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Hebrew Idioms and Analogies in the Book of Mormon

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STAR

In volume XII, of this publication, beginning with number 2, the writer was privileged to call attention to some peculiarities pertaining to the use of language and forms of expression which occur in the Book of Mormon. Conforming, as they do, to certain specialties of the Hebrew, they afford evidence that that work was written originally by Jews. As opportunity presented itself, at a later period, for further investigation, the subject was again taken up, and the results, in part at least, are submitted to the reader. No pretense of exhausting it, however, is made. Our efforts in this direction may, perhaps, have the effect of inducing some more competent writer to show us fully to what a great extent the Book of Mormon is idiomatically, Hebraic, and how largely it conforms in all respects to Jewish literary characteristics. Some of the points which shall be considered in the following pages are sustained by copious quotations, or numerous references, or by both; but we trust the reader will not lose patience on that account. The subject sought in submitting passages and references freely is to manifest beyond reasonable doubt that these Hebraic expressions and constructions have not been written into the text, in a sort of haphazard manner, by an impostor, whose purpose was to deceive the public; and to show, moreover, that they occur in general with a frequency and a consistency which can be attributed fairly to authors only who used the Hebrew as their native language.

Some of the Hebraisms, on the other hand, can be illustrated by but few examples; but even in this case the enemies of the Book of Mormon are welcome to all the benefit to their cause

which they are able to derive from that fact; for if only a few of these Hebraisms and practices can be placed on a satisfactory standing as originating with people to whom they were native and familiar,—used apparently because they could not avoid using them according to the genius of their language—it is not material that some one may attempt to show that an occasional one might occur in the book by the design of an impostor. If some of these points rest on a foundation which is not rationally assailable, they all do as a logical consequence. And, moreover, we should remember that the Bible may be searched from beginning to end without finding more than a few examples which illustrate some certain idioms of the Hebrew; and one peculiar expression, we risk in saying, occurs in a single instance only. Translated into understandable English it reads, “when shall it once be?” but literally, “after when yet?” (Jer. 13:27).

In order that what is now to be said, and what we have heretofore said pertaining to our general subject, may be presented to the reader in one view, brief illustrations of some Hebraisms, considered in Vol. XIII, will be submitted again in connection with others of the same, or like nature, as opportune occasion arises.

Coming now to the work more particularly in hand, it is observed, first, that the Hebrew frequently uses nouns in the plural where the English idiom requires the singular form. The respective idioms thus oppose each other in a marked degree. Some plurals of this character occur in the Hebrew of the Bible as follows:

bloods, Gen. 4:10, and often elsewhere.

sojournings, Gen. 17:8; 28:4; 37:1.

wraths, Job 21:30.

salvations, Ps. 28:8; 53:6. Isa. 33:6.

revenges, Ps. 94:1.

wisdoms, Prov. 1:20.

the goings out of lives, (the issues of life.) Prov. 4:23.

Without citing references, in order to economize space, other Hebrew plurals belonging to the same class, are subjoined, viz.: creators, desolations, stammerings, righteousnesses, understandings, deaths, meltings, prosperities, bitternesses, drosses, wastes, choices, etc.

Some of these words occur as English plurals also, but we do not use them in that form where our idiom takes the singular; for instance, we say, “the people of his choice,” not “the people of his choices,” Dan. 11:15.

Some plurals employed instead of the singular, selected from quite a number that occur in the Book of Mormon, now follow; and where it can be done without quoting at length in order to give the sense, a few words from the context where the respective examples are found, will be added in several cases:

“there shall be bloodsheds.” II Nep. 1:12.

“the gifts and callings of God.” Moro. 3:4.

“and his great condescensions to * * men.” Jac. 4:7.

“because of the destructions of my people.” I Nep. 15:5.

“and great slaughters with the sword.” I Nep. 12:2.

With references only, we have:

*envyings, II Nep. 26:21; *plunderings, Al. 37:21; *priestcrafts, II Nep. 10:5; *rebellions, Al. 61:14; understandings, Mos. 8:20; witchcrafts, III Nep. 21:16; *deceivings, III Nep. 21:19; magics, Morm. 1:19, and murderings, Al. 50:21. Those marked thus * occur more than once. This list might easily be lengthened, but the number of examples before us suffice the purpose. A consistency connected with the use of these plural forms in the Book of Mormon should be noticed. Learned Hebraists inform us that plurals instead of the singular are sometimes employed in Hebrew writings to express an intensive sense of the idea or thing so pluralized. Thus “wisdoms” in Prov. 1:20, should be taken to mean “excellent wisdom,” or “wisdom exceeding great,” to borrow a term from the Book of Mormon. Observing this invested, intensive meaning which sometimes pertains to this usage of the plural, we find that the Book of Mormon writers have employed them from the native Jewish standpoint. The context shows that in a large percentage of examples an intensive, qualifying word should be supplied, as, “fearful bloodshed,” “shocking or atrocious murder,” “astonishing condescension” of God, “widespread priestcraft,” “awful destruction,” etc., etc., and if anything is yet lacking to confirm the correctness of these statements, the associated history of the people to whom these plurals were addressed or applied, does it effectually—sets a broad seal of consistency upon their use which can not be broken.

Readily suggested by the foregoing remarks is the Hebraic practice, not invariable, of course, of using a term in the singular for one in the plural. Examples of the character illustrate but one phase of the principles of enallage which was considered more generally than is now necessary, in Vol. XIII; but by way of contrast with the use of the plural for the singular as just reviewed, a few examples showing the use of the singular where our idiom requires the plural, are herewith supplied:

“Now these are the commandments which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it. That thou mightest fear the Lord thy God, to keep all his statutes * * * which I command thee, thou and thy son, and thy son’s son, all the days of thy life, and that thy days may be prolonged.” (Deut. 6:1, 2; see also verses 16-19; Ex. 23:9, 31; Num. 28:3, 4, etc.)

The following passages from the Book of Mormon manifest

that in this respect also the principle of enallage was familiar to and used by the Nephite writers:

"And now, they said, we know of a surety that the Lord is with thee, for we know that it is the power of the Lord that has shaken us. And they fell down before me, and were about to worship me, but I would not suffer them, saying, I am thy brother, yea, even thy younger brother." (1 Nep. 17:55.)

Another example:

"For the Lord had not hitherto suffered that we should make much fire, as we journeyed in the wilderness; for he said, I will make thy food become sweet, that ye cook it not." (1 Nep. 17:12.)

In all these illustrations—Biblical and Book of Mormon—the unwarranted substitution of the singular for the plural, according to English standards, is very noticeable. No composition in our language which observes its idioms can ever be characterized by peculiarities of this nature.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

"How the Lord Saved Israel"

Within a high and olden wall
 There stands a temple holy;
 Erected by brave, willing hands
 To Him who loves the lowly;
 Where prophets stand, and Saints repair
 To worship in the House of pray'r.

Where falls the shadow of its spires
 'Mid spruce and elm trees balmy,
 There lies a fount—a lily pond
 Where floats the broad leaf calmy;
 While gold-fish sport beneath the wave
 And searching eyes, sad, gay, or grave.

Up from the center of the fount,
 Where flowers sly are peeping
 At their fair shades within the pool,
 Their pulses proudly leaping,
 There tow'rs a snow-white monument
 In mem'ry of an incident.