

Possibilities of a Reformed-Egyptian Version of the Small Plates

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Abstract

There is evidence that the small plates included in the plate stack created by Mormon and Moroni and found by Joseph Smith were not exclusively the original small plates, but rather were a version that included a set that had been translated/interpreted into reformed Egyptian. This evidence includes the reported appearance of the plate stack by modern-day witnesses, the fact that Mormon and Moroni² did not seem to prefer using reformed Egyptian, Book of Mormon figures' apparent lack of knowledge of prophecies recorded in the small plates, the presence of an interpreted term in the small plates section, the presence of a narrative voice, the selective use of prefaces, the textual consistency of the Book of Mormon, a general absence of reference to the small plates in the Book of Mormon, and the evidence that knowledge of Egyptian was lost at some point, which would have resulted in the necessity of using reformed Egyptian.

The prophet Moroni² describes the Book of Mormon as having been written in a script referred to as reformed Egyptian (Mormon 9:32). Having completed a variety of research books involving the Book of Mormon plate stack and its metallurgy, as well as linguistic elements of the Book of Mormon text,¹ a

¹ See, for example, Jerry D. Grover, *Ziff, Magic Goggles, and Golden Plates* (Provo, UT: Grover Publishing, 2015), <http://bmslr.org/ziff-magic-goggles-and-golden-plates/>; Jerry D. Grover, *Translation of the "Caractors" Document* (Provo, UT: Grover Publishing, 2015), <http://bmslr.org/translation-of-the-caractors-document/>; and Jerry D. Grover, *Sumerian Roots of Jaredite-Derived Names and Terminology in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Challex Scientific Publications, 2017), <http://bmslr.org/sumerian-roots-of-jaredite-derived-names-and-terminology-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

simple question arose in my mind: why did Mormon and Moroni₂ write the Book of Mormon in reformed Egyptian instead of Egyptian? Answering this question would be relatively easy if we could assume that Mormon and Moroni₂ simply did not know Egyptian. It seems, however, that they did: apparently included in the Book of Mormon plate stack were the small plates of Nephi₁, in which Nephi₁ made his record in the language of the Egyptians (Nephi 1:2), and Mormon clearly understood what Nephi₁ had written. Nephi 1:2 also indicates that the language of the Egyptians was also the language of his father, Lehi₁. Nephi₁ made that statement around 557 BC or shortly thereafter (2 Nephi 5:28–31, 34), after he had been in the New World for some time. The large plates of Nephi₁, which were started after reaching the New World but before the small plates (1 Nephi 19:1; 1:17), formed a continuous record that was maintained through much of the Nephite history. This record was a principal source for Mormon's abridgement. Nephi₁ does not indicate what language was used for the large plates.

There is no indication from Joseph Smith or any other modern witnesses of the plates that the language inscribed on the plates took different forms (that is, both Egyptian and reformed Egyptian, recognizing that both forms of writing would have been foreign to the witnesses). Thus it seems possible that the small-plate section of the Book of Mormon plate stack was also written in reformed Egyptian. This would of course mean that the original small plates, which were inscribed by Nephi₁ in Egyptian, were likely not in the Book of Mormon stack as found by Joseph Smith. It is worth exploring the possibility that the original small plates were not in the Book of Mormon plate stack and that the small plates there were a set that had been interpreted into reformed Egyptian; if this theory is proved correct, it may provide some answers to some difficult questions that have bedeviled Book of Mormon researchers for years.

The Inclusion of the Small Plates in the Plate Stack by Mormon

A close reading of what Mormon actually said regarding the small plates is important. He states:

3 And now, I speak somewhat concerning that which I have written; for after I had made an abridgment from the plates of Nephi, down to the reign of this king Benjamin, of whom Amaleki spake, I searched among the records which had been delivered into my hands, and I found these plates, which contained this small account of the prophets, from Jacob down to the reign of this king Benjamin, and also many of the words of Nephi.

4 And the things which are upon these plates pleasing me, because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ; and my fathers knowing that many of them have been fulfilled; yea, and I also know that as many things as have been prophesied concerning us down to this day have been fulfilled, and as many as go beyond this day must surely come to pass—

5 Wherefore, I chose these things, to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the plates of Nephi; and I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people.

6 But behold, I shall take these plates, which contain these prophesyings and revelations, and put them with the remainder of my record, for they are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren.

7 And I do this for a wise purpose; for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now, I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will.

8 And my prayer to God is concerning my brethren, that they may once again come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ; that they may once again be a delightsome people. (Words of Mormon 1:3–8)

Mormon obtained the large plates of Nephi when he was about 24 years old (circa 335 AD) (Mormon 1:4), and he personally took up all the records that Ammaron had hidden up in the hill Shim between 375 and 380 AD (Mormon 4:16, 23, 5:6). Mormon comments that he found the small plates

after he had completed his records “down until the reign of king Benjamin” and after he had searched the “records which had been delivered into my hands” (Words of Mormon 1: 3). Presumably these records were the ones spoken of from the hill Shim; however, an alternate interpretation that they came from elsewhere can be made, based on the language that they were “delivered into my hands,” as opposed to Mormon personally getting the records. Thus the abridgement up to king Benjamin was completed prior to the 375–380 AD period, which is also the period when Mormon renounced his military position and thus would have had time to concentrate on his abridgement.

At this juncture, Mormon indicates only that the plates “contained this small account of the prophets.” He does not specifically indicate that they were exclusively the original plates, and he does not formally call them the “small plates.” However, after a textual continuity break indicated by the phrase “and now I” in verse 9, Mormon seems to indicate that “these plates” identified in verse 3 contained the same original physical plates (also identified as “these plates” in verse 10), which were delivered into the hands of King Benjamin that were then passed down to eventually fall into Mormon’s hands:

9 And now I, Mormon, proceed to finish out my record, which I take from the plates of Nephi; and I make it according to the knowledge and the understanding which God has given me.

10 Wherefore, it came to pass that after Amaleki had delivered up these plates into the hands of king Benjamin, he took them and put them with the other plates, which contained records which had been handed down by the kings, from generation to generation until the days of king Benjamin.

11 And they were handed down from king Benjamin, from generation to generation until they have fallen into my hands. And I, Mormon, pray to God that they may be preserved from this time henceforth. And I know that they will be preserved; for there are great things written upon

them, out of which my people and their brethren shall be judged at the great and last day,
according to the word of God which is written. (Words of Mormon 1:9–11)

Thus, it would seem that the small plates included in the Book of Mormon plate stack included the originals engraved in Egyptian (at least Nephi₁'s portion) or at least were part of a plate set that included the originals. Based on the discussion by Mormon that he only looked through the records to locate these plates, it does not seem that Mormon would have been the person to have interpreted/translated the plates; the discussion seems to imply he just included the small plate stack as it was. He clearly was able to recognize them and read them. Alternatively, it is also possible that Moroni₂ later included or substituted in the plate stack a version of the small plates that had been translated into reformed Egyptian.

Because this alternative textual interpretation—that there was a reformed-Egyptian version of the small plates in the stack—is not specifically indicated, in order to be better considered as a possibility, additional supporting evidence is needed .

Evidence for a Reformed-Egyptian Version of the Small Plates

Mormon Finishes “His Record upon Them”

One interpretation of verse 5 indicates that Mormon is finishing the balance of his record upon the small plate stack, implying that he is engraving the Words of Mormon on these very plates. If that is the case, it is evidence that these plates are not the original plates, since the original plates were “full” at the time the last author (Amaleki) finished his record (Omni 1:30). To have any additional space for writing is indicative that the plates Mormon had were not the original plates.

An alternate interpretation of verse 5 would be that in the line “I chose these things, to finish my record upon them,” “these things” refers to the prophecies of the coming of Christ and other prophecies mentioned in verse 4. This interpretation is also not incompatible with a reformed-Egyptian version of the small plates.

Moroni₂ Does Not Identify Standard Egyptian as a Script Option for Any of the Plates

Moroni₂ identifies only two potential script languages for the record—reformed Egyptian and an altered form of Hebrew. Standard Egyptian is not identified as an option, which seems to indicate that original Egyptian was not a language that writers of the plates were capable of using, although it is possible that the nature of the Egyptian script (that is, cursive) didn't lend itself easily to engraving on metal plates. Because hieratic and Demotic Egyptian were primarily logographic languages, they were more compact than a syllabic or alphabetic language (like Hebrew). Because Moroni₂ mentions in verse 33 that the plates could not be written in Hebrew because of the size constraints of the plates, it seems likely that if they had used a more compact language like hieratic or Demotic Egyptian, Moroni₂ would have mentioned that language instead of an altered form of Hebrew.

32 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.

33 And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record.

34 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. (Mormon 9:32–34)

Reformed Egyptian Was Not a Preferred Script Language by Moroni and Mormon

Reformed Egyptian does not appear to have been preferred by Mormon or Moroni₂. Moroni₂ states, for example, that the reformed Egyptian would cause “imperfections in the record” and was also problematic because “none other people knoweth our language” (Mormon 9:34).

Moroni₂ further laments the utilization of the reformed Egyptian because it was apparently difficult to write (although the difficulty may have also been due to the process of engraving on metal plates), and he records that he and his father stumbled “because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:25):

23 And I said unto him: Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them;

24 And thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. Behold, thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them.

25 Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words. (Ether 12:23–25)

Mormon also indicates that the use of the reformed Egyptian resulted in deficiencies in expression: “And I know the record which I make to be a just and a true record; nevertheless there are many things which, according to our language, we are not able to write” (3 Nephi 5:18). Thus, a reasonable argument can be made that had standard Egyptian been available to them, they would have likely used that language instead of the reformed Egyptian.

Moroni₂'s Treatment of His Contributed Portion of the Plate Stack

There is indication that the plates of the brother of Jared that were included as the sealed portion in the plate stack are at least the interpreted version (Ether 4:5), not necessarily exclusively the original plates

of the brother of Jared. This notion would be consistent with the small plates being similarly interpreted with an interpreted version included in the Book of Mormon plate stack.

5 Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to write them; and I have written them. And he commanded me that I should seal them up; and he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters, according to the commandment of the Lord.

6 For the Lord said unto me: They shall not go forth unto the Gentiles until the day that they shall repent of their iniquity, and become clean before the Lord.

7 And in that day that they shall exercise faith in me, saith the Lord, even as the brother of Jared did, that they may become sanctified in me, then will I manifest unto them the things which the brother of Jared saw, even to the unfolding unto them all my revelations, saith Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of the heavens and of the earth, and all things that in them are. (Ether 4:5–7)

Since Moroni₂ did not know how to write in the original language of the brother of Jared, by necessity his inclusion of the things he wrote and sealed up must have been in reformed Egyptian (or perhaps altered Hebrew). He also sealed up “the interpretation thereof,” which appears to be a reference to the interpreters.

The Uniform Appearance of the Plate Stack

As previously mentioned, none of the modern persons who described the Book of Mormon plate stack indicated there was any difference in size, color, or plate thickness in any portion of the observable stack (except the sealed portion). The binding of the stack was also uniform and consisted of a set of three uniform D-shaped rings that went through holes in each of the plates. If the original small plates from one thousand years earlier had been included, one might expect there to be some observable differences in color, thickness, or script. One might even expect a difference in size; however, since the

large plates were started by Nephi and were maintained thereafter, Mormon and Moroni may have used a standard size of plate established by Nephi's plates when creating their abridgments and comments.

One possibility, discussed by Neville, is that the small plates were not in the original stack recovered by Joseph Smith but were later divinely delivered to him. But since the individuals who witnessed the plates did so primarily after Joseph Smith's translation, the small plates would have been part of the collection at the time they witnessed them, even if they had been delivered separately prior to translation.²

General Absence in the Subsequent Scriptural Record

While there are numerous mentions of the large plates of Nephi in the Book of Mormon, both implicit and explicit, particularly as being physically passed down from father to son, there is no mention of the small plates anywhere outside of the small plates (except in the Words of Mormon). This suggests that the original small plates were not linguistically available as a source of sacred text in mid to late Book of Mormon times. Hilton has discussed the possible uses of a few phrase fragments used by king Benjamin that are common with Jacob, a prophet in the small plates;³ however, if accurate, they could just as well as come from the large plates used in Mormon's abridgement, so this does not establish the availability of the small plates to king Benjamin. Similarly, Spencer believes he has found some scattered typological thematic connections and assumes that they were from small plates, basically ignoring the fact that similar themes may have been present in the large plates.⁴ As a practical matter, neither set of original

² Jonathan Neville, *Whatever Happened to the Golden Plates*, North (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

³ John Hilton III, "Jacob's Textual Legacy," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 52–65.

⁴ Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute of Religious Scholarship, 2016), 125–40 .

plates (large or small) were available to Zeniff, so the only possibilities are that copies of these plates were carried with Zeniff when he departed or that copies remained in the land of Nephi among the Nephites who remained when Mosiah₁ fled from the land of Nephi.⁵ It is clear that the Zeniffites had access to portions of the brass plates, as sections of Isaiah were cited in Abinadi's confrontation with Noah and his priests (Mosiah 12–16). Prior to Spencer, Gardner and Goff noted similarities with the beginning of Zeniff's record and Nephi₁'s record, with Gardner recognizing it may have come from the large plates instead of the small plates.⁶

Roesler notes that 1 Nephi 1:8 and Alma 36:22 are nearly identical and notes (citing others) that it is feasible that Nephi copied some of his original large plate record onto the small plates since he began the small plates after first recording thirty years of history and prophecy on the large plates (1 Nephi 19:1–2; 2 Nephi 5:28–30).⁷ Thus, there are no indications of any exclusive availability of the small plates to later prophets or Book of Mormon characters.

The Interpretation of Irreantum

The inclusion of *Irreantum*, with its “interpreted” meaning (“Irreantum, which, being interpreted, is many waters”) in the small plates, is consistent with the original small plates having gone through a process of translation/interpretation using the interpreters (1 Nephi 17:5). Hoskisson and others have suggested that *Irreantum* is a South Semitic name and that it would have thus been Nephi₁ who inserted

⁵ Jerry D. Grover, *Evidence of the Order of Nehor in Mesoamerica* (Provo, UT: Challex Scientific Publishing, 2017), 65–72.

⁶ Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 3:227; Alan Goff, “Historical Narrative, Literary Narrative—Expelling Poetics from the Republic of History,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 85–86.

⁷ Rebecca A. Roesler, “Plain and Precious Things Lost: The Small Plates of Nephi,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (Summer 2019): 85–106.

the interpretation, likely because his people in the New World would not have understood the term.⁸ While that is possible, it is equally likely that the definition was added as part of a later interpretation/translation of the small plates of Nephi¹.

The only other names in the Book of Mormon that the writers clearly state were “interpreted,” implying they underwent a translation process using the interpreters, are *Rameumptom* (interpreted from the language of the Zoramites), *Deseret* (interpreted from the original language of the Jaredites), *Rabbanah* (interpreted from the language of the Lamanites), *Ripliancum* (interpreted from the language of the Jaredites on the twenty-four plates), and *Liahona* (interpreted from “the language of our fathers”) (Alma 31:21; Ether 2:3; Alma 18:13; Ether 15:8; Alma 37:38). All these terms required interpretation because the original languages were not understood at the time. In the case of the Zoramites, the overall language may have been understood, but the specific name *Rameumptom* was not understood. The interpretation of *Ripliancum* and *Deseret* from the Jaredite language(s) establishes that the textual term “by interpretation” requires the use of the interpreters, since there is no other way by which those Jaredite terms could have been understood by the Nephites. The interpreted terms (especially the Jaredite terms) are from languages not understood by the Nephites. Thus, it is textually consistent to assume that *Irreantum*, as part of the small plates, was also interpreted (not translated), which is consistent with notion that the small plates in the plate stack underwent a process of interpretation using the interpreters.

The Interpretation of Liahona

The word *Liahona* had to be interpreted from “the language of our fathers” (Alma 37:38). The term would not have been found in the brass plates because the *Liahona* postdates them, so “the language of

⁸ Paul Y. Hoskisson, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, “What’s in a Name? Irreantum,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11 (2002): 90.

our fathers” probably refers to Egyptian or one of the potential Semitic languages known to the Lehites (Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, etc.). This is clearly evidence that there had already been a significant shift in the language understood at the time of Alma₂.

Because Alma₂ had to interpret the term *Liahona* (“which is, being interpreted, compass”) for readers, at the time of his discussion of the Liahona (circa 76 BC), the small plates had apparently not been interpreted/translated. Nephi₁ in the small plates had specifically called the object a “compass” (1 Nephi 18:12, 21; 2 Nephi 5:12), and this fact was apparently unknown to Alma₂, precipitating the necessity of interpretation of the term by Alma₂. The mere fact that the term *Liahona* had to be interpreted indicates that the language of the small plates was not understood by the people at the time of Alma₂ and that the “language of the fathers” (at least in this case) was not understood.

Mormon indicates that the small plates were passed down from king Benjamin from “generation to generation” all the way to Mormon, along with the other sacred records and relics, so it is pretty clear that Alma₂ had possession of the small plates. Either one has to assume that he was neglectful and didn’t bother to read them, which would not seem likely, or conclude that he could not actually read them.

Alma₂’s Lack of Knowledge of the Prophecy of the Coming of Christ to the Nephites

Around 86 BC, Alma₂ clearly states that he does not know if Jesus will come to the Nephites (Alma 7:8), even though the prophecy saying he would is explicitly stated by Nephi multiple times on the small plates (1 Nephi 12:4–7; 2 Nephi 26:1–9, 32:6). Similar to the argument involving the interpretation of *Liahona*, the only plausible explanation for this oversight is that Alma₂ could not actually read the small plates.

Samuel the Lamanite’s Lack of Knowledge of the Prophecy of Destruction in the Small Plates

Samuel the Lamanite prophesies of destruction at the time of Christ's death, declaring that an angel had directed him to prophesy of the event (Helaman 14:3–6, 13:7). It is clear that Samuel the Lamanite had an intimate knowledge of Nephite scripture (Helaman 15:7–17); he even cites Zenos, a prophet from the brass plates. However, Samuel indicates his source was the angel and never mentions the extensive and detailed prophecies of Nephi regarding the destruction at Christ's coming (1 Nephi 19:10–12; 2 Nephi 26:3–8). This suggests that the small plates were not part of the corpus of scripture at the time of the coming of Christ to the Nephites.

Nephi₂, Nephi₃, and the rest of the Nephites' Ignorance of the 600-Year Prophecy of Destruction in the Small Plates

Like Samuel the Lamanite, the Nephite prophets (Nephi₂ and Nephi₃) and the rest of the Nephites are seemingly ignorant of the 600-year prophecy. Though it is clear the Nephites knew that Christ was to be born in Jerusalem (Helaman 16:20) and that signs that were to precede his birth (Helaman 16:13–14; 3 Nephi 1:4, 17), there is absolutely no reference to the 600-year prophecy. Mormon notes that 600 years had passed away since Lehi left Jerusalem (3 Nephi 1:1), but there was apparently no immediate alarm. Only when the five-year prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite appeared to have passed did there arise any controversy, and it was only this five-year prophecy that is discussed among the Nephite prophets and the larger Nephite body (3 Nephi 1:5, 9).

Samuel the Lamanite's and Alma₂'s Lack of Knowledge of the Prophecy of Wickedness of the Fourth Generation after Christ

Samuel the Lamanite also prophesies that in the fourth generation after Christ, the Nephites would be destroyed; again, this information was given to him by an angel (Helaman 13:10). This same prophecy was made by Alma₂ earlier, but he instructed that the prophecy should not be made known until after the event actually happened (Alma 45:9–13), so his version would not be available to Samuel. The

fourth-generation prophecy was made in the small plates by Nephi₁ (1 Nephi 12:11–15; 2 Nephi 26:8–10). Both Alma₂ and Samuel appeared to be unaware of Nephi’s prophecy since they make no reference to Nephi₁.

Benjamin’s and Alma₂’s Lack of Doctrinal Knowledge

Roesler notes that Benjamin and Alma₂ lack knowledge of elements of the doctrine of the resurrection, yet the small plates contain great detail on the subject when Lehi taught his son Jacob, with Jacob also later teaching the principle. Roesler indicates that Alma₂ had to gain his doctrinal knowledge of the Spirit World from an angel, yet Jacob taught of these principles in the small plates. Roesler notes that Benjamin receives information regarding Christ’s life from an angel that is similar to the account given by Lehi and Nephi, except Benjamin omits Christ’s baptism and the exact time of his coming, and notes that the angel increased his knowledge meaning that the knowledge was not available by other means. Finally, Roesler notes that Alma₂ was unaware of the ultimate purpose and destiny of the Nephite record, where the details and prophecies in this regard abound throughout the small plates. Roesler notes that both Mormon and Moroni had a clear doctrinal knowledge of the small plates. Roesler offers as explanation for Benjamin and Alma₂’s lack of knowledge of the content of the small plates the premise that it was based on the Nephites spiritual knowledge increasing and decreasing based on the people’s attentiveness to it.

Narrative Voice in the Small Plates

Because the small plates are not a compilation or a narrative, one might expect the writing on them to be exclusively in the first person. If third-person writing was found, it could indicate that the small-plates version that we have had been “worked” or managed by a third party, as might occur during scribal translation or interpretation. There are, in fact, five places where the third person is used: the original prefaces to 1 and 2 Nephi, 2 Nephi 6:1, the original preface to the book of Jacob, and Jacob 2:1. The 1

Nephi preface starts in the third person and then moves to the first person, seeming to indicate that Nephi₁ is writing the preface. However, Brant Gardner has noted that for the preface of 1 Nephi, in the Printer's Manuscript, there was no line written between the preface and the text, so the last sentence of the current 1 Nephi preface, should not actually be part of the preface but is likely a chapter heading, or a part of the text.⁹ The third-person narrative in 2 Nephi 6:1 and Jacob 2:1, which both introduce the words of Jacob, suggests that someone other than Jacob inserted these verses. First, these two verses are virtually identical in form. Second, they are addressed to "the people of Nephi," yet following the words of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6:1, Nephi₁ notes that Jacob spoke many more things to "my people" and does not refer to them as "the people of Nephi," continuing to speak in the first person (2 Nephi 11:1). Although not definitive, a few instances of narrative voice in the small plates support the idea of an interpreted version of the small plates.

The Use of Prefaces

Prefaces are not found in the Old Testament; it is thus curious that Nephi₁ or Jacob would have used them. All of the books abridged by Mormon contain a preface (except for Mosiah, whose preface would have been in the 116 lost pages). This practice would be consistent with a later interpreted version of the small plates added perhaps at the time of interpretation or later. The one contradiction to this premise is that at the end of the 1 Nephi preface, it states that the record "is according to the account of Nephi; or in other words, I, Nephi, wrote this record." This phrase is awkwardly worded and seems additionally curious since the first verse of the book that follows the preface starts with "I Nephi, . . . make a record" (1 Nephi 1:1).

"Come to Pass" Consistency

⁹ Brant Gardner, *Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture*, Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation) <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-3>, accessed December 6, 2019.

Royal Skousen compared the use of the various grammatical formations of the narrative connector “come to pass” in the Book of Mormon to its use in the King James Version as well as other versions of the Bible.¹⁰ After some personal correspondence, Skousen, from his handwritten notes, graciously provided a further breakdown of the number and type of instances of “come to pass” in the Bible and Book of Mormon, and in the small plates specifically, which consist of the books 1 Nephi through Omni and the Words of Mormon; Skousen characterized these numbers as “accurate or close to being accurate.”¹¹ Following is a table containing the numbers provided by Skousen showing the usage of “come to pass” (in its present, past, or future form):

<u>Grammatical type</u>	<u>KJV Bible</u>	<u>Book of Mormon</u>	<u>Nephi-Omni</u>	<u>W of M</u>	<u>small plates</u>
CTP + that S	47	1,004	243	1	244
CTP + S	0	2	0	0	0
CTP + that Adv + S	76	292	55	1	56
CTP + Adv + S	41	72	7	0	7
CTP + Adv + that S	410	27	5	0	5
CTP + that Adv + that S	1	35	3	0	3
CTP + Adv + that Adv + that S	0	1	0	0	0
Incomplete with <i>that</i>	2	23	6	1	7
Incomplete without <i>that</i>	0	7	2	0	2
Non-expletive <i>it</i>	48	31	14	1	15
TOTALS	625	1,494	335	4	339

CTP= “come to pass” Adv= adverbial phrase S= extraposed clause

In comparing the Book of Mormon with the King James Version of the Bible, Skousen noted that “the predominance of type changes rather dramatically.” With respect to the glyph form underlying “come to pass” in the reformed Egyptian, the glyph usage followed a Mesoamerican pattern and

¹⁰ Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, Part 1: Grammatical Variation* (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and BYU Studies, 2016), 1:149–75.

¹¹ Royal Skousen, personal communication with author, 2018.

structure.¹² Based on the statistics in the table, the use of the “come to pass” phrase in the small plates tracks closely with the predominance and frequency of the phrase in the rest of the Book of Mormon, engraved in the reformed Egyptian by Mormon and Moroni². While it may be argued that this could be a result of translation preference, one would still expect to see a difference in the small plates written in Old World Egyptian and in an Old World Hebrew scriptural style. This difference is not found, offering a clue that the small plates were written in the same script as the rest of the Book of Mormon—namely, the reformed Egyptian.

The Point When Standard Egyptian Would Not Have Been Understood by Nephite Leaders

Abandonment of standard Egyptian as a script likely started when a recordkeeper who did not have a full knowledge of the total corpus of language had to write something original (instead of copying an existing record). The people in the culture that the Lehites encountered when they arrived spoke a different language, and some of them likely had different writing systems. With each passing generation, Lehi’s descendants likely integrated at least some of the foreign language into their own language more and more. It appears that the primary source of Egyptian script is the brass plates and perhaps some other records that were brought; Egyptian script could have also appeared on whatever record was written by those fluent in the language, such as Nephi¹ and perhaps some others in the first party to the New World. Later recordkeepers would have to rely on what was taught to them based on the records that they had, which means when they needed to discuss new words or concepts, they would have been limited to the script available to them. Whatever phonetic elements existed in Egyptian probably were diluted as the population was likely at least bilingual, and different groups likely

¹² Jerry D. Grover, *Translation of the “Caractors” Document* (Provo, UT: Grover Publishing, 2015), 67–110, <http://bmslr.org/translation-of-the-caractors-document/>.

spoke different languages or dialects, pushing the elite written record script to a primarily logographic system in order to be understood.

For example, it is estimated that the Hebrew Bible contains only one-fifth of the ancient Hebrew language.¹³ Since the Nephites would likely have had only the Egyptian works that the Lehite immigration group brought or wrote, their access to the written Egyptian language would have been similarly limited. If only 20 percent of a language is available, it becomes necessary to change, create, or incorporate other languages in order to effectively communicate the remaining 80 percent. If one were to pick a period in the Book of Mormon record when the most significant language changes might have taken place, the time covered in the book of Omni would be a good candidate since the entries of the recordkeepers are very short. Though these individuals may have written short entries because they did not have much to say, it's also possible that their capability of writing in Egyptian was severely limited.

A notable point of demarcation might be the point when the small plates were passed to king Benjamin, which must have occurred after some significant length of time into Benjamin's reign, since Amaleki (the last writer in Omni) records that Benjamin led the Nephites in a serious war against the Nephites (Omni 1:24). The small plates were maintained by the priestly line, as opposed to the large plates, which were maintained by the kingly line. Whatever limited Egyptian the writers in Omni may have known, it would not necessarily be expected that the same would be true of the kingly line of Benjamin, since it is not known if the large plates contained any Egyptian at all.

Curiously, Mosiah 1:2–7 (circa 131 BC) seems to indicate that the language on the plates of brass may not have been known either at this point in time. Mosiah 1:2–3 indicates that Benjamin caused that his sons should be taught in “all the language of his fathers” “that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers.” It then says that Benjamin “*also*

¹³ W. F. Albright, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 62.

taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass” (emphasis added), indicating that the brass plates may have contained a language that was different than the language of the “fathers” of Benjamin’s sons. King Benjamin then states, referring to the commandments found on the brass plates, that Lehi was “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 the present time.” King Benjamin then says:

I say unto you, my sons, were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries. . . . Oh my sons, I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and *also* that these records are true [emphasis added]. And behold, *also* the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes. And now, my sons, I would that ye should remember to search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby.

King Benjamin’s further statement that “these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries and have his commandments always before our eyes” could also imply the presence of the interpreters as well as the scriptures.

Without making any assumptions regarding this passage of scripture, it can be said that the plates of brass contained Egyptian and that Lehi₁ could read them. The passage does not say specifically that Lehi₁ taught his children Egyptian—just that he taught what he read (the commandments) to his children. There is a distinction between the “sayings” being true and “these records” being true. The verses also seems to differentiate the plates of Nephi and their sayings from the previously mentioned “sayings” and “records.” It is not certain that when Benjamin instructed his sons to “search them diligently,” he was referring to everything, including the plates of brass, or even the plates of Nephi; he may have been referring to just the “sayings” and other records, which may not have been in Egyptian.

For example, these “sayings” may have been written in some form of Hebrew or contained a mixture of languages, including New World languages.

So is it possible to pinpoint further when the original Egyptian language was lost to understanding? The original language of the original Lehite group was apparently not the lingua franca among the next generation born in the New World. Enos points out that Jacob, his father, “taught me in *his language*” (Enos 1:1, emphasis added). Further analysis of how well the authors in the small plates followed the instructions given by Nephi₁ helps provide further insight.

Those who were to write in the small plates were commanded by Nephi (Jacob 1:1–4) to include as their entries the main points of the following events that occurred during their lifetimes: (1) sacred preaching and (2) great revelation or prophesying. These two types of events were to be written “for Christ’s sake” and “for the sake of our people.” The writers were not to include history, except “save it were lightly.”¹⁴ Jacob, Enos, and Jarom follow this format. Later entries by Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom, and Amaleki do not. These later entries are very brief (perhaps because of the limited space on the plates) and make no effort to record any preaching, revelations, or prophesying. The failure to follow the specific instructions given by Nephi suggests that the later writers were unaware of these instructions; a likely explanation for their ignorance would be that they were unable to read the earlier instructions. Omni writes 276 years after the Lehite departure (Omni 1:3), so this time frame would make sense as the time when the original Egyptian was no longer understood, or at least fully understood.

The interpretation/translation of the original small plates would have had to occur later than the time of Samuel the Lamanite, as he and the Nephites of his time were unaware of their content, and

¹⁴ John W. Welch, “The Father’s Command to Keep Records in the Small Plates of Nephi,” preliminary report, Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1984, https://archive.dev-bookofmormoncentral.org/content/fathers-command-keep-records-small-plates-nephi_.

likely occurred much later since they are never mentioned in the Book of Mormon outside of the small plates section.

Implications of the Words of Mormon Transition to the Book of Mosiah

In Words of Mormon, Mormon initially indicates that he was at the point when he was about to deliver up the record that he had been making to his son Moroni₂. Mormon also notes the point in time in the verse, namely, that it was after he had witnessed “almost all the destruction of my people, the Nephites” (Words of Mormon 1:1–2).

This description could fit only two potential times: (1) the point in time just before the final Nephite battle, sometime between 380 and 384 AD or (2) the point in time after the final battle and prior to Mormon’s death, when there were a few Nephite survivors (Mormon 6:15, 8:2–3), sometime between 384 and 400 AD (Mormon 8:6). The second point in time is the most likely since it better fits the description of “almost all the destruction of my people.”

Mormon then mentions that at the point in time that his abridgement reached “down to the reign of king Benjamin,” he then “searched among the records” “that had been delivered into [his] hands” and located a “small account of the prophets” and also “many of the words of Nephi” (Words of Mormon 1:3). It is clear that Mormon did not use the “small account” in his abridgement. We know that Mormon obtained the large plates of Nephi₁ when he was twenty-four years old (Mormon 1:3), in approximately 335 AD. As far as we know, Mormon did not get the rest of the records until sometime after 375 AD and before 379 AD. Allowing for some time for intervening battles, he likely received the records in 377 AD (Mormon 4:16, 23; 5:5). Thus, we can conclude that Mormon completed his abridgement “down to king Benjamin” prior to 377 AD. He could not have included any unique material from the “small account” (small plates) in his abridgement because he did not have the record up to that point in time. We can also then assume that he completed the balance of the abridgement from Mosiah on sometime between 377 and 384 AD.

Continuing in the Words of Mormon, after noting that the small account contained the records of prophets and also the words of Nephi, Mormon indicates in the present tense that the plates were “pleasing” to him because of the “prophecies of the coming of Christ” and because the prophecies concerning “us down to this day have been fulfilled, and as many as go beyond this day must surely come to pass” (Words of Mormon 1:3–4). The next set of verses indicates that Mormon is going to create a “remainder of [his] record” and place it with the small plates:

5 Wherefore, I chose these things, to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the plates of Nephi; and I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people.

6 But behold, I shall take these plates, which contain these prophesyings and revelations, and put them with the remainder of my record, for they are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren.

9 And now I, Mormon, proceed to finish out my record, which I take from the plates of Nephi; and I make it according to the knowledge and the understanding which God has given me.

(Words of Mormon 1: 5–6, 9)

To understand the implications of this passage in regard to the small plates, it is first necessary to look at the phrase “I chose these things, to finish my record upon them.” The 1981 version of the Book of Mormon has a footnote for “these things” that reads, “IE the things pleasing to him, mentioned in v. 4,” which implies Mormon will concentrate on prophecy in completing his record. Others have interpreted this to mean that Mormon finished his record on some additional space available on the small plates or added additional plates.¹⁵ It is possible that both interpretations may be accommodated. It seems clear that Mormon’s concentration on prophets and prophecy is textually present through the

¹⁵ Eldin Ricks, “The Small Plates of Nephi and the Words of Mormon,” chap. 12 in *The Book of Mormon: Jacob Through Words of Mormon, To Learn With Joy*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990).

rest of the Words of Mormon, since verses 12–18 describe king Benjamin as a “holy man” who used the sacred relic sword of Laban invoking the “strength of the lord.” These few verses discuss false Christs and false prophets and “holy prophets” who assisted king Benjamin in preaching and establishing peace in the land.

Because the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript ended at the start of the book of Mosiah, which follows the Words of Mormon, there have been various theories as to where verses 12–18 come from, since they seem to match nearly exactly the chronology of and segue into the first verses in the book of Mosiah, where one would not expect a seamless transition. Lyon and Minson propose that these verses are in fact part of the book of Mosiah and not the Words of Mormon, asserting that after the 116 pages were lost, these verses were not part of the 116 pages and were still retained by Joseph Smith.¹⁶ Their analysis relies primarily on the chapter notations provided by Oliver Cowdery in the Printer’s Manuscript and on Doctrine and Covenants 10 , in which the Lord instructs Joseph, “You shall translate the engravings which are on the [small] plates of Nephi, down even till you come to the reign of king Benjamin, or until you come to that which you have translated, which you have retained” (D&C 10:41).

While this theory remains a possibility, the chapter notations have other reasonable constructions that do not support the necessity of this theory.¹⁷ In addition, while apparently ignored by Lyon and Minson and not mentioned by Gardner, assuming that the portion translated and “retained” must refer to a residual portion of the lost 116 pages misses the most reasonable interpretation of this section. D&C 10 was received in May of 1829, shortly after the translation of the Book of Mormon had resumed on April 7, 1829.¹⁸ Thus the most reasonable interpretation of D&C 10 is that the translation

¹⁶ Jack M. Lyon and Kent R. Minson, “When Pages Collide: Dissecting the Words of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4, (2012): 120–36.

¹⁷ See Brant A. Gardner, “When Hypotheses Collide: Responding to Lyon and Minson’s ‘When Pages Collide,’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 105–119.

¹⁸ Don Bradley, personal communication with author, May 5, 2018.

being retained is what Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were currently working on and had completed. The language in section 10 does seem to imply that the small plates and the Words of Mormon contained text that went beyond King Benjamin; otherwise it would seem that the Lord would have instructed them to translate everything instead of stopping at a certain point.

Unlike Lyon and Minson, Gardner's position is that verses 12–18 (and also verses 9–11) of the Words of Mormon are not from the original plates but are an inspired bridge beyond the actual Words of Mormon, which ended at verse 8 and were provided by inspiration by Joseph Smith, not Mormon, perhaps recognizing elements of the lost 116 pages:

In my view, this simply isn't the way Mormon would have written this information. Mormon's descriptions of events do not have this level of terseness until 4 Nephi, which I argue has a different structural intent than other writings, and one that does not apply to these verses. These verses describe nothing short of the crucial events that led up to Benjamin's speech. They deal with an external war with the Lamanites, an internal civil war, and a religious crisis. Compare the treatment in this synopsis with similar topics in the book of Alma. These are things that Mormon cares about deeply. They are an important part of the story of the struggle of faith that he is building. I suggest that it is so completely incongruous for Mormon to have written this synopsis that we must look to another source. This is a synopsis of material that should have been in the missing text from the beginning of Mosiah. It is not the way Mormon wrote about those topics. It is not the way Mormon closed chapters. If we are looking at textual evidence, the evidence of how Mormon constructed his chapters argues against his authorship of these verses.¹⁹

Another possibility that seems to have been missed is that the "remainder" of Mormon's record is what he says it is: a concentrated and likely brief recounting of prophetic and revelatory events.

¹⁹ Gardner, "When Hypotheses Collide," 119.

Mormon says that he is relying on the large plates of Nephi to write this remainder. He cannot be referring to the Book of Mormon abridgement that he already completed and was turning over to Moroni², since that was already done. The Words of Mormon (or at least the final portion) are this “remainder record.” Features supportive of this possibility are (1) the text concentrates on prophets or prophetic material, as previously discussed; (2) as Gardner points out, the Words of Mormon do not end the way that Mormon typically ends chapters (I would add that it certainly doesn’t end in the way that Book of Mormon books end);²⁰ and (3) the language of D&C 10 that indicates Joseph Smith was to translate only to a certain point in the record.

To further illustrate the second point listed, this is the language used at the end of each book in the Book of Mormon:

1 Nephi: “And thus it is. Amen.”

2 Nephi: “For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey. Amen.”

Jacob: “Brethren, adieu.”

Enos: “Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen.”

Jarom: “And I deliver these plates into the hands of my son Omni, that they may be kept according to the commandments of my fathers.”

Omni: “And I make an end of my speaking.”

Mosiah: “And thus ended the reign of the kings over the people of Nephi; and thus ended the days of Alma, who was the founder of their church.”

Alma: “And thus ended the account of Alma, and Helaman his son, and also Shiblon, who was his son.”

²⁰ Gardner, “When Hypotheses Collide,” 118.

Helaman: “And thus ended the book of Helaman, according to the record of Helaman and his sons.”

3 Nephi: “come unto me, and be baptized in my name, that ye may receive a remission of your sins, and be filled with the Holy Ghost, that ye may be numbered with my people who are of the house of Israel.”

4 Nephi: “And thus is the end of the record of Ammaron.”

Mormon: “may God the Father remember the covenant which he hath made with the house of Israel; and may he bless them forever, through faith on the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Ether: “Whether the Lord will that I be translated, or that I suffer the will of the Lord in the flesh, it mattereth not, if it so be that I am saved in the kingdom of God. Amen.”

Moroni: “I soon go to rest in the paradise of God, until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air, to meet you before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead. Amen.”

Conversely, the Words of Mormon end with the following: “Wherefore, with the help of these, king Benjamin, by laboring with all the might of his body and the faculty of his whole soul, and also the prophets, did once more establish peace in the land” (Words of Mormon 1:18).

All of the other books finish with some sort of a clear ending statement. 3 Nephi is a bit different than the others, but it still ends with a final warning statement to the Gentiles. The end of the Words of Mormon is markedly textually different. Whether or not we can prove Gardner’s assertion that its ending is different from other chapter endings in the Book of Mormon, it is clear that the end of the Words of Mormon not only does not comport with Mormon’s writings but also does not comport to any of the ending statements of the authors who wrote in the Book of Mormon.

Gardner argues that verses 11–18 were not written by Mormon because they are concise and Mormon’s normal writing style was somewhat expansive; he would not have dealt with this material in

the terse way if it had been part of a chapter of Mosiah. This assertion is likely correct if one is dealing with a chapter in Mosiah. However, if Mormon had already dealt with this material in the lost 116 pages in his normal expansive style, and if he was primarily interested in briefly featuring some of the prophetic elements in a “remainder record,” as he stated in the Words of Mormon, this concise approach makes more sense. The Characters Document material is organized in a fairly brief and structured pattern and is actually somewhat consistent with the nature of the text in verses 12–18. Gardner labels verses 9–18 as “bridging text” and hypothesizes that these verses represent a translation of information but not a translation of text from the plates. He supposes that the information was taken by Joseph Smith from the first two missing chapters of Mosiah.²¹ Gardner indicates this “bridging text” allows the reader to understand the migration of the Nephites from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla. However, under scrutiny, these verses are not a necessary bridging text. Don Bradley has indicated that these verses really don’t provide much in the way of bridging, since Amaleki in the book of Omni already provides the information (and more) regarding the Nephite migration to Zarahemla and discusses the conflicts under king Benjamin.²² Verses 12–18 of the Words of Mormon discuss, from a historical standpoint, a war with the Lamanites led by king Benjamin and contentions among his own people. Omni 1:24 discusses the war against the Lamanites led by king Benjamin, and verses 27–28 of Omni give an example of a contention of one group of Nephites at the time of king Benjamin.

Mormon’s decision to include the small plates at the end of his record and to feature prophecy as the final contribution to his record is completely consistent with the Mesoamerican practice of featuring prophecy and divination as the front pieces of a codex. While not conclusive, a continuation of the “remainder record” on a set of the small plates that had additional space to write is most consistent with a reformed-Egyptian version of the small plates, since the original plates indicated there was no

²¹ Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 246.

²² Bradley, personal communication, 2018.

more room on the plates. It is also consistent with the presence of an untranslated continuation initiated as the Words of Mormon that goes beyond the beginning of the book of Mosiah.

Conclusions

While not overtly stated, there is evidence that the small plates that were included in the final Book of Mormon plate stack were a reformed-Egyptian version, not the original. This conclusion is based on factors including the reported appearance of the plate stack by witnesses, prophetic disconnects, the presence of an interpreted term, the presence of a narrative voice, a textual consistency with the balance of the Book of Mormon (e.g., “come to pass”), a general absence of reference to the small plates in the balance of the Book of Mormon, and the evidence that the knowledge of Egyptian was lost at some point, which would have resulted in the necessity to use reformed Egyptian, a script that was not preferred by Mormon and Moroni².