This article explains the benefits of studying specific words in the context of the Book of Mormon. Focusing on the origin of a word provides additional meaning and insight to a particular verse of scripture and helps the reader better understand the intended meaning of the author.
Asking the question “What’s in a word?” can be a fruitful method for studying the scriptures for several reasons:

1. The study of words (called philology) can clarify Book of Mormon terms that were familiar to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries but that may seem obscure to today’s readers. For example, to modern readers the adjective *quick* usually means “speedy,” but in Joseph Smith’s time, the word *quick* also meant “alive, living, as opposed to dead or unanimated.” A careful reader would notice that *quick* means “alive” rather than “speedy” in Helaman 3:29, “lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful.”

2. A fuller knowledge of the denotations, connotations, and origins of English words may aid those who are translating the Book of Mormon into non-English languages. For example, the word *quick* in English has the same origin as the word *vivus* in Latin and *bios-* in Greek. They all share the same reconstructed Indo-European root *g*wei-, meaning “to live” or “life.” The /gw/ sound in Indo-European (IE) became a /kw/ sound in English, spelled as qu-. In Latin and Greek, the IE /gw/ lost the velar /g/ sound, and the labial /w/ became a /v/ or a /b/, leading to *vivus* and *bios-*.

The meaning of the word *quick* gradually narrowed in English from “alive” to “lively” to “vigorou” to “energetic” to “rapid.” A Spanish translator could use the noun *vivos* to correspond to *quick* in Moroni 10:34, “the eternal Judge of both quick and dead,” and the adjective *rápido* to represent *quick* in 3 Nephi 7:15, “their quick return from righteousness,” in order to achieve an accurate translation.

3. Although the base language of the Book of Mormon is now English in Joseph Smith’s translation, the original dialect of the records was an adaptation of Hebrew learning and Egyptian language (1 Nephi 1:2). Thus Semitic language roots can also be helpful for obtaining scriptural insights. The “speedy” meaning of the adverb *quickly* appears in a Hebrew transliteration as *maher* in the Old Testament: “They have turned aside quickly out of the way” (Exodus 32:8). The “living” definition of the adjective *quick* in the Old Testament appears as *hayyim* in a passage about being buried alive: “if . . . the earth openeth her mouth . . . and they go down quick into the pit; then ye shall understand that these men have provoked the Lord” (Numbers 16:30). However, in Isaiah 11:3, which is restated in 2 Nephi 21:3, the adjective *quick* has neither *maher* nor *hayyim* as its root: “[the Spirit of the Lord] shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord.” Instead, the Hebrew form *hariyyho* appears for *quick*, with connotations of “delight,” “sensitivity,” “perception,” and “touch.” This Hebrew nuance is effectively captured in the Spanish translation of the Book of Mormon, where *quick* transfers into *penetrante*, meaning “keen” or “profound” instead of “rapid” or “alive.”

4. Often the roots of words form a poetic network of associations that endorse the truths of the gospel. The history of English words may reveal insights about sacred teachings contained in the Book of Mormon. For example, the words *tree* and *truth* are both derivatives of the Indo-European root *deru-*, which means “firm,” “solid,” or “steadfast,” often referring to objects made of wood.

When we apply this knowledge to the vision of the tree of life received by Lehi and Nephi (1 Nephi 8 and 11), the “tree” of life is also the “truth” of life, a reminder that Christ was crucified on a tree (1 Peter 2:24) and that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Other derivatives of the root *deru-* in English include...
the following: true, trow, troth, betroth, trust, tryst, and endure. Nephi’s admonition to “endure to the end” (2 Nephi 31:20) means trusting God, waiting upon the Lord, and espousing the truth. A person who trusts in the Lord is like a tree by a river (Psalm 1:1–3; Jeremiah 17:7–8). Those who nourish the word will pluck sweet, pure, and precious fruit with confidence from the “tree springing up unto everlasting life” (Alma 32:41–43).

5. According to 2 Nephi 11:4, all things typify or bear record of Christ. Thus, language can be a type of Christ, and words can bear record of him. Words can bear record of Christ not only in standard definitions but also in their underlying etymological roots and derivatives. The tongue of every nation, kindred, and people can testify of Christ in its own way, and the linguistic history of sacred terms or scriptural words in a language can provide insights about our relationship to the Lord.

This column will present material from scholarly reference tools that can enhance our understanding of the words we encounter in our scripture study. In the early 19th century (paralleling the restoration of the gospel), Europe and the United States experienced a philological renaissance. Lexicographers published the family history of English words in great works such as Noah Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language and James Murray’s Oxford English Dictionary. Further research in comparative historical linguistics has reconstructed the lineage of English back into the Indo-European family of languages, as recorded in Calvert Watkins’s appendix to the American Heritage Dictionary.

Another useful reference tool is the latest edition of a computerized scripture concordance WordCruncher program that enables us to search for words and references in English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Old Testament Hebrew, and New Testament Greek. Some comparative historical linguists believe that Indo-European languages (such as English and Greek) are genetically related to Afro-Asiatic languages (such as Hebrew and Arabic) through a common ancient linguistic ancestor called Nostratic, which is in turn related to other language families that point back to one common mother tongue. Although all languages have been altered substantially by language change and language contact over the centuries, from time to time we see underlying similarities in sound, meaning, structure, and cultural traditions.

The Prophet Joseph Smith returned the gold plates to Moroni for safekeeping, so we cannot consult the original text of the Book of Mormon for linguistic insights as we might consult Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic source texts for information about the Bible. However, we can search out the meanings of words in the languages and texts that are available to us. If you are interested in knowing the history and meaning of a particular word in the Book of Mormon, we invite you to submit a request by e-mail to Cynthia_Hallen@byu.edu. We will consider including your “What’s in a Word” question in a future edition of this journal.
building of temples to reveal the ordinances of the temple for both the living and the dead (see Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 224, 307–8, 323).}

12. The phrase “power to permit” is a misspelling of the phrase “power to permit.”

Hugh W. Nibley, Mormon. He defined Joseph Smith to “find” the Book of Mormon and Mormon (see Ephesians 1:9–10). When all things in Christ will be gathered together, there will be a final judgment and the comprehensive of the languages, one might reasonably expect to find how large volumes they held this view, although some held the view that the Jews built temples in Egypt on Elephantine (destroyed in 410 B.C.E.) and Leontopolis (shut down in A.D. 73) where sacrifice was offered. See Haran, Temples, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah Menahot 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud Menahot 109a.

What’s in a Word?
Gyrthia L. Hallen

4. All Hebrew translations are adapted from the Interlinear Scriptures Concordance program (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2001).

New Light

1. For example, see the April 2001 issue of Insights, the FARMS newsletter, for observations about the limits of radiocarbon dating even at its best.

Out of the Dust

1. John W. Welch, ed., Reexploring the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), ix, xii–xxi.