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Language of the Nephites

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Abstract: Compares two views concerning the language of the Nephites: (1) people wrote and spoke Egyptian; or (2) they wrote Hebrew words in Egyptian characters. Sees Hebrew roots in the following Book of Mormon words: Ziff, Rameumpton, Sheum, Gazelem, and Rabbanah.

LANGUAGE OF THE NEPHITES.

BY G. R.

THERE appears to be a slight difference of opinion among students of the Book of Mormon, with regard to the language of the ancient Nephites. We will endeavor to give a sketch of both ideas.

One class of enquirers affirm, that it is evident from a careful study of the Book of Mormon, that the people of Nephi were greatly influenced by the language and ideas of the Egyptians. That language was the language of their every-day life, altered or "reformed" (whether corrupted or improved cannot be told) so greatly in the course of time, that in his day, Moroni informs us no other people knew it (570).* In the thousand years that had elapsed between the exodus of Lehi from Jerusalem, and the abridgement of the record, the Nephites had altered the Hebrew also, so that neither their sacred nor their common mode of speech could be understood by other races.

At the very opening of the inspired record, Nephi writes: "I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father." A little further on he explains what that learning was. He says: "I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning (literature) of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1). King Mosiah in after years, confirmed this statement: that Lehi was "taught in the language of the Egyptians" (160). It would be rather unreasonable to suppose that the knowledge of that language carried no further influence than to enable the Nephites to converse in it. It brought them *en rapport*, so to speak, with those who used it in its native home in Africa, evidences of which yet exist in the Egyptian types of architecture and hieroglyphics found in the midst of the ruins of the ancient cities, scattered far and wide over this Western Continent. This similarity has been noticed again and again by explorers and students, but its cause still remains to them an unsolved problem. To the believers in the Book of Mormon the mystery stands revealed. †

Other students incline to the opinion that when the Egyptian language is mentioned, it probably only means its orthography. They say the Jews seem to have understood the Egyptian language or writing (see Mosiah i. 4): "For he (Lehi) having been taught in the language of the Egyptians, therefore he could read these engravings" (the brass plates). Laban and his forefathers must have understood the Egyptian, and recorded their sacred writings, from generation

*—The figures refer to pages in the Book of Mormon, new edition.

†—"No claim has been advanced we believe, which advocates an actual Egyptian colonization of the New World, but strong arguments have been used to show that the architecture and sculpture of Central America and Mexico have been influenced from Egypt, if not attributable directly to Egyptian artisans."—*J. T. Short.*

"The hieroglyphics, symbols and emblems which have been discovered in the temples bear so strong a resemblance to those of the Egyptians, as to encourage the supposition that a colony of that nation may have founded the city of Palenque or Culhuacan."—*Jaurros.*

Giordan found "the most striking analogies between the Central American and Mexican remains, and those of the Egyptians. The idols and monuments he considers of the same form in both countries, while the hieroglyphics of Palenque do not differ from those of ancient Thebes."

to generation, in that language. The words "language of the Egyptians," very probably means little more than Egyptian characters or alphabet for spelling Hebrew words. There seemed to be two sets of characters—the Egyptian and the Hebrew (see Mormon ix., 32 and 33) for spelling; but it is doubtful whether the words written were words of two distinct languages, or words of one language written in the Egyptian and Hebrew characters. Which was the fact is not clearly specified.

There are but few Nephite words handed down to us in the Book of Mormon, as wherever an English equivalent could be found, it has been given by the prophet in his inspired translations. Those words are:

Neas and Shenm	(182)	Kinds of grain.
Ziff	(186)	A metal.
Rameumptom	(328)	A holy stand.
Gazelem	(346)	A name given to a servant of God.
Liahona	(347)	A ball or compass.
Rabbanah	(288)	A title, meaning powerful king.

Also the names of their coins, and proper names of persons, places, etc.

Some would-be-wise folks have seen fit, at different times, to amuse themselves at the expense of these words, applying to them various contemptuous terms, and styling them gibberish, etc. But we propose to shew that these words are derived from the Hebrew and Egyptian tongues, neither of which, all men admit, were known to the Prophet Joseph Smith, at the time he published the Book of Mormon (A. D. 1829). Had he been worldly wise, he might by his own learning have fashioned these words; but, as he was not, when we can adduce evidence that they have true Hebrew or other ancient roots, we have brought forward another strong argument in favor of the inspiration of the translation.

It has been wisely said, "It is very evident that pure words of either the Hebrew or Egyptian tongues could hardly be expected in the Book of Mormon, for the reason that the Nephites had altered the Hebrew, and their language was so completely changed, that their speech could not be understood by other races. But although the structure of their language had thus changed, it does not follow that all the words had been replaced by others entirely unlike the former language, spoken and written by them. It is logical to expect many remnants of the ancient roots, which, however much changed, may retain so much of their original types as to be capable of identification. Thus, in the word *Ziff*, which the Prophet Joseph tells us was a metal, we find a word of the same sound as the Hebrew word *Ziph* or *Zeph*, which means a metal. The metal laid over statues was so-called. It is true that the word *Ziff* is not spelled the same, but in its orthography is like the name of the Hebrew month, *Ziff*. But the word *Ziff* means brightness—metallic brightness." (The word is used in Daniel ii., 31, also in Isaiah xxx., 22, where it means overlaying metal).

Rameumptom was the name given by the Zoranite apostates to the elevated place in their synagogues, from whence they offered up their vain-glorious and hypocritical prayers. Alma states the word means "a holy stand." It resembles, in its roots, Hebrew, and also Egyptian, in a remarkable manner: *Ramoth*, high (as Ramoth Gilead), elevated, a place where one can see and be seen; or, in a figurative sense, sublime or exalted. *Mptom* has probably its root in the Hebrew word translated *threshold*, as we are told that the Philistine god, Dagon, had a threshold in Ashdod (see I. Samuel, v., 4-5). Words with this root are quite numerous in the Bible. Thus

we see how Rameumptom means an exalted place to stand upon, a pulpit or holy stand.

Shemm—a kind of grain, is singularly like the Hebrew Shum (garlic), as found in Numbers xi., 5.

Gazelem appears to have its roots in Gaz—a stone, and Aleim, a name of God as a revelator or interposer in the affairs of men. If this suggestion be correct, its roots admirably agree with its apparent meaning—a seer. The text reads: "And the Lord said, I will prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light, that I may discover unto my people who serve me, that I may discover unto them the works of their brethren: yea, their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations."

Rabbanah is another wonderful word. It is the title applied by the servants of King Lamoni to Ammon, the son of Mosiah, after his miraculous exploits at the waters of Sebus. It is translated "powerful or great king." Whether it was a Nephite or Lamanite word is uncertain, as the Lamanites of that age (B. C. 91) had been taught by royal command in the language of the Nephites. It is, however, of little moment to which of these kindred tongues it belonged, but its Hebrew derivation is most unmistakable. Its origin is evidently in *abba*, father. Max Muller, the great modern authority on such points, says the word king originally meant father; having doubtless taken this form in the earliest patriarchal days when the king ruled by right of his fatherhood, and represented God, the Great Father of us all. This ancient American word confirms Professor Muller's statement; while it manifests how remarkably the unities of the Book of Mormon are preserved, consistent only with its claim to Divine inspiration. It would be the height of folly to ascribe such a coincidence to chance; a man must be far more credulous to so believe, than it can possibly be claimed such are who place implicit confidence in the realities of Nephite and Lamanite history.

To prove how great an influence the Hebrew has had in forming many of the languages spoken by the modern descendants of Lehi, we will here give a few examples from one dialect—the Chiapenic, and while we do, we wish it to be understood that this is not a solitary instance, but only one specimen among many of the great resemblance between the dialects of the modern American native races and the ancient Shemitic tongues.

HEBREW.	ENGLISH.	CHIAPENIC.
Abba	Father	Abagh.
Elab	God	Elab.
Maloc	King	Molo.
Ben	Son	Been.
Bath	Daughter	Batz.
Chanan	Afflicted	Chanam.
Chabic	Rich	Chabin.
Chi	More	Chic.
Votan	To give	Votan.

From the few examples of words and names before us, we judge the Lamanite language to have been quite musical. Such names as Rabbanah, Lamoni, Lehonti, Middoni, Antionum, Onilah, etc., are certainly specimens of a soft, flowing, pleasing form of speech.

One practice, that of word building, or adding several words together to form a new word, which combination gave expression to the desired idea, obviously obtained among the Lamanites. As examples we have the city of Lehi-Nephi, the village of Ani-Anti and the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi.

Such a practice is frequent among many families of their modern representatives. It was found to exist among the Mexicans—the Aztecs—by the early Spanish invaders and to-day is practiced by our near neighbors the Shoshones. This habit explains the reason for the existence of so many words of great length found in both of these tongues.

ONLY.

Only a seed—but it chanced to fall
In a little cleft of a city wall,
And, taking root, grew bravely up,
Till a tiny blossom crowned its top.

Only a flower—but it chanced that day
That a burdened heart passed by that way,
And the message that through the flower was sent
Brought the weary soul a sweet content;

For it spoke of the lilies so wondrously clad,
And the heart that was tired grew strangely glad
At the thought of a tender care over all,
That noted even a sparrow's fall.

Only a thought—but the work it wrought
Could never by tongue or pen be taught;
For it ran through a life like a thread of gold,
And the life bore fruit—a hundred-fold.

Only a word—but 'twas spoken in love,
With a whispered prayer to the Lord above,
And the angels in heaven rejoiced once more,
For a new-born soul "entered in by the door."

ENIGMA.

BY J. B. BLUTH.

My first is in rat, but not in mouse;
My second in eagle, but not in hawk;
My third is in den, but not in house;
My fourth is in fish, and also in shark;
My fifth is in shoe, but not in boot;
My sixth is in beast, but not in brute;
My whole is a place where the Lord displayed
His wondrous power to man,
Where a wicked host found a watery grave
When pursuing God's chosen band.

THE answer to the Enigma published in No. 14 is SISTER. We have received correct solutions from Wm. G. Brewer, Henneferville; Louisa P. Harris, Harrisville; Wm. Varley, Hot Springs, Nancy H. Hunt, St. Charles; Matilda Weeks, Kewanee, Ills.; Thos. C. Jones, Maggie E. Harman, Wm. Wood, Jr., Salt Lake City.

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