

## How a Weakness Becomes a Strength: An Exegesis

In the Latter Day Saint community, Moroni, the son of Mormon, is viewed as one of the strongest men in the Book of Mormon. He faces trials of loneliness, sorrow, and fear. The destruction of his people and the loneliness of hiding in the wilderness does not get in the way of his completion of the Nephite record. Though he feared his weakness, Moroni's record in Ether 12:22-29 highlights his strength and his persuasive testimony of the Book of Mormon. Simply analyzing his language provides fascinating evidence that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record.

The majority of chapter 12 in the Book of Ether includes Moroni's commentary on the story of the brother of Jared, an ancient prophet who escapes the scattering at the Tower of Babel in around 2200 B.C. Thousands of years later, in about 400 A.D., Moroni writes his reflection, which provides important details into his culture. Moroni's words themselves show that an education system might have existed for youth in the Nephite culture. He would have needed to learn how to read and write by the time he was a young adult because he was cut off from his people by that age. It can be easily assumed that Moroni and other authors of the Book of Mormon knew very well the meanings of the words they used in their writings, but how well do modern readers understand their vocabulary? Weakness, fault, and infirmity are words frequently used in the Book of Mormon. Through the studying of these words' ancient and modern definitions, the idea that Joseph Smith authored the Book of Mormon is highly unlikely.

By studying the context of Ether 12:22-29, one learns what Moroni truly meant when referring to weakness and what that means for the Book of Mormon. In verses 22-29 Moroni forms a chiasmus. This persuasive strategy is one that could not have been written on accident. It

is clear that Moroni is educated and truly knows how to write. A chiasmus would have been used in this situation to emphasize the main idea of the verses. The center of the chiasmus denotes that the main point is that people will mock Moroni's words, but those words would one day become a strength. After studying Moroni's words, it is clear how genuinely strong they are.

Moroni's words are some of the most quoted in the Mormon church, but Moroni emphasizes in Ether 12 his lack of writing skills which he repeatedly refers to as a weakness. Within the eight verses in Ether, the word "weakness" is used six times. The repetition of the word might imply its importance. What exactly was a weakness in Moroni's time? He shares that his weakness was specifically in writing. Reading of weakness elsewhere in the Book of Mormon adds clarity to what Moroni meant by "weakness." Only one hundred years before Moroni, Nephi used "weakness" in the exact same context when he said, "And the words which I have written in weakness will be made strong unto them... I have been commanded to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness." Nephi had previously used the word "weakness" about 30 years earlier saying, "I do not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred. And now, if I do err, even did they err of old; not that I would excuse myself because of other men, but because of the weakness which is in me..." When simply looking for the word "weakness" in the Book of Mormon, one quickly notices a trend. "Weakness" is used 18 times in the Book of Mormon and 14 of those associate the word with writing. This suggests that weakness in ancient times could have a unique definition. There now exists a gap between modern and ancient versions of the word weakness.

When searched in Merriam-Webster's most recent thesaurus, "weakness" is synonymized with words like "febleness," "infirmity," "shortcoming," and "fault." Because "infirmity" and

“fault” are often found in the Book of Mormon, they can be easily compared to the word “weakness” in its ancient context. To a modern vocabulary, “weakness” and “fault” are interchangeable; however, that is not the case when studied in the context of the Book of Mormon. In Helaman chapter 9, it says, “he shall confess his fault and make known unto us the true murderer of this judge... Now tell us and acknowledge thy fault.” In this case, the man’s fault was a specific sin, murder, that he needed to confess. About 50 years prior to this, the word is used in Alma 39 to say, “acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done.” In 3 Nephi 1 it reads, “in this same year, they were brought to a knowledge of their error and did confess their faults.” “Fault” is used 4 times in the Book of Mormon, and every time it is used to represent a specific sin that must be acknowledged or confessed. This is not a typical trend seen in the modern usage of the word, but it shows the contrast in ancient and modern languages.

The purpose of confessing or acknowledging a fault is not clarified when the word is used; however, studying infirmities gives reason to the actions taken on a fault. An infirmity in the scriptures does not perfectly represent how one might use the word infirmity today. Around 80 B.C. Alma says, “He [Jesus Christ] will take upon them their infirmities...” Roughly five years later he pleads, “Oh Lord, wilt thou give me strength that I may bear with mine infirmities.” In both instances, the word “infirmities” is closely accompanied by the Savior and implication of His atoning sacrifice. 3 Nephi 7:22 states, “And as many as had devils cast out from them, and were healed of their sicknesses and their infirmities, did truly manifest unto the people that they had been wrought upon by the Spirit of God.” The scriptures use the word infirmity 7 times and all 7 times it is described as something that is healed by the power of God because of the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ.

In “A Lengthier Treatment of Length,” Brian D. Stubbs says, “certain lengthy, awkward sentence structures containing strings of subordinate clauses and verbals, as found in the Book of Mormon, are more typical of Hebrew than English.” This description of the language of the Book of Mormon is exactly how Moroni describes his weakness. He describes the “awkwardness of our hands” and the “placing of our words.” To Moroni, weakness may have involved poor handwriting or imperfect word placement. According to the Webster’s 1828 dictionary, a weakness was a “want of physical strength; want of force or vigor; feebleness.” Today, the word is defined as “the state or quality of being weak; lack of strength, firmness, vigor, or the like; feebleness.” The 1828 definition and the modern one are almost identical, but the ancient definition is clearly different.

If “weakness” over time changed in meaning, did its current synonyms change too? A fault in Joseph Smith’s day was defined as “an erring or missing; a failing; hence, an error or mistake; a blunder; a defect; a blemish; whatever impairs excellence; applied to things,” while today it is plainly defined as “a defect or imperfection; flaw, failing.” Similarly to the scripture usage, it denotes a mistake or a blemish. It is crucial to notice that neither of the modern definitions refers to a sin, but in the Book of Mormon, a fault is not just used to clarify a simple flaw, but a sin that must be confessed and acknowledged. A fault and a weakness are synonymous to modern dictionaries. The deeper meaning of a fault, though, in the Book of Mormon points to the idea of its place in the repentance process which leads to the trend of the word “infirmity”

Infirmity is always accompanied by Jesus Christ and the atonement in the Book of Mormon, though modern dictionaries do not share this trend. To Joseph Smith, an infirmity was

“an unsound or unhealthy state of the body; weakness; feebleness,” and the current Webster’s refers to it as “a physical weakness or ailment.” Joseph Smith’s “infirmity” is almost identical to today’s and the definitions are simply a restatement of the word “weakness.” These three words are interchangeable to Joseph Smith and modern readers, but their trends in the Book of Mormon suggest that these words were not as synonymous in ancient times. The importance of this is not to simply give insight to a Book of Mormon reader; rather, it validates the Church’s doctrine that Joseph Smith did not write the Book of Mormon.

The word, “weakness” in Ether 12:27 is commonly generalized to mean “the lack of a strength” and interchangeable synonyms—according to modern definitions—might be “fault” or “infirmity.” However, when read in context, these words are not at all interchangeable: “weakness” is almost always a lack of writing ability; “fault” is always associated with a specific sin such as greed or murder; and “infirmity” is always accompanied with Jesus Christ and the Atonement, suggesting that an infirmity is something that is specifically taken on by Jesus Christ. The consistency of usage suggests that the ancient definitions of these words had slight, but significant difference that modern readers overlook and misinterpret, though, interestingly, the 1828 Webster's Dictionary clarifies that Joseph Smith's understanding of weakness, fault, and infirmity was likely similar to our 2017 interpretation. Taken together, these 3 words form another small but significant evidence of the Book of Mormon: it is highly unlikely that Joseph Smith could author a book that consistently uses three words in subtly different ways especially when, to him, the words were interchangeable.

What Moroni saw as a weakness, the Lord promised to make into a strength. If read in a 2017 Sunday School class, Ether 12:27 might be generalized to teach that if we work hard to

recognize and improve our weaknesses, Heavenly Father will help make them into our strengths. This generalization suggests a timeline that God did not quite mention. Moroni never acknowledges an improvement in his ability to write, but the Lord did not break His promise to Moroni. His repetition of the word “weakness” sparked interest in comparing the word to “infirmity” and “fault.” Noting their differences in the Book of Mormon compared to their *lack* of differences to a modern vocabulary upholds the idea that the book must be an ancient record. Moroni’s writing may not have met his personal standards; however, the words he chose were all he needed to testify that the Book of Mormon is the word of God.

Moroni feared “the Gentiles would mock at our words,” and his fears definitely came to pass. Mark Twain described the Book of Mormon as “so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print. If Joseph Smith composed this book, the act was a miracle—keeping awake while he did it *was*, at any rate.” Surely, the words of the Book of Mormon have been mocked, but the Lord testifies to Moroni, “Fools mock, but they shall mourn; and my grace is sufficient for the meek, that they shall take no advantage of your weakness.” In Richard Rust’s book, “Feasting on the Word,” he states, “the impact of *what* the Book of Mormon says often is created through *how* it is said.” For Moroni, it took thousands of years before his words would be strong enough to become evidence of the Book of Mormon, but they did. Not only did the Lord strengthen Moroni’s weakness, but he made it into the strongest thing it could be—a testament of Jesus Christ. The Lord kept his promise to an overwhelming extent and what the Lord did for Moroni, He will surely do for us.

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