characters on the plates, Joseph Smith's preparation for translation, the scribes, and manuscripts. The third part covers the characters on the gold plates.

# NOTES ON THE BOOK OF MORMON

— BY J. M. SJODAHL

## III.

*The Characters.* The letters on the plates, commonly called "characters," were a modified, or re-formed Egyptian alphabet. This must be inferred from the Book of Mormon itself. Nephi's statement (1 Nephi 1:2): "I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians," when read in the light of the explanatory note of Mormon: "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" (Mormon 9:32)—can only mean that the authors of the book used the Hebrew language, which, however, gradually had changed as all languages do, and that they wrote it in some form of Egyptian characters.\*

*Facsimiles.* During the time of December, 1827, and the following February the Prophet Joseph, then living on his farm near Harmony, Penn., copied a number of the characters, and translated a few of them, by means of the interpreters. When Martin Harris arrived in Harmony, in February, 1828, the Prophet gave him two specimens. Martin Harris, evidently anxious to know the truth for himself, proceeded to New York and submitted them to the inspection of Professor Charles Anthon, of the Columbia College, and also to Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell, two eminent scholars. That the interview was perfectly satisfactory to Martin Harris, notwithstanding the account later published by Prof. Anthon, is proved by the fact that Harris joined the Church, after having assisted the Prophet to the utmost of his ability in the publication of his translation of the work.

*Two Prints Extant.* In the Church Historian's office, Salt Lake City, there is a photographic reproduction of a print, which purports to be a facsimile of one of the specimens which Martin Harris took to New York.† The characters are arranged in three horizontal lines. The document is known to have been in the possession of the Patriarch Hyrum Smith. Unfortunately, it contains an historical error in the statement that Martin Harris interviewed Prof. Anthon in 1827, whereas the date given in the Pearl of Great Price is February, 1828.

---

\*"This little colony brought with them from Jerusalem their ancient Scriptures engraved in Egyptian characters, on brass plates"—Orson Pratt, *Mill. Star*, vol. 38, p. 692. They were, consequently, familiar with some form of Egyptian letters.

†*Essentials of Church History*, by Joseph Fielding Smith; p. 63.

Another facsimile, containing a greater number of characters, is reproduced in Elder B. H. Roberts' *History of the Church*, published in the *Americana*.

Prof. Anthon, a few years after the interview with Martin Harris, repudiated the true story told by this gentleman, but in such a way as to throw doubt either upon the reliability of his memory or his veracity. The repudiation came in a letter to Mr. E. D. Howe, of Paynesville, Ohio, dated New York, Feb. 17, 1834, and it was intended for an anti-Mormon publication. In this letter he is alleged to have said of the paper brought to him by Martin Harris:

"This paper, in question, was in part a singular scroll. It consisted of all kinds of crooked characters, disposed in columns, and had evidently been prepared by some person who had before him at the time a book containing various alphabets, Greek and Hebrew letters, crosses, and flourishes; Roman letters inverted or placed sideways, were arranged and placed in perpendicular columns; and the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle, divided into various compartments, decked with various, strange marks, and evidently copied after the Mexican calendar, given by Humbolt, but copied in such a way as not to betray the source whence it was derived. I am thus particular as to the contents of the paper, inasmuch as I have frequently conversed with my friends on the subject since the Mormon excitement began, and well remember that the paper contained anything else but 'Egyptian hieroglyphics.'" (*Mormonism*, by N. W. Green, Hartford, 1870, page 426.)

We owe Prof. Anthon a debt of gratitude for this minute description of the "scroll" he refers to. It proves, in the first place, that Martin Harris, in fact, had an interview with him; so there can be no doubt as to that. But it proves, in the second place, that the paper which the professor repudiates could not possibly have been the one submitted by the "plain farmer." Read the description again. Prof. Anthon says the "singular scroll" had characters copied from Hebrew, Greek, Roman, etc., alphabets, by someone who had the book containing such alphabets before him. That lets the young boy, Joseph Smith, and his associates at that time out of the case; for neither of them had, at that time, any such literature before them. He says the characters were arranged in "perpendicular columns." That is evidently not the case in the published facsimiles. Finally, he says the whole ended in a rude delineation of Humbolt's reproduction of the Mexican calendar. That proves positively that the paper Prof. Anthon is talking about is not the one Martin Harris exhibited. For neither Joseph nor any of his friends at that time was a student of Humbolt, and there is no picture, crude or otherwise, of the Mexican (Aztec) calendar stone on the facsimiles of Book of Mormon characters, now extant in print, and they were, unquestionably, the kind of, if not the very identical, characters which Martin Harris had in his possession.

Is it possible that someone had perpetrated a hoax on the professor, and, under an assumed name, submitted a paper such as that described in the Howe letter, just to accommodate Mr. Howe? Or was Prof. Anthon's memory so treacherous that it made him give a totally

fictitious description of the paper Martin Harris presented? The latter of these alternatives is the more probable; the first is not altogether impossible?

*Dr. Plongeon versus Prof. Anthon.* Dr. Augustus le Plongeon did not treat the characters with the contempt Prof. Anthon seems to have felt. In a letter to Elder D. M. McAllister, Salt Lake City, dated 18 Sidney Place, Brooklyn, June 20, 1892, Dr. Augustus le Plongeon writes, in part:

"I have carefully examined the characters on the plates from which the Mormon book was translated.

"Although several resemble some on the old monuments and in the Maya codices, still the characters of the writings are in no way similar to that of the Mayainscriptions, or those on the tablets of Palenque. It seems to me they bear more similitude to the Old Phœnician. Still I am free to say that the following are found in the Maya writings:

"~ (n), ɹ, or ɹ, or ɹ, ma (Egyptian and Maya), 'the land,' 'the country;' 𐎠 (h) Ah, 'the male,' or 'the powerful;' ɹ or ɹ (t), symbol of Maya Tem, altar, or Egyptian T. ~ This is the most significant. It is found in the Maya books, ~, where it has the meaning of 'The lands of the West;' that is, North and South America, and the lost Land of Mu (Atlantis), indicated by the dot in the midst of the Ocean, contained within the shores of the Western continent from New Foundland and Cape St. Roque in Brazil."

In a note, Dr. Plongeon adds that a certain compound sign would in Maya glyphs mean Ah-tem, "he of the altar, either God, or the priest."

There is no reason to believe that Prof. Anthon knew a great deal about the Egyptian language or the literature of ancient America; but whatever may be said of Dr. Plongeon, he certainly must be recognized as a Maya scholar, and as such his criticism of the characters has considerable weight.

*Egyptian Characters.* A few words about the Egyptian characters may aid us in obtaining a better understanding of the relation of the Book of Mormon to the Egyptian.

The oldest Egyptian writings are pictures called hieroglyphs. Some tell us they were in use as far back as four thousand years before our era. In this writing a circle would represent the sun; a crescent, the moon; an oval, an egg; the picture of a man and a woman, mankind, and so on.

Those glyphs were also used symbolically. The circle repre-



senting the sun, could also stand for a "day," and the crescent, representing the moon, could stand for a "month." The picture of a pen and an ink-stand could mean "to write." The picture of a bee might mean "royalty," that of a vulture "mother," and that of a species of serpent, "God."

Most of the glyphs were used also as letters, representing elementary sounds. An eagle stood for "a," a human foot and leg for "b," etc. But the Egyptians were not satisfied with only one sign for each sound. They used a great many. Altogether they had in the neighborhood of a thousand hieroglyphs. They sometimes wrote in vertical columns, but more often in horizontal lines, either from left to right or from right to left. The figures were facing the side from which the lines were to be read.

*The Hieratic Alphabet.* A thousand signs were, of course, too much for practical purposes. Consequently, a smaller number, gradually, became more popular, as it were, than the rest, and were used to denote vowel and consonant sounds. Their forms, little by little, assumed simpler characteristics. The picture of the eagle, for instance, became only a line bent so as merely to suggest the outline of the bird. The same happened to other pictures. After a while forty-five such simplified characters had been adopted, and they have become known as the hieratic alphabet. This system of writing is also very old. It is known to present-day scholars chiefly from a manuscript in the National Library, Paris, called Papyrus Prisse, supposed to be one of the oldest books in existence. It was found in a tomb of Thebes, Egypt.

*Demotic Signs.* The Egyptians also had a third system of writing, generally called the demotic. This has been traced as far back as 900 B. C., and must have been known in Egypt and neighboring countries at the time of the emigration of Lehi from Jerusalem. It was really reformed hieratic Egyptian, simplified for social and business purposes. Gradually it became popular, and it was necessary to write royal decrees, intended for the people, in demotic characters in addition to the hieratic or hieroglyphic, which was understood only by scholars. The famous Rosetta stone has an inscription in hieroglyphs, demotic and Greek letters.\*

*Phoenician Characters.* Another modified or reformed Egyptian originated in all probability in Phoenicia. Phoenicians, with their practical business sense, feeling the need of fewer and simpler letters than those used in Egypt, picked out twenty-one of the hieratic characters, re-modeled and re-named them. In this way, according to the French Egyptologist, Emmanuel de Rouge, originated the oldest Semitic alphabet. It has been called the Phoenician or Old Israelitic

---

\*The Rosetta stone was found in 1779, but not until more than twenty years afterwards did Champollion begin to solve its riddles. Akerblad in 1802, and Young in 1818 announced the results they had obtained. Egyptology was in its very infancy when Martin Harris, in 1828, visited Professor Anthon in New York.

alphabet. As a matter of fact, it was Egyptian, reformed in Phoenicia and adapted to the needs of Semitic speech.

*Aramean.* In course of time the Old Israelitic was superseded by the Aramean characters, possibly through the influence of Ezra, as Jewish tradition avers. The square Hebrew letters now in use are the offspring of the Aramean, and they are, consequently, in fact, reformed Egyptian.

In Egypt, too, the reformed script known as the demotic, or encorian, superseded the hieratic to such an extent that, at the time of Herodotus, about 450 B. C., only the hieroglyphic and the demotic characters were known outside a small circle of scholars.† It is evident, therefore, that the writers of the Book of Mormon did in America what scholars in Egypt and Asia had done before them: They modified the Egyptian hieratic characters, or the Old Israelitic, which were themselves reformed Egyptian, to suit their purposes. It was the most natural thing for them to do.

---

## The Flowers of May

The rainbow's arch oft illumines the sky,  
While over the prairies the colors fly  
    To bring me the flowers of May.  
The raindrops, glowing like gems and pearls  
On plummy grasses and leafy whorls,  
Their colorful gleam in each hue unfurls  
    To bring me the flowers of May.

The foot of the rainbow rests in the grass,  
While cheerily over the spring showers pass  
    To bring me the flowers of May.  
The robins and redbirds arrive and sing,  
The orioles flash with a flaming wing;  
The buds of the prairie are wakening  
    To bring me the flowers of May.

What hope the Spring-time is bringing to me!  
A wonderful joy is in all I see,  
    And bringing the flowers of May!  
Then come with thy sunshine so glad and gay,  
And come with thy flowers in their bright array—  
For May-time will bring me my wedding-day  
    Mid the beautiful flowers of May!

JOSEPH LONGKING TOWNSEND.

---

†E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Egypt*, vol. 6, p. 198. Scribner's *Bible Dictionary*, under "Alphabet."