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Hebrew Idioms in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: This article is a technical study of Hebrew grammar and idioms found profusely throughout the Book of Mormon. Compound Hebrew prepositions, plural compounds, and over three dozen examples of Hebrew idioms are given in the article. These studies support the idea that the Book of Mormon was originally written in Hebrew.

HEBREW IDIOMS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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THE ENGLISH of the Book of Mormon contains idioms that are immediately recognizable by students of the ancient Near East as originating in that area. Notice this clause which says that Melchizedek "did reign under his father." (Alma 13:18.) The average reader, if he does not pass it by completely, seldom asks himself the meaning of the clause. It is quite unlikely that it means that Melchizedek reigned under the direction of his father, but if it does not mean that, what does it mean? More likely is the view that it is a Hebrew idiom (the Nephites wrote and spoke Hebrew) translated very literally by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Hebrew Bible gives us every reason to believe that this view is the correct one. Here are some good examples:

And Bela died, and Jobab the son of Zerah of Bozrah *reigned in his stead.* (Italics literally "under him" in Hebrew.) (Gen. 36:33; similarly in verses 34-39.)

And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants unto Solomon; for he had heard that they had anointed him king *in the room of his father.* . . . (Italics literally "under.") (I Kings 5:1.)

And all the people of Judah took Azariah, which was sixteen years old, and made him king *instead of his father* Amaziah. (Italics literally "under.") (II Kings 14:21.)

Thus according to common Hebrew usage for a man to reign "under" someone else is simply to reign in his stead. We may therefore assume with some confidence that when Melchizedek "did reign under his father" the text simply means that the great high priest "did reign in his father's stead." (See also Jacob 1:11 and Mosiah 10:6.) Joseph Smith usually translated the idiom in the conventional manner, but in this particular instance (Alma 13:18) he translated literally—to our interest and profit.

The use of compound Hebrew prepositions is very noticeable in the Book of Mormon where the prophet Joseph Smith renders them literally.

The use of *beyadh*, "by the hand of," indicating agency or instrumentality, occurs forty-seven times in the Nephite record. This use has been noted before, either by the writer, or others, but let me give a few new examples:

Joseph . . . who was preserved *by the hand of the Lord.* . . . (Italics meaning "by" the Lord.) (1 Nephi 5:14.)

And after they go forth *by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.* . . . (*Ibid.*, 13:26.)

. . . and they shall be afflicted *by the hand of their enemies.* (Mosiah 11:21.)

Similar cases are found in the Old Testament in Genesis 38:20; Exodus 4:13, etc.

From the Book of Mormon:

And they fled from before my presence; . . . (1 Nephi 4:28.)

From the Bible:

. . . the Lord God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel. . . . (Judges 11:23.) (Italics author's.)

The use of this compound in the plural should be noted here. *Bidhê*, "by the hands of," occurs in the Book of Mormon eight times.

These are examples:

. . . they were brought into bondage *by the hands of the Lamanites.* . . . (Italics meaning "by" or "through"). (Alma 5:5.)
. . . even *by the hands of their own brethren?* (*Ibid.*, 9:10.)

There is one fairly clear instance of this usage in the Old Testament, but it will be necessary to translate it literally in order to illustrate it:

Their judges have been thrown down *by the hands of* (i.e., by means of) the crag. . . . (See Psalm 141:6.)

The verse is obscure, but the idiom is there nevertheless.

There may be another instance in

Lamentations 1:14, but the interpretation is too much in doubt.

Still another compound preposition is *mippenê*, *from* (literally "from before"). In the Book of Mormon it very often receives a literal translation. Notice a few illustrations:

. . . and they fled *from before* my presence; . . . (1 Nephi 4:28.)

. . . for he had gone *from before* my presence. (*Ibid.*, 11:12.)

. . . insomuch that they did fall back *from before* them. (3 Nephi 4:12; see also Mosiah 17:4; Alma 44:12; Mormon 4:20, etc.)

In the Old Testament part of the King James Version we find the idiom translated *from* (I Sam. 19:8; Isa.

31:8), "out of the presence of" (I Sam. 19:10), "from the presence of" (Gen. 3:8), "because of" (*Ibid.*, 7:7), "from the face of" (Ex. 2:15), by way of illustration, but it is also translated as in the Book of Mormon:

. . . and Moses fled *from before* it. (Ex. 4:3.)

. . . the Lord God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites *from before* his people Israel. . . . (Judges 11:23; see also I Chron. 11:13; Zech. 14:5.)

The compound, *ba 'abhûr*, "on account of," occurs a number of times in the Book of Mormon (Alma 13:4; 15:3; 19:16, etc.), but because of the regular use of the translated compound (phrasal preposition) in English it is difficult to make any special point of it other than the fact that it does occur. Numerous examples

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occur in the Old Testament though the usual translations may make it difficult for the average reader to spot them. (Gen. 12:13, 16; I Sam. 23:10, etc.)

The idiom *bephi*, "by the mouth of," occurs in the Nephite record about fifteen times. Here are some illustrations:

And also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, . . . (1 Nephi 3:20; italics author's.)

. . . and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah. (*Ibid.*, 5:13.)

Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah. . . . (2 Nephi 25:1.)

This idiom is certainly foreign to our manner of speaking, but is typically Nephite, that is to say, Hebrew. Notice these illustrations from the Old Testament:

To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, . . . (II Chron. 36:21.)

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, . . . (*Ibid.*, 36:22.)

Another similar compound, *mippi*, "from the mouth of," will be found in the Book of Mormon six times. Three illustrations follow:

. . . Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew; and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the plainness of the gospel of the Lord, . . . (1 Nephi 13:24.)

And now Limhi was again filled with joy in learning from the mouth of Ammon that king Mosiah had a gift from God, . . . (Mosiah 21:28.)

Here are some Old Testament examples:

. . . and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, . . . (Jeremiah 36:4; see also vs. 32.)

. . . and hearkened not unto the words of Necho from the mouth of God, . . . (II Chron. 35:22.)

The common Hebraic idiom, "to open the mouth," appears in the Book of Mormon. Notice these occurrences:

And king Benjamin again opened his mouth and began to speak unto them, . . . (Mosiah 4:4.)

. . . king Lamoni did open his mouth, and said unto him: . . . (Alma 18:18.)

This manner of writing is somewhat foreign to us, but occurs in the Old Testament as these examples attest:

After this opened Job his mouth and cursed his day. (Job 3:1.)

Behold, now I have opened my mouth, my tongue hath spoken in my mouth. (*Ibid.*, 33:2.)

. . . then I opened my mouth, and spake, . . . (Daniel 10:16.)

The Hebrew idiom, "multiply exceedingly," which is not as strange to present English usage as the foregoing may be illustrated by these three examples from the Nephite record:

And we multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, . . . (Jarom 1:8.)

. . . for they had multiplied exceedingly and waxed great in the land. (Mosiah 2:2.)

And this church did multiply exceedingly because of iniquity, . . . (4 Nephi 1:28.)

These may be compared with the familiar examples in Genesis:

And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and I will multiply thee exceedingly. (Gen. 17:2; see vs. 20.)

. . . and they had possessions therein, and grew, and multiplied exceedingly. (Gen. 47:27.)

The Hebrew idiom, "to stiffen the neck," occurs a number of times in the Nephite record. These illustrations will suffice:

And after they have hardened their hearts and stiffened their necks against the Holy One of Israel, . . . (2 Nephi 6:10.)

But because of priestcrafts and iniquities, they at Jerusalem will stiffen their necks against him, . . . (*Ibid.*, 10:5; see also 25:12; 28:14; Jacob 2:13; Jarom 3; Helaman 9:21.)

The parallels in the King James Version of the Old Testament usually have the rendering "hard of neck," but some are rendered similar to the examples in the Book of Mormon:

. . . who had made him swear by God: but he stiffened his neck, . . . (II Chronicles 36:13.)

. . . but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear, . . . (Jeremiah 17:23.)

The Hebrew has an idiom, "to lift up the face," or "distinguish the face," that is used to convey meaning with respect to or showing partiality to a person. For example in Leviticus 19:15 we find the following in the Hebrew text:

. . . thou shalt not lift up the faces of the poor. . . .

This expression is rendered by the Authorized Version:

. . . thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, . . .

The meaning of this is shown by the next clause, "nor honor the person of the mighty," . . . That is to say, no partiality was to be shown.

Notice this in the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 1:17:

Ye shall not distinguish (discern) faces in judgment; . . .

This is rendered by the Authorized Version:

Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; . . . [Here, again, no partiality was to be shown.]

That the Nephites understood this idiom may be reasonably deduced from these references:

. . . they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, . . . whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect ["lifting up," or "distinguishing"] to persons ["faces"] as to those who stood in need. (Alma 1:30.)

And as many as would hear their words, unto them they did impart the word of God, without any respect ["lifting up," or "distinguishing"] of persons ["faces"], continually. (*Ibid.*, 16:14.)

. . . if not so, God is a partial ["lifter up of faces"] God, and also a changeable God, and a respecter to persons; . . . (Moroni 8:12; cf. Acts 10:34.)

One of my friends has noticed in the Book of Mormon an apparent Hebrew idiom, "to give up the ghost," which is used to express the death of a person. Let us look at it for a moment. The expression occurs three times in the Book of Mormon:

And it came to pass that when he had said these words he could say no more, and he gave up the ghost. (Jacob 7:20.)

. . . as he was about to give up the ghost, they were astonished exceedingly; . . . (*Ibid.*, 7:21.)

Yea, at the time that he [Christ] shall yield up the ghost there shall be thunderings. . . . (Helaman 14:21.)

As is well known, there are parallels to these in both the Old and New Testaments. Let us examine two or three examples from the Old Testament:

. . . she hath given up the ghost; her sun is gone down. . . . (Jeremiah 15:9.)

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In this example the Hebrew of the words in *italics* reads literally: "She has breathed (or blown) out her soul [*nephesh*]." The same essential words (not used grammatically the same) will be found in Job 11:20.

But in other examples in the Old Testament there is a different usage of the Hebrew. Notice this one in Genesis 25:8:

Then Abraham *gave up the ghost*, and died in a good old age, . . . (Authorized Version.)

Here the Hebrew original of the words in *italics*, *wayyigwa*, is completely different from those in Jeremiah 15:9 given above. In contrast to the Authorized Version, this may be translated:

Then Abraham *expired*, and died in a good old age, . . .

It is highly probable that the Nephites used both Hebrew expressions "breathe out the soul" and "expired" in referring to the death of a person. To "give up the ghost" in old English simply means to "give up the spirit (*gast*)," that is, to die.

In this article have been presented but a few of the Hebrew idioms observed in the Book of Mormon. At a later time others may be described.

It may be appropriate at this point to make a few observations concerning the old problem of the original language of the Nephite record. These studies support the idea that the Book of Mormon was originally written in Hebrew. Most of the idioms in the book appear to be typically Hebrew idioms; there appear to be few which could be called Egyptian. To be sure there are Egyptian names in the Nephite record and other evidences that point to the fact that the Nephite historians were acquainted with the language and customs of Egypt, but the text proper shows the strong influence of Hebrew.



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