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Hebrew Idioms in the Small Plates of Nephi

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Abstract: This article argues that, inasmuch as the Book of Mormon is a literal translation from a Hebrew record, one would expect to find the frequent use of Hebraic idiomatic expressions in it. Bramwell provides examples of a number of Hebraisms, such as compound subjects, frequent usage of the conjunction “and,” a limited number of vocabulary words, and the repetitive use of possessive pronouns.

The Prophet Joseph Smith undertook to write a history of the Church in order to "disabuse the public mind, and put all inquiries after truth into possession of the facts, as they have transpired" because of "the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil-disposed and designing persons, in relation to the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."¹ In the course of this history the Prophet commented on the title page of the record which had been placed in his hands by the angel Moroni.

"I wish to mention here that the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated, the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that said title-page is not by any means a modern composition, either of mine or of any other man who has lived or does live in this generation. Therefore, in order to correct an error, which generally exists concerning it, I give below that part of the title page of the English version of the Book of Mormon, which is a *genuine* and *literal* translation of the title-page of the original Book of Mormon, as recorded on the plates."²

It is noted that in his explanation the Prophet twice mentioned that the Book of Mormon was a literal translation of the record entrusted to him. Because of this, and also because inexperienced translators tend to adhere closely to the form of the language being

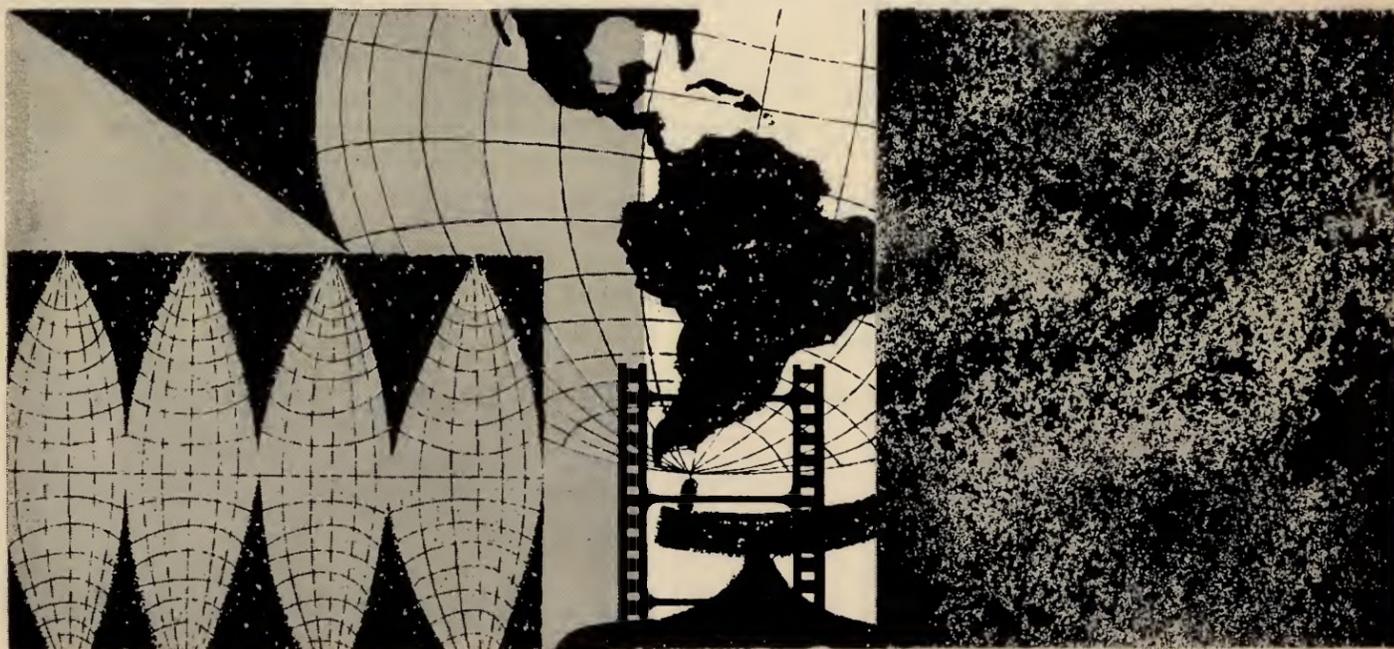
translated, it is assumed by some that the Book of Mormon is a rather literal translation. Consequently, one should expect to find in it frequent use of idiomatic speech which is Hebraic in nature.

That Lehi and his family spoke Hebrew can hardly be doubted; they were natives of the city of Jerusalem.³ As a matter of fact, there seem to be indications that his descendants living on the American continent 1,000 years later were also acquainted with the language. Moroni, a historian of that later period, states that if their plates had been "sufficiently large," they would have written in Hebrew, and that if they had done so, there would have been no imperfection in their record, even though the Hebrew had been altered by them.⁴ This is a significant statement because it implies that their Hebrew was a living language undergoing the processes of natural growth and change.

Before describing some Hebrew idioms encountered in the Small Plates, it is to be noted that the term *idiom* as used herein is defined in a broad sense as any peculiar characteristic or genus of language that differentiates it from other languages. This definition does not limit an idiom to distinguishing verbal expressions, as illustrated in English by a football "gridiron," a "close call," a "shakedown," and others. Such verbal idioms are formed by combining words in such a manner that the meaning derived from the union is much different from the meanings of the individual words.

Our definition of *idiom* also includes unique

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grammatical and syntactical constructions of languages which often tend to be overlooked in a study of idiomatic usage. (For example, there is a tendency in German to stack the verbs at the end of the sentence.) Whereas languages may borrow words from one another, a point to be stressed here is that an exchange of syntactical structure is most uncommon. A good example of this well-established principle of linguistics is English. The majority of the words in English are Roman, having come into the language through the influence of French after the Norman conquest. Yet, because of the fact that English grammar is generally considered to be Germanic, English is regarded as a Germanic⁵ rather than a Romance language.

With the foregoing in mind, it is possible for one to appreciate more fully the significance of some of the grammatical peculiarities found in the Book of Mormon which may strike one as being odd but which are legitimate if viewed as having a Hebraic origin.

Compound Subject

The usage of the compound subject in the Book of Mormon is a striking indication that this scripture was written by persons versed in Hebrew. The presence of this phenomenon would also seem to evidence a rather literal translation of the Book of Mormon as opposed to the philosophy that the concept or meaning was obtained by the Prophet and that he was then left to his own devices and experience for the

expression of it.

In Hebrew construction, a rule states that when a compound subject is composed of different persons, the first person precedes the second, and the second precedes the third.⁶ An example of this is seen in 1 Kings 1:21: "I and my son Solomon shall be counted offenders."⁷ In the Small Plates there are several similar instances, such as "I and my brethren" or "I and my father."⁸ This is poor English but excellent Hebrew. Not in any instance has the writer found a case in the Small Plates in which the first person has not been placed before the second or the third.

The Conjunction

Another grammatical construction in the Book of Mormon which bears the earmarks of Hebrew is the ever-recurring use of the conjunction *and*. Hebrew sentence structure is relatively simple, somewhat like the speech of children. This is because the Hebrew habit is to co-ordinate rather than subordinate phrases and sentences as is done in Latin and Greek in which languages, sentences are built together by the use of articles, participles, relative clauses, and other subordinating media.⁹ The Hebrews are such an *and* loving people they exhibit a dislike even to begin a sentence without its use; even books are commenced with it.¹⁰ (See Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Ruth.)

One need only to read a few verses in the Small Plates to determine that this Hebrew pattern of construction is observed.

"*And* it came to pass that when I, Jacob, had spoken these words, the power of the Lord came upon him, insomuch that he fell to the earth. *And* it came to pass that he was nourished for the space of many days.

"*And* it came to pass that he said unto the people: Gather together on the morrow, for I shall die; wherefore, I desire to speak unto the people before I shall die.

"*And* it came to pass that on the morrow the multitude were gathered together; *and* he spake plainly unto them *and* denied the thing which he had taught them, *and* confessed the Christ, *and* the power of the Holy Ghost, *and* the ministering of angels.

"*And* he spake plainly unto them, that he had been deceived by the power of the devil. *And* he spake of hell, *and* of eternity, *and* of eternal punishment.

"*And* he said: I fear lest I have committed the unpardonable sin, for I have lied unto God; for I denied the Christ, *and* said that I believed the scriptures; *and* they truly testify of him. *And* because I have thus lied unto God I greatly fear lest my cause shall be awful; but I confess (Continued on page 517)

HEBREW IDIOMS IN THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI

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(Continued from page 497)

unto God."¹¹

In addition to the frequent use of the conjunction *and* to join sentences in Hebrew, it is also common for *and* to stand before each word in a series as is seen in Genesis 20:14 or 1 Samuel 13:20.¹² This characteristic usage is found many times in the Book of Mormon, a few examples of which are here given: "The pointers . . . in the ball . . . did work according to the faith *and* diligence *and* heed which we did give unto them."¹³ "They will reject him, because of their iniquities, *and* the hardness of their hearts, *and* the stiffness of their necks."¹⁴ (See also 2 Nephi 26:3; 28:12, 14; and 5:17.)

Another characteristic employment of this same conjunction is that if several nouns are coupled by its use, the possessive pronoun, if used, must be repeated with each noun.¹⁵ This principle of usage is demonstrated in the Small Plates: ". . . for he truly testified of *their* wickedness and *their* abominations;"¹⁶ ". . . And he left *his* house, and the land of *his* inheritance, and *his* gold, and *his* silver, and *his* precious things, . . ."¹⁷ ". . . slaying food by the way, with *our* bows and *our* arrows and *our* stones and *our* slings."¹⁸

Parenthetically, it is observed that similarly the preposition is repeated before each word when several words are united under the power of the preposition. A few instances are cited from the Old Testament first: "I will betroth them unto me *in* righteousness, and *in* judgment, and *in* loving-kindness, and *in* mercies." (Hosea 2:19.) (See also Genesis 40:2; 2 Samuel 6:5; and Hosea 2:17.) The Small Plates contain many examples of this rule. In 1 Nephi 14:1 one reads ". . . if the Gentiles shall hearken unto the Lamb of God in that day he shall manifest himself unto them *in* word, and also *in* power, *in* very deed. . . ." Another example is found in 1 Nephi 16:23: ". . . wherefore I did arm myself *with* a bow and an arrow, *with* a sling and *with* stones." On one occasion Nephi quoted the Prophet Zenos as saying that

"The Lord God surely shall visit all the house of Israel at that day . . . and others with the thunderings and the lightnings of his power, *by*

tempest, *by* fire, and *by* smoke, and vapor of darkness, and *by* the opening of the earth, and *by* mountains which shall be carried up."¹⁹

There is one other facet of idiomatic usage in the Small Plates that one might tend to overlook, the limited vocabulary, which is compatible with Hebrew usage. Students of the Old Testament have noted that the working vocabulary in the Old Testament is comparatively small. Many rare words do occur in some of the books such as Job, but the average prose vocabulary is meager.²⁰ Dr. Sidney B. Sperry has observed that Isaiah employs a larger vocabulary than any other prophet of the Old Testament and that the total number of words he uses is 2,186 words.²¹ A cursory count of the vocabulary of the entire Book of Mormon indicates the use of approximately 2,696 root words. By root word is meant the basic word from which come all

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Every language is a temple, in which the soul of those who speak is enshrined.

—O. W. Holmes

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derivatives: the verb, noun, adjective, and so on. For example, *prophecies*, *prophecy*, *prophesied*, *prophesies*, *prophesieth*, *prophesy*, *prophesying*, *prophesying*s, *prophet* (*s*), and *prophetess*, for the purpose of tabulation, were all considered as one word because they derive from the same root stem.

One consequence of the limited vocabulary of Hebrew is a notable lack of adjectives. It may appear to the English-speaking reader that there is an abundance of descriptive words and phrases in the Old Testament, but these apparent adjectives are achieved through devious means employed by the Hebrew and are not true adjectives as we understand them. Therefore, authentic adjectival phrases appearing in English translations of the Old Testament are not always such in Hebrew.

It is of interest that the usage of adjectives in the Small Plates follows the pattern of Old Testament

Hebrew. Thomas Brookbank has observed that there are only some sixty or seventy different adjectives, not counting numerals and demonstratives, in the first five chapters which cover about eleven pages.²² This means that there are only about seven different adjectives a page in the initial part of the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon continues to challenge the minds as well as the spirits of men. There are as many facets to its study as there are persons with variant backgrounds and interests. This article has been an attempt to indicate the wealthy field in the Book of Mormon for the study of idioms. It is granted that any of the idioms in this book taken as a single item may not be impressive but, considered collectively, the mass of such items gives evidence that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be—an authentic product of the Near East.

FOOTNOTES

¹Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret Book Co., 1946) I, p. 1.

²*Ibid.*, p. 71. Italics throughout article are mine.

³1 Ne. 1:4.

⁴Morm. 9:33.

⁵William Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957), p. 160.

⁶A. B. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax* (3d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, reprinted 1950), p. 159.

⁷See also 1 Sam. 14:40; Gen. 43:8.

⁸1 Ne. 3:9, 10; 5:20; 7:2, 3, 22; 22:31.

⁹A. B. Davidson, *An Introductory Hebrew Grammar* (24th ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), p. 2.

¹⁰Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, p. 184.

¹¹Jac. 7:15-19. See also 1 Ne. 3:8-11; Om. 1:28, 29.

¹²Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, p. 184.

¹³1 Ne. 16:28.

¹⁴2 Ne. 25:12.

¹⁵Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, p. 2.

¹⁶1 Ne. 1:19.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 2:4.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 16:15.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 19:11. See also *Ibid.*, 1:16, 18:25; 1 Ne. 1:18, 5:15, 6:15, 31:21; Jar. 1:8.

²⁰Davidson, *Hebrew Grammar*, p. 2.

²¹Sidney B. Sperry, *The Voice of Israel's Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1952), p. 15, citing G. L. Robinson, *The Book of Isaiah*, p. 23.

²²Thomas W. Brookbank, "Hebrew Idioms and Analogies in the Book of Mormon," *The Improvement Era*, XVII (1914), p. 975.