

# The Issues of Nephite Language and Chronology

By A. Chris Eccel, Ph.D.  
www.gptouchstone.org

## The Brass Plates of Laban

One of the more astounding claims of the Book of Mormon is that there existed at the close of the seventh century BCE a book of Israelite scripture inscribed on brass plates in the Egyptian language. Egypt was seen as the land of the Israelites' bondage, a land of pagan idolatry, and one of the principal symbols of evil in Hebrew culture. The authors of the Book of Mormon knew that the Bible had, in their day, been translated into many languages. Bible students are aware also that at an early date, the Old Testament had been translated into Aramaic (Targum Onkelos, Targum Yerushalmi [Jerusalemite], Targum Yonathan [Jonathan] and Targum Neofiti), into Greek (the Septuagint), classical Ethiopic and even Arabic. But, all of these translations were done two or more centuries after the Hebrew language was no longer spoken. They were done to meet a need, so that worshippers would have access to the Sacred Scriptures. We have no example of Hebrew scriptures being translated into a Gentile language before the demise of Hebrew.

There is such a huge wealth of Egyptian documentary and other artifact evidence that Egyptian museums often are forced to double as warehouses. And yet, there is no clear evidence even of the Hebrew captivity in Egypt. The one clear case of a Jewish settlement in Egypt is that uncovered on Elephantine Island, in Southern (Upper) Egypt. Although this sixth-century BCE community, possibly of mercenaries, displayed some polytheist influences, they had a temple, and left behind a trove of legal documents and letters in Aramaic. Clearly they had not adopted the Egyptian language, and there is no trace of their use of written Egyptian.

When the Rabbinical philosopher and exegete Sa'adiah ben Yosef Gaon (born in Egypt and died in Baghdad, ninth to tenth century CE) translated the Pentateuch (the so-called Books of Moses) into Arabic, he not only wrote it using the Hebrew alphabet, but used the Arabic passive participle *ma'bûd* (the one who is worshipped) to translate God, rather than Allah, which is the normal word for God not only in the Qur'an, but also in the New Testament. This is the extent to which he attempted to cling to at least some Hebrew in his translation, and avoid any hint of non-Israelite religious tainting.

In the case of the Brass Plates of Laban, one is struck by the fact that Nephi had sufficiently great resources to attempt to buy the brass plates. But why not buy a Hebrew copy of the sacred books, or commission copyists to make a copy. Certainly a Hebrew text would be better, and should have been the first priority. The only advantage of the brass plates was that they also contained the genealogy of Lehi. But surely this could have been revealed to a prophet and seer. For the BOM authors, the plates had a very important function: to assert the practice of writing the scriptures on metallic plates, and to establish the use of Egyptian for that purpose, thereby making it possible for Mormon to write on gold plates, and in reformed Egyptian, a language that they though would never be deciphered..

The brass plates of Laban contained the five books of Moses, and a record of the Jews down to Zedekiah (I Nephi 5:11), possibly therefore Joshua, Samuel I & II, and Kings I & II, to the extent that Kings II had been completed, in addition to Isaiah and some of Jeremiah.

## Nephite Language

Nephi states that his father had lived all his days in Jerusalem, while at the same time referring to Egyptian as the language of his (Nephi's) father. It is hard to imagine that these two statements are not contradictory. He claimed to be descended from Joseph. This implies that he would have hailed from the tribe of Joseph. When the tribe of Levi was made into a priestly cast and scattered among the other tribes, their land was reallocated, along with that of Joseph, to split the tribe of Joseph into the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim. Those both were located in the north, in what had become the northern kingdom, after conflict (between Solomon's sons, Jeroboam and Rehoboam) divided Israel into the Kingdom of Judah in the south, and the Kingdom of Israel in the North. When Nephi says that he went to the land of his inheritance to get the silver, gold and other precious things (left there by his father) to buy the brass plates, he might have gone to the north, to the land of Israel (Samaria). It would appear that one or some of Lehi's forebears had moved from this land of their inheritance to Jerusalem, possibly generations earlier, but certainly before his birth. Nephi and his siblings too must have been reared in Jerusalem, with their father. Surely their first language must have been Hebrew.

Nephi had a choice to make. He could write his record in Hebrew, and include passages from the brass plates in Hebrew translation, or write in Egyptian, or write in Hebrew but quote from the brass plates in Egyptian. Even though the first language of the people was Hebrew, and in spite of the sacred stamp of the Hebrew language, and its symbolic value for ethnic pride, he chose to write in Egyptian. (1 Nephi 1:2) Inexplicably, he calls it the language of his father, although he had lived in Jerusalem all his days, and the land of his inheritance was somewhere in Palestine, as we have seen. The Book of Mormon claim is, therefore, that an elite among the people were bilingual, speaking Hebrew, but using Egyptian largely as a scriptural language, a bit like Latin in Italy, confined to the Vatican.

Nephi made plates with his own hands (1 Nephi 1:17) and wrote his history in Egyptian. (1 Nephi 1:2) Later, he was commanded to make a second set of plates. He says (1 Nephi 19):

1. I did make plates of ore [i.e., gold] that I might engraven upon them the record of my people. And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them.

2 And I knew not at the time when I made them that I should be commanded of the Lord to make these plates; wherefore, the record of my father, and the genealogy of his fathers, and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness are engraven upon those first plates of which I have spoken; wherefore, the things which transpired before I made these plates are, of a truth, more particularly made mention upon the first plates.

The first set is the longer account, which was the first 130-some pages of the Book of Mormon, before it became necessary to start over again, at which point a different text was used, the smaller plates. The list of the keepers of the record is recorded:

### **Table of the Transmission of the Plates, and of Generations**

**ADJ: After Departure from Jerusalem**  
**YOJ: Year of the Reign of the Judges**  
**YOS: Year Since the Sign (birth of Jesus)**

Gener- ation	date	date (ADJ)	Event/Transmission of Plates
	598	0	Departure from Jerusalem
	594	4	Approximate birth of Jacob, brother of Nephi

	590	8	At end of eight years in the wilderness (1 Nephi 17:4)
<b>1</b>	543	55	Approximate death of Nephi Nephi gives plates to Jacob, his brother, born in the wilderness (Jacob 1:-21)
<b>2</b>	???		Plates passed from Jacob to Enos son of Jacob
<b>3</b>	419	179	Approximate death of Enos Jarom, son of Enos, receives plates
<b>4</b>		238	Approximate death of Jarom Omni son of Jarom receives plates
<b>5</b>		282	Approximate death of Omni Passed plates to Amaron son of Omni
		320	Approximate death of Amaron Plates passed to his brother, Chemish
<b>6</b>			Chemish passes plates to his son Abinadom
<b>7</b>			Abinadom passes plates to his son Amaleki
<b>8</b>			Amaleki has no heir Plates passed to King Benjamin
<b>9</b>		476	Mosiah reigns in his father's stead, at age 30 Plates passed to Mosiah
		479	King Benjamin dies
<b>10</b>			King Mosiah passes plates to Alma son of Alma (Mosiah 28:20 ) Alma is subsequently appointed the first Chief Judge Alma's father dies, age 82
		509	King Mosiah dies, in 33 <sup>rd</sup> year of his reign, age 63 Years of the Reign of the Judges begin (YOJ)
		518	At the beginning of the 9 <sup>th</sup> year of the reign of the judges, Alma delivers judgment seat to Nephiha Moroni was 25 when he was appointed Chief Captain over the Nephites
<b>11</b>		528	Alma blesses Helaman and departs (19 <sup>th</sup> year of the judges)
		544	Helaman dies in 35 <sup>th</sup> year of judges)
		545	Shiblon brother of Helaman takes possession of plates in 36 <sup>th</sup> year of judges (from Helaman)
<b>12</b>		548	Shiblon dies in 39 <sup>th</sup> year of judges Delivers plates to Helaman son of Helaman
		551	Helaman son of Helaman appointed to the judgment seat, 42 <sup>nd</sup> year of judges
<b>13</b>		562	Helaman son of Helaman dies, leaves plates to son Nephi, in 53 <sup>rd</sup> year of judges
		571	Nephi delivers judgment seat to Cezoram, in the 62 <sup>nd</sup> year of judges
		575	Cezoram murdered, then his son is murdered, in the 66 <sup>th</sup> year of judges
<b>14</b>		600	Lachoneus is chief judge, in 91 <sup>st</sup> year of judges (date given: 91 YOJ = 600 ADJ; see 3 Nephi 1:1 Nephi, son of Helaman, passes plates to his son, Nephi, son of Nephi Years after the Sign (birth of Jesus) begin
		609	Equals 100 year of the judges (3 Nephi 2:5-6) Equals also 9 years since the sign of the coming of Christ
		625	Mormon (disciple) records plates (25 year after sign of coming of Christ)
		630	Lachoneus son of Lachoneus becomes governor (30 <sup>th</sup> year of the sign) Chief judge is murdered
		634	A great storm on the 34 <sup>th</sup> year, 1 <sup>st</sup> month, 4 <sup>th</sup> day of the sign
		634	"Age of man" defined by Christ as "seventy two years"
<b>15</b>		710	110 years after the sign equals first generation since Christ, i.e., eighty years Nephi, son of Nephi, dies, having kept the record 84 years Plates passed to his son Amos

<b>16</b>		794	194 years after the coming of Christ (i.e., after the sign), Amos dies and passes plates to his son, Amos son of Amos
		801	Dissension begins in 201 <sup>st</sup> year of the sign (or since birth of Christ)
		810	Many churches, schisms, existed, 210 years after the sign
		831	Nephite/Lamanite division reestablished, 231 <sup>st</sup> year after the sign
		905	Amos died and his brother Ammaron gets the records, in year 305
		920	Ammaron hides records in 32091 after the birth of Christ Mormon (about age 10) receives instructions from Ammaron
		921	Mormon accompanies father to Zarahemla Nephite/Lamanite warring begins
		926	Mormon is sixteen in 326 after Christ
<b>17</b>		945	Mormon gets the records in 345 and begins keeping the record
		984	Nephites gather at Cumorah
		1,000	Nephites destroyed; no more Christians (400 after Christ) About this time, Moroni begins writing on the plates
		1,021	Moroni seals the plates

Nephi son of Lehi, to Jacob (his brother), to Enos (his son), to Jarom (his son), to Omni (his son), to Amaron (his son), to Chemish (his brother), to Abinadom (his son), to Amaleki (his son); then to King Benjamin, to Mosiah (his son), to Alma (the son of Alma), to Helaman (his son), to Shiblon (his brother), to Helaman (son of Helaman), to Nephi (his son), to Nephi (his son), to Amos (his son), to Amos (his son), to Ammaron (his brother). Ammaron hid them in the hill called Shim, and instructed Mormon how to find them later. Not counting brothers, there are 17 individuals in the list, including King Benjamin.

Therefore, the records in Egyptian were passed essentially from father to son, along a line of descent from Nephi. It was a sequence of prophets, who were spiritual, and sometimes political elites.

Apart from these plates, there were plates kept by Mormon the disciple of Christ, and the plates of the kings: “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.” (Mormon 1:10)

When King Benjamin passed the plates to his son Mosiah, he said:

For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been 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 this present time. (Mosiah 1:4)

..he also gave him charge concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass; and also the plates of Nephi; and also, the sword of Laban, and the ball or director, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord ... (Mosiah 1:16)

When Alma passed the records to his son Helaman, he said (Alma 37: 2-3):

And I also command you that ye keep a record of this people, according as I have done, upon the plates of Nephi, and keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them; for it is for a wise purpose that they are kept. [i.e., the plates of Nephi]

And these plates of brass, which contain these engravings, which have the records of the holy scriptures upon them, which have the genealogy of our forefathers, even from the beginning— [i.e., apparently the plates of Laban]

Each member in this line of succession taught the Egyptian language to his sons, to pass on the ability to read and continue the record. The fact that this instruction was necessary shows that Egyptian was not their spoken language, but rather a scriptural, literary, but otherwise dead language.

This is reflected in the statement of Mormon, when speaking of his production of the text on the gold plates, saying that he wrote in reformed Egyptian which had been “handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech,” due to a shortage of gold, apparently reformed Egyptian being a more compact language. Notably he adds, “if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record.” This indicates that of the two, he was able to write in Hebrew better than in Egyptian. This agrees with the above observation, that the first language of the Nephites was Hebrew, and that among them there was an elite who handed down a knowledge of Egyptian.

The assertion that both Egyptian and Hebrew had been altered over the course of a millennium in the New World is not unusual. Language always changes. Even so, the Semitic languages display remarkable resistance to change, largely due to their triconsonantal structure and the forms used to generate vocabulary. Even Coptic resembles ancient Egyptian to such an extent that Champollion, who knew Coptic, was able to use it to decipher the Rosetta Stone text, once he had identified enough of the phonological characters. Two of the principal factors that promote language change are the adoption of a language by a substrate population that speaks some other language, and influences from neighboring languages, especially languages with considerable cultural dominance. Egyptian and Hebrew among the Nephites would have suffered neither of these influence, since the land is claimed to have been devoid of human beings prior to Lehi’s arrival. Especially Egyptian, existing in splendid isolation, and used mostly as a written scriptural language, should have remained largely intact.

Many other records existed. In Helaman 3:15 we read “But behold, there are many books and many records of every kind, and they have been kept chiefly by the Nephites.” But the Lamanites also kept a record, and carried on correspondence. (Mosiah 24:6)

Communications by sending epistles was very common (Moroni 8:1; Alma 54:14-15; 56:1; 57:1-3; 59:3-4; 60:1; 60:25; 61:1 & 9; 61:19; 3 Nephi 3:1; 3:10; Mormon 3:4; 6:2; Ether 15:4-5; 15:18; and Moroni 8:6). Messages were often sent, and though some may have been delivered orally, others may have been written (Alma 15:4; 43:24; 47:12; & 47:33). Decrees were sent (Alma 23:2). Proclamations were “published throughout all the land” (Alma 22:27; 23:1; 30:57; 47:1; 61:6; Helaman 9:9; 3 Nephi 3:22; Mosiah 2:1; 7:17; & 27:2). The scriptures were sent out to teach the people: “Now behold, all those engravings which were in the possession of Helaman were written and sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land, save it were those parts which had been commanded by Alma should not go forth. (Alma 63:12)

The Nephite/Lamanite civilization is described as being very advanced, with numerous cities, many of them fortified, kingship, coinage, advanced metallurgy, wheeled vehicles, large armies and a written tradition in two languages. Writing must have been essential to keep inventories, write contracts and conduct business. Indeed, in parts of the ancient Middle East, these mundane applications were the earliest and most common use of writing. Since the account of the Nephites and Lamanites spans a period of over 1,000 years, certainly they would have left written material, in both languages, monumental inscriptions, commemorative inscriptions, signet rings, seal stamps, texts on jars used in votive offerings, royal and business correspondence, documents (contracts, inventories, marriage and divorce writs, and

scriptures), tomb inscriptions and inscribed bone boxes. Some principal cities would have had a royal archive. Apparently, metal plates were a common medium for records in the Book of Mormon.

Even if the Hebrew writing system was altered, the alphabet has only twenty-two characters. Its form at the end of the seventh century BCE is known to scholars from inscriptions. If a text in altered Hebrew were to be found, a specialist would readily identify the alphabet, and basic translation would be possible in possibly no more than a year. Subtle shifts in the meaning of words, and neologisms, would keep scholars busy for many years. It is even now so with Biblical Hebrew. Joseph Smith's transcription of characters from the gold plates would readily identify the reformed Egyptian, but its decipherment would be more complex and take longer. Certainly the character set would be larger, and logograms would exist alongside phonological characters, but even so, there is no reason to assume that this challenge would be greater than that faced by Champollion. Above all, minimally, archaeologists should be digging up textual material that is unidentified, not Mayan, or part of the Zapotec/Oaxacan/Aztec systems. In spite of massive archaeological exploration and excavation in the New World, no unidentified writing has been found that could be a candidate for a Nephite or Lamanite text.

### **Nephite Life Expectancy**

As seen in the Table of Records Transmission, death dates are usually stated, but birth dates are not. To what extent can this table reflect life expectancy? For the first sequence of father-son plates transmission, the base to calculate from is the birth of Jacob during the eight years in the wilderness. The plates transmission table operates on the assumption that Jacob was born in year four After the Departure from Jerusalem (ADJ). Since the lives of father and son overlap, and since it is not certain how soon after passing on the plates a father died, it is not possible to determine how long individuals lived with accuracy. On the other hand, Alma senior died at age 82 and Mosiah died at age 63. When Jesus asks his disciples what they wish, they reply (3 Nephi 28: 2-3):

And they all spake, save it were three, saying: We desire that after we have lived unto the age of man, that our ministry, wherein thou hast called us, may have an end, that we may speedily come unto thee in thy kingdom.

And he said unto them: Blessed are ye because ye desired this thing of me; therefore, after that ye are seventy and two years old ye shall come unto me in my kingdom; and with me ye shall find rest.

So, in this passage, the "age of man" is apparently 72 years.

### **Nephite Chronology**

The table of the individuals to whom the plates were passed is, at the same time, a table of Nephite generations. The layman can easily confuse procreation generations with lifespan. For example, since Nephite history covered about 1,016 years since the birth of Jacob, brother of Nephi, and since Moroni may have lived a few years after 421 after the birth of Jesus, if the average lifespan was 100 years, then the ages of ten people would add up to 1,000 years. But for this to be generations, each successor in the list would be born on his father's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, i.e., in the year of his father's death. Clearly, lifespan is not the same as a procreation generation.

The generation count, based on the plates transmission list, has a convenient beginning point, the birth of Jacob, the first of two children born to Lehi in the wilderness, on route to the New World. This gives us a rather accurate birth date. Ammaron hid the plates in the hill called Shim c. 320 CE. He had had the plates

for only 15 years. Generally, the brothers in the list should not be counted as different generations. Passing the plates to a brother is like a lateral pass in football, rather than a thirty or forty yard pass. We will count Jacob because we are not counting his brother, Nephi, and we will not count Ammaron, but will Mormon, since Ammaron was a brother. Mormon was sixteen in 326 (Mormon 2:2), and was killed by the Lamanites c. 400 after the birth of Jesus (the year of the sign). Moroni bids farewell c. 421, living virtually alone, in hiding from the Lamanites. The most reliable last date is therefore the death of Mormon, in c. 400, or 1000 ADJ. So we have 17 individuals in our list, spanning 1,000 years. If each sired his son on his deathbed, the average lifespan would be almost 60 years (1,000/17).

Note that the first 600 years has twelve generations, while the remaining 400 years have only four.

Generations vary from population to population. In twenty-first century Europe, a generation might be twenty-five years. But in a third-world country with a low age at marriage, and higher mortality, a generation might be only sixteen or seventeen years. In the case of the Nephites, in an ideal environment, where food was plentiful, and the diseases of the Old World might have been mostly left behind, we might assume, on the outside, that on average each family had eight children. Although early Hebrew society had a low age at marriage (possibly fourteen or fifteen), let us assume it was higher among the Nephites, to be on the conservative side. In fact, to be outrageously generous, let us assume that on average, the plates were given to the second of four sons (rather than strict primogeniture), that the first child was born when the father was twenty seven, that children were born every two years with alternating genders, so that the one receiving the plates was born when the father was thirty-three, on average. Generations absolutely had to be shorter than this, but with this generous calculation, there would be three generations in a hundred years, and thirty in a thousand years. The table of the transmission of the plates has only sixteen generational individuals, about half of what it must be, mathematically. In known populations, the number of generations per hundred years would be at least four, which comes to forty in 1,000 years.

The data in the table can be explained in theory. If each individual sires the son in question at age 60, then each of the 17 individuals would have been born sixty years after the other, and  $17 \times 60 = 1020$  years. This would be the average pattern, and is virtually impossible. Accounting for the last 400 years in just four generations is more problematic. For example:

Father is 50 years old when siring the son		Father is 80 years old when siring the son	
Record Keeper	DOB	Record Keeper	DOB
1. Jacob	4 ADJ	14. Nephi	684 ADJ
2. Enos	54 ADJ	15. Amos	764 ADJ
3. Jarom	104 ADJ	16. Amos	844 ADJ
4. Omni	154 ADJ	17. Mormon	924 ADJ
5. Amaron	204 ADJ		
6. Abinadom	254 ADJ		
7. Amaleki	304 ADJ		
8. King Benjamin	354 ADJ		
9. King Mosiah	404 ADJ		
10. Alma	454 ADJ		
11. Helaman	504 ADJ		
12. Helaman	554 ADJ		
13. Nephi	604 ADJ		

[NOTE: Not all the names are part of the same father-son chain, which was broken by the passage to King Benjamin, but his and his son's ages are not high, and the father-son assumption can be used.]

If we assume that the average lifespan in the table is 62.5 years (super-high for preindustrial times), then sixteen lifespans equals 1,000 years. It is clear that the number of generation individuals in the list was based on a misunderstanding; the BOM authors confused lifespan with generation.

## **Conclusions**

1. The claim that the Hebrew scriptures had been collected as a sort of Bible, and translated into Egyptian, by the end of the seventh century BCE, is extremely unlikely.
2. The Book of Mormon claims that Hebrew was the first language of the Nephites, and Egyptian was a written scriptural language.
3. The Book of Mormon states that there were many records of every kind, and correspondence.
4. If the Nephite/Lamanite civilization existed in the Americas without a substrate population and language, or neighbors using other languages, then their Hebrew and Egyptian would have existed in ideal circumstances to resist change.
5. Such a large and advanced civilization, existing for over 1,000 years in the Americas should have left written artifacts that can be deciphered, or at the very least, there should be unidentified texts that are candidates for ancient Nephite texts. No Nephite or Lamanite written material has ever been found, or any unidentified text that could be a candidate for it.
6. Using ultra conservative assumptions to calculate generations, the generation list of persons receiving the plates of Laban and Nephi has little more than half as many generations as the number needed for a period of 1,000 years. The list reflects a lay misunderstanding of generations on the part of the authors of the Book of Mormon, confusing generations with lifespan.