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Repetitive Resumption in the Book of Mormon


One of the most important contributions of biblical scholarship since the time of Joseph Smith has been the recognition and analysis of editorial activity in the Old Testament. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Mormon is a compilation of several literary sources produced under the auspices of ancient editors or redactors. Significantly, one of the primary signs of editorial activity in the Old Testament, a technique known as repetitive resumption, is also attested in the Book of Mormon.

Repetitive resumption refers to an editor's return to an original narrative following a deliberate interlude. Old Testament writers accomplished this by repeating a key word or phrase that immediately preceded the textual interruption. For example, in Joshua 1:7, Moses's successor counsels ancient Israel to be "strong and very courageous." This admonition is then followed by a mandate to continually meditate upon the "book of the law" (v. 8). Since a reference to the "book of the law" alters the focus of Joshua's primarily militaristic account, most biblical scholars conclude that Joshua 1:8 represents a later editorial insertion that successfully transformed the book of Joshua into "Torah" literature.¹ Directly following this interruption, the Hebrew redactor returns to the original narrative by restating the key words that immediately precede his insertion: "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage" (v. 9). Similar examples of this phenomenon have been identified throughout the Hebrew Bible.

A careful survey of editorial activity in the Book of Mormon shows that Nephite editors used repetitive resumption in a similar manner. For example, the editor of the book of Alma (in this case apparently Mormon) interrupts the account of Alma's confrontation with Zeezrom by interjecting an outline of the Nephite monetary system (see Alma 11:1–19). Prior to this insertion, the account reads, "Now the object of these lawyers was to get gain; and they got gain according to their employ" (10:32). However, after the editorial interruption that breaks the flow of the primary narrative, the

editor returns to the original account by using repetitive resumption: "Now, it was for the sole purpose to get gain, because they received their wages according to their employ" (11:20).

Another example of repetitive resumption in the Book of Mormon occurs in Helaman 5:5–14. In this section the compiler inserts a direct report of Helaman's powerful discourse to his sons Nephi and Lehi (see vv. 6–12). This insertion is intentionally prefaced by the editorial introduction, "For they remembered the words which their father Helaman spake unto them" (v. 5). The compiler's choice of words in this passage proves especially significant. The word *remember* serves as the *Leitwort* (key word) recurring throughout Helaman's discourse.² In these few short verses, Helaman intentionally emphasizes the word *remember* by repeating it a total of 12 times. With great editorial skill, therefore, the compiler of this account used repetitive resumption to bracket Helaman's discourse with a return to the original introduction, "And they did remember his words" (v. 14).

Further study of repetitive resumption in the Book of Mormon may help shed additional light on the editorial activity that underlies the text. This literary technique is significant not only because it supports the authenticity of the Book of Mormon (the technique had not yet been identified by biblical scholars in 1830) but also because it allows readers to identify the primary message that the original writers of the Book of Mormon wanted their audience to receive. 

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Notes

1. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 384, 388.
2. "A *Leitwort* is a word or a word-root that recurs significantly in a text, in a continuum of texts, or in a configuration of texts: by following these repetitions, one is able to decipher or grasp a meaning of the text, or at any rate, the meaning will be revealed more strikingly" (Martin Buber, as cited in Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: BasicBooks, 1981], 93).