Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon

Foolish **or Hebrew?**

In the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon Alma 46:19 reads, "When Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the rent of his garment in the air." Of course, the **rent** is the **hole**, the **tear**, the space that now separated what was once a whole. Yes, the Prophet made an error which has been corrected in later printings to read, "***rent part***." But, perhaps not *foolish.* Rather, this almost silly omission has become one thread in a tapestry of evidence pointing to the truth of this young prophet's claim: he was really translating a Hebrew text. "**Waving the rent,**" may be ludicrous English but it is a literal translation of perfectly good Hebrew. John Tvedtnes explains that in Hebrew, the noun modified by a verbal substantive like **rent** is assumed from its context. Thus, "part" would not be included in the Hebrew text. It must be supplied by the translator.**(1)** Yes, Joseph failed to supply the missing word, thus leaving us this interesting evidential strand.

Mark Twain called the Book of Mormon "chloroform in print," and the 1830 edition would similarly impress most modern readers. Many Latter-day Saints are surprised to learn that there have been nearly 1400 changes in this *most perfect* of books since its original publication in 1830. These changes have principally been made to correct Joseph Smith's *abominable* grammar. While these changes have certainly made the text more readable, there is still much language in the current edition that is strange to the English ear.

The problem is that many of the expressions found in this *perfect* book don't really belong to the English language. Not only are they not good English, they are also not representative of the language of Joseph Smith's rural upstate New York upbringing. Brother Tvedtnes contends "that the Book of Mormon, in its English form as provided by Joseph Smith, is in many respects a nearly literal translation." The Book of Mormon shows all the signs of being a translation of an ancient Semitic record which has been translated into English by someone who had little skill in English grammar and phrasing. The sentence structure, word usage, and peculiar idioms of the original language have been nearly recreated in sometimes very awkward English phrases. Brother Tvedtnes concludes, "In most cases thus far investigated, Book of Mormon expressions which are ungrammatical in English are perfect Hebrew grammar."**(2)** Instances of Hebraic expression found in an English text are called *Hebraisms.* This paper will examine a number of Hebraisms that are found in the Book of Mormon. A more detailed discussion will be found in the references.

"*And it came to pass*"

Most have heard Twain's quip that removing "and it came to pass" from the Book of Mormon would reduce it to a pamphlet. Who could blame him? Even in the present edition of the Book of Mormon "**it came to pass**" occurs 1297 times.

However, this phrase also occurs 457 times in the KJV of the Old Testament. There, it's the English translation of the single Hebrew word, *hâyâh*. We tend to read this phase as indicating a passage of time. However, J Weingreen, in *Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, suggests that it would best be given the meaning, "*now it happened*." Strong's Hebrew dictionary suggests "*to exist*" or "*to become*" as possible translations of *hâyâh*. Royal Skousen postulates that *hâyâh* represents a

"discourse marker" and suggests that the phrase **and it came to pass** "may be considered equivalent to *and then* or *and so*."**(3)** The Hebrew Old Testament has 1114 occurrences of the word *hâyâh*. Most of these have either been ignored or reduced to simply *"and."*

In his editing for the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon Joseph Smith removed 46 occurrences of "it came to pass," rendering them as "*and*," just as was done by the King James translators. If Mark Twain was reading the 1830 edition he would have encountered passages like this:

> **2 Nephi 4:10:** "**and it came to pass** that when my father had made an end of speaking unto them behold **it came to pass** that he spake unto the sons of Ishmael . . ."

> **Alma 8:18-19:** "now **it came to pass** that after Alma had received his message from the angel of the Lord he returned speedily to the land of Ammonihah and **it came to pass** that he entered the city by another way yea by the way which was on the south of the city Ammonihah and **it came to pass** that as he entered the city . . ."

Many Old Testament examples could be given of similar construction which would result from a literal translation of the Old Testament Hebrew. One will suffice. The current KJV of Genesis 35:16-18 contains two instances of "it came to pass," but, there are three in the Hebrew (the omitted text is shown in [ ]):

> "And they journeyed from Bethel; and [**it came to pass that**] there was but a little way to come to Ephrath: and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labour. And **it came to pass**, when she was in hard labour, that the midwife said unto her, Fear not; thou shalt have this son also. And **it came to pass**, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin."

In a recent interesting discovery, a Mayan language element has been translated "and it came to pass." The function of this element in Mayan texts is rather well defined. Depending on context, it references the reader either forward or backward to a specific date or event. An analysis of the Book of Mormon has shown that many of the instances of "and it came to pass" are reasonably consistent with this Mayan meaning of this expression.**(4)**

Why is this phrase so common in the Book of Mormon? The answer is simple: *Because Joseph was translating a Hebrew text.* If "*it came to pass*" were not prominent in the Book of Mormon, the Hebrew claims for its origin would be absurd. *Hâyâh* is an integral part of Hebrew expression. Thus, "*it came to pass*" must be found as a common expression in any document that claims to be a translation from Hebrew to English. Does this prove the Hebrew origins of the Book of Mormon? No. But another thread is added to our tapestry of evidence.

And, and, and; Too Many "*ands*"

In Hebrew, words, phrases, and sentences are generally connected by a single character, usually translated "*and*." Thus, in a literal translation of Hebrew into English "*and*" appears in many places where English would have a punctuation mark. In this literal translation, many sentences would begin with "*and,*" as in Alma 11 where 20 of the 23 verses begin with "And." Lists in this literal translation would have each item set off by "*and,*" as in "all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of precious ores" (2 Nephi 5:15). Many other strange uses of "*and*" might also be expected to occur. The following paragraphs illustrate some of these.

"And" or "But"

This Hebrew conjunction translated *and* really has many possible meanings in English. In the Old Testament it has been translated: "or," "then," "certainly," "perhaps," "in order to," "like," "therefore," "so," "thus," and "but." This last, *but,* leads us to an interesting observation in the Book of Mormon.

Consider this sentence from Moroni 9:4, "and when I speak the word of God with sharpness they tremble and anger against me; **and** when I use no sharpness they harden their hearts against it." Obviously, the sense of this "**and. .**" would, in English, be better expressed by the word "**but. ..**" However, if Joseph was making a near literal translation Hebrew, "**and**" is a correct rendering. Another example provides and even better illustration. A promise from the Lord is quoted by Lehi in 2 Nephi 1:20. In 2 Nephi 4:4, this same passage is again quoted, with one interesting difference: the "**but**" appearing in the first passage is replaced by an "**and. .**" in the second. The Hebrew for each of these passages would be identical and both renditions are fully acceptable translations of that Hebrew.

"And also"

Another unusual construction using "*and*" is the Hebrew use of "*and also.*" In this case, English also uses "*and*" but Hebrew must add "*also.*" In Hebrew this construct, "*and also,*" is used to denote a strong link between two things. Again, this structure is common throughout the Book of Mormon (it occurs 447 times). For example, in 1 Nephi 8:3 "*and also*" appears twice:

> "And behold, because of the thing which I have seen, I have reason to rejoice in the Lord because of Nephi **and also** of Sam; for I have reason to suppose that they, **and also** many of their seed, will be saved."

"If . . . . and"

Here is yet another place where the Hebrew "*and*" shows up in a strange place. The Hebraic equivalent of the English *if-then* clause is the Hebrew *if-and* clause. This is not found in the current editions of the Book of Mormon, nor is it found anywhere in and English Old Testament. But, it was in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. For example, this is how Helaman 12:13-21 appeared in that edition:

> ". . . yea, and **if** he sayeth unto the earth Move **and** it is moved; yea, and **if** he sayeth unto the earth, Thou shalt go back, that it lengthen out the day for many hours, **and** it is done; . . . And behold, also, **if** he sayeth unto the waters of the great deep, Be thou dried up, **and** it is done. Behold, **if** he sayeth unto this mountain, Be thou raised up, and come over and fall upon that city, that it be buried up **and** behold it is done. . . . and **if** the Lord shall say, Be thou accursed, that no man shall find thee from this time henceforth and forever, **and** behold, no man getteth it henceforth and forever. And behold, **if** the Lord shall say unto a man, Because of thine iniquities thou shalt be accursed forever, **and** it shall be done. And **if** the Lord shall say, Because of thine iniquities thou shalt be cut off from my presence, **and** he will cause that it shall be so."

The Parenthetical Insert

Hebrew does not use the parenthesis or comma, instead, the *and character* is used to set off what in English would be a parenthetical phrase or comment. In the English Old Testament, the translation has regularly expressed this using the normal English practice of parentheses and commas (leaving the *and character* untranslated). But, the Book of Mormon, particularly the 1830 edition, used the Hebraic form, usually introducing a parenthetical statement with a *now*, and ending with *and*. For example, we read in 3 Nephi 12:1, "When Jesus had spoken these words unto Nephi, and to those who had been called, (**now. .** the number of them who had been called, and received power and authority to baptize, was twelve) **and. .** behold, he stretched forth his hand" (remember, the punctuation was inserted by the printer). An example of the *and . . . and* construction is found in the 1830 edition of 1 Nephi 10:17. This reads, ". . . which power was received by faith in the Son of God **and. .** the Son of God was the Messiah who should come **and** it came to pass . . ." This is certainly not good English, but it is very good Hebrew.

There Have Been a Lot of Changes!

"Who" / "Which" / "Where"

In Hebrew, the relative "pronoun" *'aser,* which might be translated "which" in English, is used for both human and nonhuman references. This same pronoun is used in *place* references. The most common correction to the 1830 Book of Mormon grammar has been the change of *which* to *who* (891 times). In an additional 66 case, *which* has been changed to *whom.* This is another instance where the Hebrew structure of the first edition resulted in unacceptable English sentences. For example, Alma 46:34, in the 1830 edition read, "Now, Moroni being a man **which** was appointed by the chief judges . . . "

That's Just Too Much

There have been 188 instances of the word *that* removed from the Book of Mormon since its 1830 publication. Even a casual reference to the original edition would confirm the need for this drastic revision. Yet, many instances of this Hebraic phrasing still remain in the current text. Here are two examples:

"And because **that** they are redeemed from the fall" (2 Nephi 2:26)

"because **that** my heart is broken" (2 Nephi 4:32)

John Tvedtnes explains that Hebrew "begins subordinate clauses with prepositions plus a word that translates into *that* in English." This "that" is generally totally redundant in English. But, if the translation is literal, and the translator just doesn't know any better, *that's* what happens.

This Is Not the Way It's Done in English

Why Not Adverbs?

The Book of Mormon often uses a prepositional phrase in place of an adverb. This is not good English, but then the book does not claim to be English. Joseph said he was translating from Hebrew and Hebrew has very few adverbs. In Hebrew, a preposition is used instead. Consider the following Book of Mormon *Hebraisms*:

"with harshness" instead of "harshly"

"with joy" instead of "joyfully"

"with gladness" instead of "gladly"

"with patience" instead of "patiently"

"with diligence" instead of "diligently"

"in diligence" instead of "diligently"

"in abundance" instead of "abundantly"

"in righteousness" instead of "righteously"

"in the spirit" instead of "spiritually"

"of worth" instead of "worthy"

"of a surety" instead of "surely"

John Tvedtnes makes this further observation about Hebrew adverbs: "At least one adjective (*harebeh*, 'many, exceeding') is used adverbially, but more often a prepositional phrase is used. The Book of Mormon is replete with adverbial usage of the adjective 'exceeding' (as in 'exceeding great joy'--instead of 'exceedingly'--in 1 Nephi 8:12)." Just another thread in our tapestry.

"*Plates brass*" and *"Book Mormon"*?

Where English uses possessives, Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic use what is called the *construct state.* Instead of saying *David's city*, the Hebrew literally says *city David*. This is, of course, translated "city of David." This word order also applies to descriptions. While the normal English phrasing would be *brass plates,* the Hebrew word order would be *plates brass*, translated "plates of brass," the "of" being supplied by the translator. The phrase "brass plates" does not occur in the Book of Mormon, while "plates of brass" occurs 27 times. Both possessives and the normal English descriptive statements (like brass plates) are nearly absent from the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. Instead, the Book of Mormon is full of Hebraisms like:

Descriptives		Possessives	
night of darkness	rod of iron	sword of Laban	record of Jared
words of plainness	land of promise	plates of Nephi	Brother of Jared
mist of darkness	skin of blackness	Book of Mormon	language of Jacob
state of probation	altar of stones	army of Moroni	people of Ammon

What's with These Crazy Pronouns?

Pronouns in Hebrew are frequently overused by English standards. The following are two examples of this Hebraism which are common to both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon.

Redundant Pronouns: Hebrew often uses a pronoun in a subordinate clause which refers to the same person or object referenced in the main clause. For example, Nephi says, "I beheld, and saw the **people** of the seed of my brethren that **they. .** had overcome my seed." (1 Nephi 12:20).

Possessive Pronouns: In Hebrew, pronouns used for possession are attached as suffixes to the noun. This is similar to the "*plates brass*" construction. For example, the literal Hebrew of *his house* would be equivalent to *house-his.* Just as in the case of the translation of "*plates brass*" the translator may supply an "of" resulting in a sometimes strange English expression in the form "*house of him.*" An example of this is found in Jacob 5:2, where Jacob says, "*hear the words of me.*" (Check it out, that's the way it's still written in the latest edition.) More often, this will be translated "*his house*," or "*my words."* Even this good English translation results in a strange construction when there is more than one object referenced. Since the pronoun is attached to the noun, a literal translation must repeat the relative pronoun. This is illustrated in 1 Nephi 2:4. Nephi, describing his father's departure from Jerusalem says. "And he left **his. .** house, and the land of **his. .** inheritance, and **his. .** gold, and **his. .** silver, and **his** precious things. . . ."

"From before"?

The expression "from before" occurs 78 times in the King James translation of the Old Testament. These are expressions like: "from before thee," "from before them," "from before thy presence," and

"from before thy face." This is a Hebraism and does not occur in the New Testament. This form of expression appears 21 times in the Book of Mormon. Some might say that Joseph just copied this from the Old Testament. With this in mind, one example is interesting. The Hebrew phrase *mil-li-phnê* can be literally translated "from before the face of." or "from before my face," or "from before the presence of." Of the 21 Book of Mormon occurrences of "from before," thirteen are closely related to "from before my face." This is exactly the wording of six of these. Only once does "from before my face" appear in the KJV of the Old Testament.

"In" or "To"?

The Hebrew words translated into English as "*in*" and "*to*" are sometimes interchangeable in Hebrew sentence structure. Could this explain an interesting "error" in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon? In that edition, 1 Nephi 7:12 read, "Let us be faithful **in** him."

Neither "*more*" Nor "*er*" ???

In Hebrew there is no equivalent for the normal English phrasing of comparisons. In English we might say, "He is **more. .** handsome," or "She is tall**er. .**." Neither this use of *more* nor the addition of the suffix *er*, is possible in Hebrew. Instead of *more*, Hebrew uses *above all.* This should be very familiar to Book of Mormon readers as this "*above all*" comparison occurs 35 times in the current Book of Mormon text. There are many familiar examples: "choice **above all** other lands"; "sweet, **above all** that I ever before tasted"; "the tree which is precious **above all. .**." And in 1 Nephi 13:30, it occurs twice: "and have been lifted up by the power of God **above all. .** other nations, upon the face of the land which is choice **above all** other lands."

Taxing Taxes

There exists in the Semitic languages a construction called the "cognate accusative." It consists of a verb immediately followed by a noun derived from the same root, and is often used for emphasis. The Book of Mormon has many excellent examples:

"*they are cursed with a sore cursing*" instead of *sorely cursed*

"*work all manner of fine work*" instead of *do fine work*

"*and he did judge righteous judgments*" instead of *judge righteously*

"*Behold I have dreamed a dream*" instead of *I had a dream*

"*taxed with a tax*" Instead of *taxed*

Name that Name

In 1 Nephi 2:8, the following appears: "And it came to pass that he called the name of the river, Laman. . . . " In English, we would ordinarily expect to read "he called the river Laman," or "he named the river Laman." However, in both Hebrew and Arabic the construction of this phrase would be similar to the cognate accusative: "he **named. .** the **name**." This construction is seen throughout the Book of Mormon. Almost always it's the **name** that is named.

Numerals

In English compound numbers are hyphenated. We write twenty-five. In Hebrew the conjunction "and" is always used to express this compound (*twenty and five*). The Book of Mormon always uses this Hebrew form for expressing compound numbers.

Compound Subjects

In proper English, when a person speaks of themselves and another, the reference to the speaker should always come last. In Hebrew, this is reversed. Thus, "my brother and I" would be "I and my brother." The Book of Mormon consistently uses this Hebrew form.

Compound Prepositions

While rare in the English Bible, the Hebrew *compound preposition* is found throughout the Book of Mormon. Here are some examples:

by the hand **of** your enemies instead of "by your enemy's hand"

by the mouth **of** all the prophets instead of "said by all the prophets," or "by the prophet's mouth"

down **into** the land **of** Nephi instead of "down to Nephi," or "down to the land of Nephi"

fled **from before** my presence instead of "fled from me," or "fled from my presence"

Repeated Prepositions

In Hebrew when a preposition refers to multiple objects, it is usual for the preposition to be repeated with the mention of each object. In English we might say, "I was pleased with the work of Tom, Dick, and Harry." In Hebrew this would be: "I was pleased with the work of Tom, and of Dick, and of Harry." It might even be: ". . . the work of Tom, and the work of Dick, and the work of Harry." This can be seen in 2 Samuel 6:5, where we read, "Even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and on cymbals." This construction is also common in the Book of Mormon. For example, in Lehi's instruction to his son, Jacob (2 Nephi 2:5), he says:

*"And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And **by** the law no flesh is justified; or, **by** the law men are cut off. Yea, **by** the temporal law they were cut off; and also, **by** the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever."*

Prophetic Perfect

This one is interesting. Angela Crowell tells us that in Hebrew an action is either *completed* or *uncompleted*--there are no past, present, or future tenses. Instead, they have what are called the *perfect* and the *imperfect* tense. The perfect tense is used when speaking of the past and the imperfect when speaking of the future. However, in a fascinating exception to this rule, Hebrew prophets generally use the *perfect* tense when speaking of future events. This is called the *prophetic perfect*. Thus, the prophet will describe a future event as if it had already occurred. "For unto us a child **is. .** born," is a familiar example from Isaiah. Anyone who has read the Book of Mormon is aware that this pattern is followed throughout. The Nephi prophets continually speak of Christ as if he had already come. They continually speak of the atonement as if it had already occurred. They continually speak as if they were *Hebrew* prophets.

Plural Forms

The plural form in Hebrew would seem strange and ambiguous to most of us. There are words that are always plural, like: *hayyim* ("lives"); *samayim* ("heavens"); *mayim* ("waters"). Some words, like *hand, head, moth, tongue,* and *voice* are generally singular, even when referring to more than one person. Plurals are used for emphasis and the plural form of "God" (*elohim*) always takes a singular verb. This is strange and complex stuff. It's so far from English usage that any translator whose primary language was English would be expected to convert these plurals to standard English form.

But, what if this translator had limited education, perhaps not sufficiently familiar with his mother tongue to even compose an intelligible letter? Joseph just told Oliver what he saw in the words of the record and this educated, yet humble, scribe just wrote as he was told. So we have:

"Great **slaughters** with the sword" (1 Nephi 12:2)

"I did exhort them with all the **energies** of my soul" (1 Nephi 15:25)

"and did reap with your **mights**" (Alma 26:5 - 1830 edition)

"by the **voice** of his angels" (Alma 10:20 & 21)

"by the **mouth** of his holy prophets" (2 Nephi 9:2)

Word Plays?

Did the original Book of Mormon contain *word plays* which are not apparent to us in the English translation. We know that the Hebrew of the Old Testament is replete with cleaver word selections, names being the principal example. Of course, without reference to the original language, these kinds of word plays are really impossible to identify in the Book of Mormon. At the same time, if we *assume* that the original language had a Semitic derivation, there are some interesting coincidences that can be observed. I here look at four of these: the place names *Nahom, and Jershon,* together with Lehi's *river and valley*. Dr. Nibley, in his consideration of the origin of proper names in the Book of Mormon, provides many more interesting examples.[5]

Nahom

Nahom (or NHM, the vowels must be added) is a Hebrew word meaning "consolation" or "comfort." In Arabic, this same word has the meaning of "to sigh" or "to moan." As Lehi's party were traveling in the wilderness, they buried Ishmael "in a place called Nahom." Is it just coincidence that in describing this event, Nephi commented that Ishmael's daughters "did mourn exceedingly."

Jershon

In Hebrew, Jershon means "place of inheritance." Jershon was the name that the Nephi's gave to the land given as a refuge to Ammon's convert Lamanites. In Alma 27:22 we read that this land was given to these Lamanites "for an inheritance."

A "*nhr*" and an "*êtn*"

Nhr is a Hebrew word for river. It comes from a root meaning "to flow" and also has the secondary meaning of "to shine." *Similarly, êtn* is a Hebrew word for valley. More specifically, it speaks of a valley that is "perennial, overflowing, enduring, and firm." Could these be the words Lehi used when he admonished Laman to, "Be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness"; and Lemuel to, "Be like this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable"?

Conclusion

Yes, the original text of the Book of Mormon, and even our current edition, contains many expressions that are not characteristic of English. It is true that in many places that original text betrayed the scanty schooling of its translator. As the above examples have illustrated, that translator appears to have been unable to go far beyond the literal representation of the text before him. That the word order and semantic expression of that text was Semitic and at least a near cousin to Hebrew can hardly be questioned.

Does this *prove* the Book of Mormon true? No. But, the book certainly isn't the product of the imagination of an uneducated New York farm boy.

References:

1. John Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon," included in, Sorenson & Thorne, Ed., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, p. 78. The general sources for this paper include this article by John Tvedtnes together with:

   Angela Crowell and John Tvedtnes, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon," FARMS pamphlet, C&T-82

   John Tvedtnes, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Study," *BYU Studies*, Vol. 11. No. 1, pp. 50-60. Also included in FARMS pamphlet, C&T-82.

   I Have a Question," *Ensign,* October 1986, answered by John Tvedtnes. Also included in FARMS pamphlet, C&T-82.

   John Tvedtnes, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon," FARMS pamphlet, TVE-VIT.

2. John Tvedtnes, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Study," *BYU Studies*, Vol. 11. No. 1, p. 50.

3. *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 1, p. 37

4. John Welch, Ed, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon.* "Words and Phrases," p. 284.

5. See, Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, chapter 2, "Men of the East."