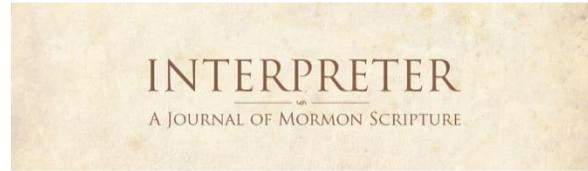




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## Learning Nephi's Language: Creating a Context for 1 Nephi 1:2

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## **Learning Nephi's Language: Creating a Context for 1 Nephi 1:2**

Neal Rappleye

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## LEARNING NEPHI'S LANGUAGE: CREATING A CONTEXT FOR 1 NEPHI 1:2

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Neal Rappleye

### Nephi's Language Without Context: An Enigma

It was not long after the Book of Mormon was published before Nephi's statement that he wrote using "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2) started raising eyebrows.<sup>1</sup> It has continued to perplex even the best LDS scholars, who have put forward no fewer than five different interpretations of the passage.<sup>2</sup> Some have even pointed out that there seems to be no logical reason for Nephi's statement, since anyone who could read the text would know what language it was written in.<sup>3</sup>

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1 For just one example, which is relatively tame, see Gimel, "Book of Mormon," *The Christian Watchman* (Boston) 12/40 (October 7, 1831): "The plates were inscribed in the language of the Egyptians, see page 5. As Nephi was a descendant from Joseph, probably Smith would have us understand, that the Egyptian language was retained in the family of Joseph; of this, however, we have no evidence." Some more inflammatory examples could be cited.

2 These include: (1) Nephi was writing in Hebrew with an Egyptian script (Stephen D. Ricks, John A. Tvedtnes, among others); (2) Nephi's writings were not just in Hebrew, but reflected Jewish culture while using an Egyptian script (John L. Sorenson); (3) Nephi wrote in both Egyptian language and script, but after a manner of learning taught in Israelite scribal schools (Hugh Nibley); (4) Nephi was using a writing system unique to his father Lehi, which somehow combined Jewish learning with Egyptian language (John S. Thompson); (5) Nephi was conveying the sacred concepts of the Jewish sacral language in Egyptian (presumably both script and language) (LeGrand Baker). I lay these out in detail in Neal Rappleye, "Nephi the Good: A Commentary on 1 Nephi 1:1-3," *Interpreter Blog*, January 3, 2014, online at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/nephi-the-good-a-commentary-on-1-nephi-1-1-3/> (accessed March 6, 2015). My own views, argued in the blog post and in this article are essentially aligned with (3).

3 An example is Brant A. Gardner, "Another Suggestion for Reading 1 Nephi 1:1-3," *Interpreter Blog*, January 18, 2014, online at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/another-suggestion-for-reading-1-nephi-1-1-3/> (accessed March 6, 2015).

I suggest that the reason the phrase has remained hard to interpret is that Nephi's statement continues to be interpreted without any context. And this is so *despite* the fact that Egyptian writing by Israelite scribes has been known and attested to in Nephi's very time period since at least the 1960s. Though Latter-day Saint scholars have known and written about these writings, they have generally used them just as evidence for the Book of Mormon or to bolster support for preexisting theories about Nephi's language, rather than using those texts to create a context in which Nephi's statement can be interpreted.<sup>4</sup>

### On "Context" and Its Creation

Sam Wineburg, a cognitive psychologist who studies historical learning, explains, "Contexts are neither 'found' nor 'located,' and words are not 'put' into context. Context, from Latin *contexere*, means to weave together, to engage in an active process of connecting things in a pattern." Following Wineburg, I intend to create a context for 1 Nephi 1:2. In such an endeavor, Wineburg explains, "questions ... are the tools of creation."<sup>5</sup> There are a number of questions to ask about the Israelites' use of Egyptian writing. What we need to understand is how, exactly, were Israelite and Judahite scribes using Egyptian writing ca. the seventh century BC? What kind of Egyptian scripts were they using, and when did they adopt them? Also, was there anything different about the way they used Egyptian scripts versus how the Egyptians themselves were writing at the time?

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4 See, for example, Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "Notes and Communications — Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–163. This is not to say that the materials they use *cannot* be employed in the creation of context. Some of the texts they mention are ostraca from the same collection as those discussed in this paper, and in fact they will be cited later for a specific detail they provide. They also cite other ancient texts which could be used to create a context more consonant with option 1 (see n. 2, above); however these come from a different time period, and are generally from Egypt, not Israel. In creating a context for 1 Nephi 1:2, I have chosen to focus on materials from Judah in the late seventh century BC—very close to Nephi's own time, and certainly within Lehi's.

5 Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), 21.

### Creating the Context From Hieratic Texts in Seventh Century BC Judah

David Calabro, though not writing about the Book of Mormon, had some of these same questions in view while working on his MA thesis, which was on the use of hieratic during the period of the late monarchy.<sup>6</sup> In an article summarizing his findings, he carefully examines Judahite ostraca that include hieratic writing to see what can be determined about the use of hieratic (an Egyptian script) by Israelite, and more specifically Judahite, scribes. He finds that the data “point to the development within Judah of a unified, extensive hieratic tradition. Further, from a paleographic standpoint, this tradition appears to have been independent of those attested in Egypt during that time.”<sup>7</sup>

On one ostrakon, which contains an intermixture of Hebrew and hieratic, Calabro notices that “the use of hieratic signs here extends beyond simply inserting them as symbols to substitute for Hebrew words.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, this is not simply Hebrew written with an Egyptian script. Still, Calabro points out something interesting: he detects that in some places, the order of hieratic signs is “contrary to common Egyptian practice ... but in accordance with expected Hebrew word order as well the probable word order in spoken Egyptian.”<sup>9</sup>

On another ostrakon from the same collection, which is fully written in hieratic, Calabro observes key differences in the paleography of the hieratic signs and contemporary hieratic from Egypt, noting that the examples from Judah appear more similar to earlier Egyptian writing, “which again points to an independent Judahite development of hieratic script.”<sup>10</sup> Calabro finds that the writing is closer to New Kingdom scripts (ca. 1550–1070 BC), and more specifically the eighteenth dynasty (ca. 1543–1292 BC). This may suggest that the use of hieratic in Israel began close to that time, and subsequently developed independently.

A third ostrakon containing a mixture of Hebrew and hieratic appears to be a scribal exercise. As Calabro interprets it, it contains

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6 See David Calabro, “The Hieratic Scribal Tradition in Late Monarchic Judah,” (University of Chicago, MA thesis, 2005).

7 David Calabro, “The Hieratic Scribal Tradition in Preexilic Judah,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, BAR International Series 2397 (Oxford, Eng.: Archaeopress, 2012), 77.

8 Ibid., 79.

9 Ibid., 78.

10 Ibid., 80.

specific use of hieratic alphabetic signs, rather than merely numerals and measurements. Hence, this offers “the first example of hieratic uniliteral signs in late monarchic Judah, thus strengthening the assertion that the hieratic signs in use there were part of a basically complete system.”<sup>11</sup> Some hieratic signs from this inscription also “match fairly well the examples from the New Kingdom.”<sup>12</sup> Calabro concludes that the evidence on this ostracon points to “an extensive hieratic component in the scribal education of Judahites, at least in the place where the ostracon was composed.”<sup>13</sup>

From all of this, Calabro reaches some important conclusions about the use of hieratic in Judah in the seventh century BC.

All three of the ostraca discussed in this paper seem to belong to a single tradition of hieratic writing. ...

Paleographically, this tradition appears to have been separate from the script traditions of contemporary Saite Egypt. Some of the signs on the ostraca from Judah ... do not resemble any known forms from Egyptian papyri. In the case of the *šm'* sign, the form of the sign more closely resembles the hieroglyphic form. ...

The Judahite hieratic tradition, developing independently from the contemporary scribal traditions in Egypt, must have diverged from them at an earlier period. ... It is therefore not inconceivable that the tradition of hieratic writing in the southern Levant has its ultimate roots in a period even before the New Kingdom, perhaps being used on documents now lost to us. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of New Kingdom (and later) influence on this tradition.

The extent of the hieratic system used in this tradition, Arad 25, 34, and the ostracon from Tell el-Qudeirat indicate that the hieratic tradition in Judah lasted in a fuller form than only the isolated use of numbers and units of measurement. In particular, it included hieratic alphabetic signs, logographic signs ... and Egyptian conventions of sign sequence. ...

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11 Ibid., 82.

12 Ibid., 82.

13 Ibid., 82. Calabro explains that the place of composition “may have been at Tell el-Qudeirat [where it was found], although this is not certain.” (p. 82, brackets mine).

All three of the ostraca discussed here come from the Negev region in the southern part of Judah. ... In view of the unity of script forms mentioned above, the wide distribution of hieratic numerals and other isolated hieratic signs in Judah indicates a widespread presence of scribes educated in this Judahite variety of Egyptian script.<sup>14</sup>

The same ostraca Calabro examines are among the samples of Hebrew/Egyptian hybrid writing appealed to by Latter-day Saint writers. They also make observations that are useful in our attempt to create context. For example, discussing an ostrakon from the same Arad collection that two of Calabro's three examples come from, Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes reported, "The text on the ostrakon is written in a combination of Egyptian hieratic and Hebrew characters, but can be read entirely as Egyptian. Of the seventeen words in the text, ten are written in hieratic and seven in Hebrew."<sup>15</sup> The significance here is that the underlying language was Egyptian, not Hebrew.

At least brief mention should be made of Stefan Wimmer, who has carefully studied the hieratic texts from Israel and Judah.<sup>16</sup> Wimmer reasoned, based on some chronological changes in Israelite hieratic texts consistent with changes in Egyptian script, that there was "continued contact of some sort between Egyptian and Hebrew scribes, probably over several centuries."<sup>17</sup> This observation is driven by Wimmer's view that "the hieratic of these texts does not differ from the cursive script used in contemporary Egypt."<sup>18</sup> Such views differ from that of Calabro, although he does insist that his own analysis "does not exclude the possibility of New Kingdom (and later) influence on this tradition."<sup>19</sup> Calabro found that certain signs appear to be closer to older forms of hieratic, but that

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14 Ibid., 82–83.

15 Ricks and Tvedtnes, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts," 161.

16 See Stefan Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008).

17 William J. Hamblin, "Palestinian Hieratic," at *Interpreter Blog*, September 1, 2012, online at <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/palestinian-hieratic/> (accessed March 6, 2015). Hamblin is summarizing Wimmer's views, which are published in German. I don't read German, so I am dependent on Hamblin's English summary.

18 Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch*, 11; translation by Stephen O. Smoot. My appreciation goes to Smoot for translating relevant excerpts from Wimmer for my benefit.

19 Calabro, "The Hieratic Scribal Tradition," 83.

does not preclude others (possibly found on other ostraca) from being influenced by latter conventions of writing found in Egypt.

Other scholars, however, have made observations more consistent with Calabro's finding. For example, biblical scholars Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager similarly explain, "Documents from the kingdoms of both Israel and Judah, but not the neighboring kingdoms, of the eighth and seventh centuries [BC] contain Egyptian hieratic signs (cursive hieroglyphics) and numerals that had ceased to be used in Egypt after the tenth century [BC]."<sup>20</sup> John S. Thompson said something very similar while discussing 1 Nephi 1:2:

The kind of Egyptian script being employed on those artifacts dating around the time of Lehi is hieratic, but since Demotic was the script of the day in northern Egypt and "abnormal hieratic" was predominant in southern Egypt, the normal hieratic tradition in Canaan must have been adopted from an earlier time — possibly ... during the reigns of David and Solomon or even earlier in the tenth century BC — and was in continued use in Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Like Calabro, these scholars find that the hieratic in Palestine appears to be from an earlier, not contemporary, form of the Egyptian script. Calabro's work further illuminates the roots of this practice, suggesting it goes back even earlier than the tenth century BC, into the New Kingdom, in Egyptian periodization. This corresponds with the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BC) in Canaan. Concurring with Calabro in this regard is Seth L. Sanders, who writes, "The style of hieratic prominent in Iron Age Israel and Judah shows strongest contact not with contemporary Iron Age Egypt but with archaic Late Bronze Age forms."<sup>22</sup> Sanders connects this persistence of archaic forms with the perpetuation of the tradition

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<sup>20</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 311, brackets mine.

<sup>21</sup> John S. Thompson, "Lehi and Egypt," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 266. On abnormal hieratic, John Gee, "Notes and Communications—Two Notes on Egyptian Script," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 163, explains, "An adaptation of hieratic characterized by 'wild orthography,' abnormal hieratic in its second phase was used in Egypt mainly for legal and administrative purposes during the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Dynasties (727–548 BC)."

<sup>22</sup> Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 90.

“below the radar of state bureaucracy,”<sup>23</sup> opening up the possibility that such scribal practices were part of familial traditions passed on by successive generations. Such an absence of a state-sponsored scribal training may also explain why, according to Sanders, “The hieratic evidence shows that Hebrew scribes were taught complex *techniques*,” yet lacks “any remains of a complex *curriculum*.”<sup>24</sup>

Returning to Calabro's work, his careful scrutiny also discovers that though the signs read as Egyptian, they sometimes came in word orders more akin to Hebrew writing. This verifies Matt Bowen's assertion that “Hebraisms can exist in an Egyptian text.”<sup>25</sup> According to Ricks and Tvedtnes, the hieratic is sometimes intermixed with Hebrew signs, though the whole text may still be read as Egyptian; other times, it appears from Calabro's analysis, both Hebrew and Egyptian script *and* language are intermixed.

### Nephi's Language With Context: A Sensible Interpretation

Having woven together a context, primarily using Calabro, but also drawing on Thompson, King and Stager, Ricks and Tvedtnes, Wimmer, and Sanders, how should we interpret Nephi's language, “consist[ing] of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians”? It is reasonable to suggest that Nephi's language is part of a centuries-old and widespread scribal tradition in Judah of writing in hieratic Egyptian. Nephi calls it “the language of my father” (1 Nephi 1:2), and evidence suggests that rather than being perpetuated by the state for bureaucratic interests, this tradition was passed on within the family. By Nephi's day, the hieratic script was often intermixed with Hebrew script, incorporating Hebrew word orders and scribal habits, thus differing from Egyptian as it was written in Egypt. Calabro calls it a “Judahite variety of Egyptian script”; Wimmer calls it “*Palästinisches Hieratisch*” (“Palestinian Hieratic”). Both of these seem functionally equivalent to Nephi's “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians.” It is, as Sydney B. Sperry hypothesized 80 years ago, “a Hebraized Egyptian.”<sup>26</sup>

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23 Ibid., 90.

24 Ibid., 129.

25 Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Most Desirable About All Things’: Onomastic Play on Mary and Mormon in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2015): 33.

26 Sidney B. Sperry, “The Book of Mormon as Translation English,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 209; originally published in *The Improvement Era* 38/3 (March 1935): 140.

Within this context, it is not likely that Nephi's writing was Hebrew language in an Egyptian script. The awkwardness of such an arrangement was long ago pointed out by Hugh Nibley.<sup>27</sup> Now, we know this is not how hieratic was being used in Nephi's day. Since Calabro specifically notices what could be called Hebraisms (Hebrew word orders) in the hieratic writing, the presence of Hebraisms not typically found in Egyptian<sup>28</sup> — as the *Egyptians* write — is insufficient evidence to assert that the underlying language is Hebrew as opposed to Nephi's statement that it is Egyptian. Indeed, the most natural interpretation of Nephi's statement is that he was writing Egyptian the way the Jews had learned to write it; that is, according their own, independent scribal tradition, which had some natural syncretism with Hebrew, but was nonetheless Egyptian.

It is impressive how well these findings accord with views expressed by Nibley several decades ago. Nibley staunchly insisted that "Egyptian could be written in less space than Hebrew because in Lehi's day demotic was actually a shorthand, extremely cramped and abbreviated. ... It could be used very economically for writing Egyptian, but not for any other language."<sup>29</sup> Lehi and his sons, Nibley argued, "had no other reason for learning Egyptian characters than to read and write Egyptian."<sup>30</sup> Nibley also reasoned that Lehi would have learned Egyptian *not* in Egypt, but "in Palestine, of course, before he ever thought of himself as a record-keeper,"<sup>31</sup> thus hinting at the idea that Lehi (and subsequently, Nephi) would have learned Egyptian from an Israelite scribal tradition, something Nibley says "had been in progress long before Lehi's day."<sup>32</sup> Nibley even suspected some syncretism with Hebrew, pointing to an inscribed dagger "which neatly combines Egyptian and Hebrew in a process of fusion for which a great deal of evidence now exists."<sup>33</sup> The only substantive difference is that Nephi's most immediate context supports the use of hieratic, rather than demotic. While many of Nibley's

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27 See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 14–17.

28 See, for example, John Gee, "La Trahison des Clercs: On the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 95; Kerry Muhlestein, "Insights Available as We Approach the Original Text," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 63.

29 Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 15.

30 *Ibid.*, 16.

31 *Ibid.*, 15–16.

32 *Ibid.*, 14.

33 *Ibid.*, 14.

old hypotheses have fallen to further findings of scholarship, this one has largely been strengthened by new findings.

That Nephi specifies his writing is according to “the learning of the Jews” indicates that he has some awareness that there are differences in how the Egyptians themselves write and use their language. He may be referring to the differences in script, in word order, in the incorporation of some Hebrew linguistic elements, or most likely all of the above. The awareness of these differences could come only from having some contact with “pure” Egyptian scribal practices, as Wimmer’s findings suggest. This awareness of Egyptian according to the “learning of the Egyptians,” to adapt Nephi’s phrase, could explain why Nephi makes a statement about his language at all: familiar with both traditions of Egyptian writing, Nephi may have felt a need to specify that his was the Judahite variety. Readers of the Egyptian variety would probably still be able to read the Palestinian hieratic but may have struggled. Perhaps Nephi was hoping to help such potential readers avoid confusion from the Hebraized elements of his Egyptian writing by telling them up front that this was the Judahite variety of hieratic.

The context created from late preexilic scribal practice in Judah allows for a sensible interpretation of 1 Nephi 1:2 that resolves its ambiguity. The data allow us to see just what the “language of the Egyptians,” according to “the learning of the Jews,” actually consisted of and interpret Nephi’s statement accordingly. No such explanatory context can reasonably be fashioned out of Joseph Smith’s world, where the reaction of contemporaries indicates that the phrase was as perplexing to readers then as it is now.

**Neal Rappleye** is a history student who actively pursues research interests in early Church history and the ancient setting of the Book of Mormon. He blogs about Latter-day Saint topics at <http://www.studioetquoquefide.com/>

