Nephi's Written Language and the Standard Biblical Hebrew of 600 B.C.

Chapter 8

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It is evident to all who read the King James Version of the Bible that the English language has changed considerably over the last three centuries. And so it was with the Hebrew of the biblical era. Comparison of the Hebrew of the Bible with the Hebrew found in Judea in extrabiblical Hebrew epigraphical sources (such as inscriptions, writing on pottery shards, etc.) reveals a few interesting features of Hebrew usage that appear to have changed between 1000 b.c. and a.d. 100.[1] Where on this spectrum of linguistic change was the Hebrew that Lehi and Nephi would have written in the Jerusalem of their day?

This question can be answered, in part, by examining the books of the Old Testament that come from that time, particularly 2 Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In addition, the epigraphical sources of that period include the Cave of Lei inscriptions, the Hashavyahu Letter, the Arad Letters, and the Lachish Letters.[2] Broadly speaking, the dialect used in these writings is called Standard Biblical Hebrew. More specifically, since the Hebrew

texts I will focus on were produced toward the end of this period, I will refer to the dialect as Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late.

This study will identify four elements of Hebrew style and then will examine whether any of those four distinctive features of Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late can be discerned in the English translation of 1 Nephi 1–7, 11–18 and 2 Nephi 25–33 to determine how close to Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect Nephi wrote. This sample of texts from the Book of Mormon covers the span of Nephi's writings and includes different genres, similar to those noted in the right column of table 1. Since quoted speech has not been studied well in Biblical Hebrew, I will not include examples of speeches in this study. Additionally, several devices used solely to render a reasonable English translation will not be considered, such as the infinitive verb *to pass* in the clause *and it came to pass* (since the clause is a translation of a single finite verb in Hebrew) and the word *of* in construct noun phrases (for which see below).

Relativization

A *relative clause* is a subordinate clause that adds information about a noun in the main clause. An example is found in the sentence you have just read. The main clause is "A relative clause is a subordinate clause." The added information that further explains the noun clause is "that adds information about a noun in the main clause." In general, relative clauses in English tend to be introduced by relative pronouns like *which, who,* and *that.* The process that languages use to create relative clauses is called *relativization.* In linguistics, this topic is widely studied.[3] A look at relativization in Hebrew and in the Book of Mormon is revealing.

Relativization is a feature that changed over time in Biblical Hebrew. For example, the percentage of all clauses that

Table 1. The Extrabiblical Hebrew Sources

Diachronic Dialect[4]	Texts[5]	Date[6]	Number of Clauses	Predominant Genre (or Discourse)[7]
Archaic Biblical Hebrew	Gezer Calendar	925 B.C.	8	Description
	Kuntillet ʿAjrud	900	10	Blessing
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Early	Mesha Stone	850	52	Narrative
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Middle	Samaria Ostracon	786	3	Exhortation
	Murabbaʿat Letter	750	4	Exhortation
	Siloam Inscription	700	9	Narrative
	Royal Steward	700	6	Blessing
	Khirbet el-Kom	700	5	Blessing
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late	Cave of Lei	650	4	Blessing
	Hashavyahu Letter	620	20	Narrative
	Arad Letters	583	63	Exhortation
	Lachish Letters	576	55	Exhortation
Late Biblical Hebrew	Habakkuk Commentary	100	103	Narrative
	Manual of Discipline	100	490	Exhortation
Mishnaic Hebrew	Bar Kokhba Letters	A.D. 100	32	Exhortation

Table 2. Diachronic Changes in the Hebrew Language of Judea as Attested in the Sources

Dialect	Percentage of Clauses That Are Relative	Development of Prepositions	Development of Construct Noun Phrases	Percent of Clauses with Infinitive Verbs
Archaic Biblical Hebrew	0%	Prefix prepositions only attested	Only two nouns in a chain, a proper noun may be the last noun	0%
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Early	10%	Prefixes continue plus new freestanding prepositions are attested that are derived from nouns	Three nouns are joined, of which the first may be plural; all may be preceded by a prepositional prefix, and the last noun may be genitive or definite	0%
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Middle	16%	More new prepositions derived from nouns are attested	The same	6%
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late	18%	More new prepositions derived from nouns are attested	The same	9%
Late Biblical Hebrew	30%	More new prepositions are attested that are derived from body parts and combining prefixes with freestanding prepositions	Five nouns can be constructed in a chain; the last noun may be plural	29%
Mishnaic Hebrew	35%	More new prepositions are attested that are derived from body parts, prefixes plus proclitic / -m /, and a combination of two prefixes	No new innovations observed	0%

were relative gradually rose from none in Archaic Biblical Hebrew until, by the time of Nephi (600 B.C.), about 18 percent of all clauses were relative clauses (see table 2).

An example from 1 Nephi 1:6 will illustrate how an analysis of relativization is accomplished. The first step is to rearrange the verse so that each line is a clause and then determine which of those lines are relative.

Clause	Is it relative?
And it came to pass	no
as he prayed unto the Lord,	no
there came a pillar of fire	no
and [it] dwelt upon a rock before him:	no
and he saw	no
and [he] heard much;	no
and because of the things *which* he saw	yes
and [*which* he] heard	yes
he did quake	no
and [he did] tremble exceedingly.	no

This verse contains ten clauses, two of which, or 20 percent, are relative. The 20 percent figure is close to the 18 percent average of the Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect. A similar tally of all the clauses in the twenty-four-chapter sample from the written words of Nephi indicates that 17 percent of his clauses are relative clauses (see table 3). Thus, in this feature, the translation of Nephi reflects the language of the Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect.

As can be seen, 1 Nephi reflects the written Hebrew of about 600 B.C., which is referred to as Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late. The dialect of Mormon seems to develop from this dialect and to reflect only features of the Late Biblical Hebrew dialect of Judea. This is not surprising since written

Table 3. Summary of Occurrences of the Features Investigated in the Sample from Nephi and in Mormon 1–4

Feature	Nephi	Mormon 1–4
Relativization	17% of all clauses (n = 2,462)	30% of all clauses (n = 381)
Construct Noun Phrases	All of the features attested for the Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect appear in the translation of Nephi.	The additional features attested in the Late Biblical Hebrew dialect appear in the translation of Mormon 1–4.
Infinitive Verbs	5% of all clauses have infinitives. They are used at points of pivot in narrative.	10% of all clauses have infinitives. They still are used mostly at points of pivot in narrative.
Prepositions	The most frequent prepositions are the less wordy or shorter prepositions. The more wordy or longer prepositions are just coming into use.	The less wordy or shorter prepositions are less frequent, indicating that the more wordy or longer prepositions are becoming more used and infringing on the frequency of the less wordy prepositions.

languages reflect usages older than the current spoken language. This observation would indicate that though Nephi wrote Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late, he and his people were already speaking a form of Late Biblical Hebrew. This spoken language eventually became the written language in the biblical books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Chronicles, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and in Mormon.

Participial Modifiers

Another interesting development in Hebrew at the time of Lehi, one that is first attested in the Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect, is the use of the Hebrew letter *hey* (ה) followed by a participle. Most relative clauses up to this time in the history of the Hebrew language add information only about the nouns at the end of main clauses (in other words, objects of verbs or objects of prepositions). But beginning in late biblical times, the construction *hey + participle,* though rare, was developed to modify nouns that occur earlier in the main clause (such as subjects). Such a rare construction can be seen in 1 Nephi 2:14, which reads, "my father did speak unto them in the valley of Lemuel, with power, being filled with the Spirit." The relative clause "being filled with the Spirit" adds information about the subject, "my father," and not about the other, later nouns (*valley* and *Lemuel*) or pronoun (*them*) in the main clause. In translating this sentence back into Hebrew, I would use a *hey + participle* construction.

Construct Noun Phrases

Most languages have devices for joining nouns together. For example, in English one can put "man" and "book" together as "the man's book." In Hebrew the phrase is turned around to read "the book of the man." Another English example would be "We improvised a garbage can lid handle." The Biblical Hebrew

word order would be "handle lid can garbage," which would be translated smoothly as "a handle for the lid of the can for garbage." (The words *for* and *of* are not there in the Hebrew but are devices to create a reasonable English translation.) Nouns so conjoined in Hebrew are called construct noun phrases. In the epigraphical sources used in this study (see table 1), the number of nouns that could be constructed together continually increases so that by the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls used in this study (about 100 B.C.; see table 1), as many as five nouns could be so linked. At the time of Nephi, construct noun phrases could (1) have as many as three nouns, (2) with the last noun being definite, proper, or genitive, and (3) be preceded by prepositions (see tables 2 and 3).

These possibilities can be seen in the following examples: 1 Nephi 3:16 reads "to the land of our father's inheritance." In Hebrew the word order would be "to the land of inheritance of our father." The whole phrase begins with a preposition *to;* it includes three nouns ("land," "inheritance," and "father") in the phrase, and the last noun has a genitive pronoun, "our." Another example is 2 Nephi 25:19, which reads "according to . . . the word of the angel of God." The Hebrew word order would be "according to word of angel of God." This example has three nouns, begins with a preposition, and ends with a proper noun. Thus, the translation of Nephi reflects the elements expected for constructing nouns together in the Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect.

Infinitive Verbs

Infinitives were just beginning to appear in the Hebrew of the epigraphical sources by the time of Nephi (see table 2). Only about 6 percent of verbs in those texts are infinitives. The function of infinitives, reflected in Nephi's writing, is to join

several sentences into one. For example, 1 Nephi 1:18 reads, "Behold he went forth among the people, and [he] began *to prophesy* and *to declare* unto them." In the older levels of Biblical Hebrew this example would read "and he went forth among the people, and he began, and he prophesied, and he declared unto them." But with the use of infinitives, the last two independent clauses from the older Hebrew are expressed as part of the second independent clause in 1 Nephi 1:18. Counts in 1 and 2 Nephi indicate that 5 percent (see table 3) of the verbs are infinitives, which is close to the 6 percent found in the Hebrew epigraphical sources of this era.

Infinitive verbs, which are noted in the far right column of table 2, appear most frequently in the text with decision making. Since the primary source for Late Biblical Hebrew is the Dead Sea Scrolls *Manual of Discipline,* which encourages righteous decision making, it is not surprising to see such a high percentage of infinitive verbs. The Bar Kokhba Letters, in Mishnaic Hebrew, issue instructions, but since there are no responses to these instructions recorded, there are no infinitive verbs.

It is also interesting that infinitive verbs in Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late tend to come in pairs and to denote a point of pivot in narrative (or, in other words, a change in behavior). Similarly, two infinitives appear in 1 Nephi 1:18: "behold he went forth among the people, and began *to prophesy* and *to declare.*" Another example is found in 1 Nephi 3:14: *"to be"* and *"to return."*

Prepositions

The use of prepositions is another feature of Biblical Hebrew that changed with time (see table 2). This is true of English also. Consider the following translations of Mark 9:2 in various periods of English:[8]

Source	Translation		
West Saxon Gospels (about A.D. 1000)	and lǣdde hig on-sundron	on	ænne heahne munt
Wycliffe version (about 1382)	and ledde hem asydis	in to	an hizh hill
King James Version (1611)	and leadeth them	up into	an high mountain apart

As can be seen, the prepositions preceding "an high mountain" became increasingly more wordy or lengthy.

In the earliest inscriptions of Biblical Hebrew, only four prefixes are used for prepositions in a way that would be most similar to the West Saxon Gospels example above. But by A.D. 100 the Hebrew language had developed a long list of freestanding prepositions, some of which were formed by conjoining prepositions, such as "up into" in the King James example above. In this developmental respect, the Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late of Nephi's time would be on a par with the example from Wycliffe.

The most frequent preposition in Nephi is *of*. However, in almost all incidences, *of* is an English device for translating the Hebrew grammatical feature called a "construct noun phrase" and will not be counted here. One verse in which *of* is not a translation of a construct noun phrase is found in 1 Nephi 3:12. Here, *of* has the sense of "from," which could be translated by the Hebrew prefix preposition *m-*.

The most frequently used prepositions in the sample from Nephi are listed in table 4. Those of greatest frequency are the prepositions that are less wordy or shorter, though some of the more wordy or longer prepositions are also used. In this aspect,

Table 4. Percentage of Words That Are Prepositions in the Sample from Nephi Compared to Percentages in Mormon 1–4

Preposition	Percents in Nephi (n = 21,411)	Percents in Mormon 1–4 (n = 3,721)
unto	1.39%	.60%
in	.80%	.40%
with	.53%	.48%
into	.24%	.13%
because of	.24%	.39%
according to	.15%	.15%
before	.14%	.29%
concerning	.13%	.17%
throughout	0	.11%

it appears that Nephi chose from a pool of simple preposi-
tions, comparable to that which was available to writers of the
Standard Biblical Hebrew–Late dialect.

In table 4, the prepositions above the dotted line are the
less wordy or shorter prepositions, and the prepositions below
the dotted line are the more wordy or longer prepositions.
Since the less wordy or shorter prepositions in Mormon 1–4
tend to be used less frequently, we can assume that they are
being replaced by more wordy or longer prepositions since the
more wordy or longer prepositions are used almost twice as
frequently in Mormon 1–4 as compared to the sample from
Nephi.

Changed Features in the Language of Mormon

From Mormon 9:33 it is clear that the Hebrew language
used by the Nephites changed over the centuries: "The Hebrew
hath been altered by us also." Although it exceeds the purposes
of this study, it is worth mentioning that in certain respects
the Hebrew of the Nephites changed over time in the New
World in a fashion similar to the Hebrew in the Old World.
For example, in the Old World after Lehi's time, the usage of
relative clauses in Hebrew increased to 35 percent of all clauses
by the time of the Bar Kokhba letters of A.D. 100 (tables 1 and
2). Counts in Mormon 1–4 reveal that 30 percent of clauses
are relative (table 3). Likewise, the previously most frequent
prepositions were "in," "unto," "with," and "into," but they
are considerably less frequent in Mormon. The increased use
of the more wordy prepositions suggests that the Hebrew of
Mormon reflects the Late Biblical Hebrew dialect. For further
data along these lines, see table 4.

Conclusion

In the history of most languages, change is to be expected.
In the Book of Mormon, the Mulekites had allowed their

Hebrew language to become "corrupted" (Omni 1:17; written about 270 B.C.). Likewise, the language of Italy during the Roman Empire was Latin, which became the official language of church, government, science, and letters during the Middle Ages. In the meantime, the language of the people of Italy continued to change. As a result, Italians today must learn Latin as a foreign language. The same is true of modern Israelis who speak modern Hebrew but need to learn biblical Hebrew.

Amid such changes, however, measurements may be taken. Based on this examination of four language features that are known to have changed over time in Hebrew usage in Judea, the English translation of the writings of Nephi manifests usages of a Hebrew writer in 600 B.C. This corroborates the statement made by Nephi in 1 Nephi 1:2 (written about 580 B.C.) that he makes "a record in the language of my father." This statement has been variously interpreted, but from the research reported in this study, it appears that Nephi wrote in the standard written Hebrew used in Judea around 600 B.C.

NOTES

1. William J. Adams Jr., "An Investigation into the Diachronic Distribution of Morphological Forms and Semantic Features of Extra-Biblical Hebrew Sources" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah Middle East Center, 1987).

2. See further the article by Dana Pike, "Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Lehi and Jeremiah," in this volume, pages 193–244.

3. See, for example, Bernard Comrie, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology: Syntax and Morphology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 131–57; 2nd ed. (London: Blackwell, 1989), 138–64.

4. The titles of these diachronic dialects listed in table 1 follow Eduard Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language,* ed. Raphael Kutscher (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 12, although I made distinctions within Standard Biblical Hebrew that he does not and added

the Mishnaic Hebrew dialect. If a source covers a range of dates (such as seventh century B.C.), the date in the table above represents the mean (such as 650 B.C. for the seventh century). The Hebrew linguistic character of the three texts above the dotted line is debated. The double line represents the time of the Babylonian conquest.

5. The references for the texts are Francis I. Andersen, "Moabite Syntax," *Orientalia* 35 (1966): 81–120; Nahman Avigad, "The Epitaph of a Royal Steward from Siloam Village," *Israel Exploration Journal* 3 (1953): 137–43; Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls of St. Mark's Monastery,* 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: American School of Oriental Research, 1950–51); Frank M. Cross Jr. and David N. Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography: A Study of Epigraphic Evidence* (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1952); Graham I. Davies, *Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); William G. Dever, "Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kôm," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 40 (1969–70): 139–89; Ruth Hestrin et al., *Inscriptions Reveal: Documents from the Time of the Bible, the Mishna and the Talmud* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, Catalog 100, 1973); Zeev Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, Catalog 175, 1978); J. Naveh, "Old Hebrew Inscriptions in a Burial Cave," *Israel Exploration Journal* 13 (1963): 74–92; Dennis Pardee et al., *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters: A Study Edition* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1982); and Stanislav Segert, "Die Sprache der moabitischen Königsinschrift," *Archiv Orientální* 29 (1961): 197–267.

6. For the dates, see the sources in note 4 above.

7. The definitions of the discourse structure follow Robert E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse,* 2nd ed. (New York: Plenum, 1983).

8. From Martyn Wakelin, *The Archaeology of English* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1988), 15–16.