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View of the Hebrews: "An Unparallel"

Author(s): John W. Welch

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2 Nephi 33:2 “Wherefore, they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught.”

The claim has been made before, and has recently been raised again, that Joseph Smith specifically copied the main structure and many details in the Book of Mormon from Ethan Smith’s 1823 *View of the Hebrews*. Alleged parallels between these two books have led some to esteem the Book of Mormon lightly, “as a thing of naught.”

Since the alleged points of contact are scattered throughout *View of the Hebrews* and in some cases are claimed to be quite specific, this assertion becomes plausible only if we assume that Joseph knew *View of the Hebrews* quite well and implicitly accepted it as accurate. If he did so, then he should have followed it—or at least should have not contradicted it—on its major points.

But this does *not* turn out to be the case. Since several people have pointed out alleged “parallels” between the Book of Mormon and *View of the Hebrews*, consider the following “unparallels” that weaken, if not completely undermine, the foregoing hypothesis:

1. *View of the Hebrews* begins with a chapter on the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.¹ It has nothing to say, however, about the destruction in Lehi’s day by the Babylonians.

2. *View of the Hebrews* tells of specific heavenly signs that marked the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Joseph Smith ignores these singular and memorable details.

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3. Chapter 2 lists many prophecies about the restoration of Israel, including Deuteronomy 30; Isaiah 11, 18, 60, 65; Jeremiah 16, 23, 30–31, 35–37; Zephaniah 3; Amos 9; Hosea and Joel.² These scriptures are essential to the logic and fabric of *View of the Hebrews*, yet, with the sole exception of Isaiah 11, none of them appear in the Book of Mormon.

4. Chapter 3 is the longest chapter in *View of the Hebrews*.³ It produces numerous "distinguished Hebraisms" as "proof" that the American Indians are Israelites. Hardly any of these points are found in the Book of Mormon, as one would expect if Joseph Smith were using *View of the Hebrews* or trying to make his book persuasive. For example, *View of the Hebrews* asserts repeatedly that the Ten Tribes came to America via the Bering Strait, which they crossed on "dry land." According to *View of the Hebrews*, this opinion is unquestionable, supported by all the authorities.

From there *View of the Hebrews* claims that the Israelites spread from north to east and then to the south at a very late date. These are critical points for *View of the Hebrews*, since Amos 8:11–12 prophesies that the tribes would go from the north to the east. Population migrations in the Book of Mormon, however, always move from the south to the north.

5. *View of the Hebrews* reports that the Indians are Israelites because they use the word "Hallelujah." Here is one of the favorite proofs of *View of the Hebrews*, a dead giveaway that the Indians are Israelites. Yet the word is never used in the Book of Mormon.

Furthermore, a table showing thirty-four Indian words or sentence fragments with Hebrew equivalents appears in *View of the Hebrews*.⁴ No reader of the book could have missed this chart. If Joseph Smith had wanted to make up names to use in the Book of Mormon that would substantiate his claim that he had found some authentic western hemisphere Hebrew words, he would have jumped at such a ready-made list! Yet not one of these thirty-four Hebrew/Indian words (e.g., *Keah*, *Lani*, *Uwoh*, *Phale*, *Kurbet*, etc.) has even the remotest resemblance to any of

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the 175 words that appear for the first time in the Book of Mormon.

6. *View of the Hebrews* says the Indians are Israelites because they carry small boxes with them into battle. These are to protect them against injury. They are sure signs that the Indians' ancestors knew of the Ark of the Covenant! How could Joseph Smith pass up such a distinguished and oft-attested Hebraism as this?! Yet in all Book of Mormon battle scenes, there is not one hint of any such ark, box, or bag serving as a military fetish.

7. The Indians are Israelites because the Mohawk tribe was a tribe held in great reverence by all the others, to whom tribute was paid. Obviously, to Ethan Smith, this makes the Mohawks the vestiges of the tribe of Levi, Israel's tribe of priests. If Joseph Smith believed that such a tribe or priestly remnant had survived down to his day, he forgot to provide for anything to that effect in the Book of Mormon.

8. The Indians are Israelites because they had a daily sacrifice of fat in the fire and passed their venison through the flame, cutting it into twelve pieces. This great clue of "Israelitishness" is also absent from the Book of Mormon.

9. *View of the Hebrews* maintains that the Indians knew "a distinguished Hebraism," namely "laying the hand on the mouth, and the mouth in the dust." Had Joseph Smith believed this, why is the Book of Mormon silent on this "sure sign of Hebraism" and dozens of others like it?

10. According to *View of the Hebrews*, the Indians quickly lost knowledge that they were all from the same family. The Book of Mormon tells that family and tribal affiliations were maintained for almost one thousand years.

11. *View of the Hebrews* claims that the righteous Indians were active "for a long time," well into recent times, and that their destruction occurred about A.D. 1400, based upon such convincing evidence as tree rings near some of the fortifications of these people. The Book of Mormon implicitly rejects this notion by reporting the destruction of the Nephites in the fourth century A.D.

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12. *View of the Hebrews* argues that the Indians are Israelites because they knew the legends of Quetzalcoatl. But the surprise here is that *View of the Hebrews* proves beyond doubt that Quetzalcoatl was none other than – not Jesus – but Moses! “Who could this be but *Moses*, the ancient legislator in Israel?”⁵ Quetzalcoatl was white, gave laws, required penance (strict obedience), had a serpent with green plumage (brazen, fiery-flying serpent in the wilderness), pierced ears (like certain slaves under the law of Moses), appeased God’s wrath (by sacrifices), was associated with a great famine (in Egypt), spoke from a volcano (Sinai), walked barefoot (removed his shoes), spawned a golden age (seven years of plenty in Egypt – which has nothing to do with Moses, by the way), etc. Besides the fact that the *View of the Hebrews*’s explanation of Quetzalcoatl as Moses is inconsistent with the Book of Mormon, none of these hallmark details associated with Quetzalcoatl are incorporated into the account of Christ’s visit to Bountiful in 3 Nephi.

The foregoing twelve points could be multiplied literally seven times over. In the face of these differences, the few vague similarities pale. Both speak of long migrations for religious reasons; both report wars; both say the people knew how to write and work with metals; and both praise generosity and denounce pride. *View of the Hebrews* speaks of Indian lore that they left a “lost book” back in Palestine. But these points are rather general and inconsequential.

The question has been asked: “Can such numerous and startling points of resemblance and suggestive contact be merely coincidence?” The answer is “yes,” not only because the points of resemblance are neither numerous nor startling, but also because the differences far outweigh the similarities. Why would Joseph have contradicted and ignored *View of the Hebrews* at virtually every turn, if indeed he gave it basic credence?⁶

An expanded version of this October 1985 research by John W. Welch was published that same year by F.A.R.M.S., entitled “An Unparallel.” It and Spencer Palmer’s and William Knecht’s 1964 article in BYU Studies are now

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available together under the title "View of the Hebrews: Substitute for Inspiration?"

Notes

1. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews: The Tribes of Israel in America*, 2nd ed. (Poultney, Vermont: Smith and Shute, 1825), 2–46. This book argues that the American Indians originated from the lost ten tribes.

2. *Ibid.*, 47–66.

3. *Ibid.*, 67–225.

4. *Ibid.*, 90–91.

5. *Ibid.*, 206, italics in original.

6. Further discussion is available in Spencer Palmer and William Knecht, "View of the Hebrews: Substitute for Inspiration?" *BYU Studies* 5 (1964): 105–13; and Hugh Nibley, "The Comparative Method," *Improvement Era* 62 (October–November 1959), 744–47, 759, 848, 854, 856, reprinted in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 8:193–206.