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SUBTLE HEBRAIC FEATURES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Amanda Colleen Brown

Review of Donald W. Parry, *Preserved in Translation: Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020). 171 pages. Hardback, \$19.99.

Abstract: *Donald W. Parry combines a lifetime of insights about the Old Testament and Book of Mormon into one volume. Written for a non-academic audience, this book provides a glimpse into some of the Book of Mormon's literary complexities that originate from Hebrew grammar and style.*

Mark Twain “once quipped that if Joseph Smith had left ‘and it came to pass’ out of the Book of Mormon, the book would have been only a pamphlet” (103). Twain’s disparaging comment, while witty, did not account for the fact that the English translation he mocked was exceptional Hebrew. The Book of Mormon employs “and it came to pass” within its proper narrative context, and the poetic sections of the Book of Mormon employ the phrase less frequently, aligning with Semitic narrative structure rules (104). This insight is one of hundreds Dr. Donald W. Parry provides in his book on Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon, written for a non-specialized audience (xv).

Bringing a career’s worth of insights to both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, Parry claims that “The Hebrew elements discussed in this volume can enhance the readability of the Book of Mormon and heighten our understanding and appreciation of ancient scripture” (xxii). For conservative readers of the Book of Mormon who are interested in how the study of the language can enhance their scripture study, Parry’s perspective will capture interest.

In this volume, Parry explains literary features of Semitic language such as chiasmus, theme words, symbolic action and prophetic curse, and idea-amplifying plurals, and spotlights the contributions of prophets, Latter-day Saint scholars, and Hebrew Bible scholars alike. He also explains the structure and limitations of Hebrew narrative and poetry through examples from popular passages that resonate with readers. He synthesizes linguistic principles, language development, and secondary literature on the topic while consistently creating relevance that will resonate with a non-expert reader. He most effectively achieves this through demonstrating how the theological meaning of beloved passages changes when its contextual grammatical structure is accounted for.

Where appropriate, Parry highlights the differences between English and Biblical Hebrew grammar to show the purposeful creation of phrasing in the Book of Mormon. At the end of each chapter, he discusses a particular principle's structure, how scholars use it to reconstruct the past, and what it can add to an individual's reading. More than grammar, Parry's analysis illuminates the text by forcing a slower reading — a reading focused on parallels, similarities between the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, repeated themes in a passage, etc.

Openly admitting that without the autograph (original record), a certain amount of conjecture will always exist when deconstructing the Book of Mormon's translation, Parry overcomes this monumental obstacle by analyzing the genre, grammatical structure, and individual words employed by the book's writers, redactors, and translators, and compares these features to Hebrew grammar and style. For instance, in discussing numerical parallelism, Parry comments that the Old Testament employs this construction more than the Book of Mormon authors. He suggests this is because there are several entirely poetic books in the Old Testament (e.g. Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) while narrative dominates the Book of Mormon, making this feature inconsistent with the book's genre (36, 37).

Had the book addressed the effect of King James English (and its literal translation of the Hebrew and Greek texts) on English's development, I would have felt more at ease with all of Parry's conclusions. While there are countless instances in which the King James Version failed to adequately convey the original Hebrew construction the Book of Mormon preserved in translation, a clearer delineation between the two, especially in the beginning chapters, would have situated and clarified more of the book's conclusions.

The book concludes with accounts of several early Church converts' experiences with the Book of Mormon, reminding the reader that the

believer's interaction with the text far outweighs an academic knowledge of the text. While I believe that scripture should be read devotionally by academic and believer alike, this book's merit undeniably lies in the fact that many of the forms discussed are undetectable in the KJV and require extensive academic training in Semitic grammar to notice. Without a translator, a non-academic person's access to these insights is virtually impossible. It is wise to read this book with scriptures in hand, so as to have the full references in context.

Amanda Colleen Brown holds a MA in Bible and the Ancient Near East from The Hebrew University at Jerusalem, where she focused on Akkadian, Modern Hebrew, and Israelite popular religion as it relates to women's narratives. She previously graduated from Brigham Young University with a bachelor's degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies. She is also passionate about a variety of dance styles, literature, and travel.

