



## Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

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Volume 12 | Issue 1

Article 22

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2-13-1986

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#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Pack, M. Deloy (1986) "Three Examples of Possible Hebrew Influence on the Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol12/iss1/22>

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THREE EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE  
HEBREW INFLUENCE ON THE TRANSLATION  
OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

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The idea of looking for Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon is not new. It goes back at least to 1909 when Thomas W. Brookbank published a series of articles on "Hebrew Idioms and Analogies in the Book of Mormon" in The Improvement Era.<sup>1</sup> Although he confessed that "not many different kinds of Hebrew idioms" were known to him to exist in the Book of Mormon, he maintained that some of them were so well sustained that it was necessary to refer the authorship of the Book of Mormon to someone who was familiar with the peculiarities of the Hebrew language (p. 117). Since then, other researchers have added to his list.<sup>2</sup>

One might ask why one would look for Hebrew influence on the translation of the Book of Mormon? One reason is that, although they wrote the record which they kept on metal plates in reformed Egyptian, those who kept the record came from a Hebrew speaking area and claimed that they were still using Hebrew, albeit in an altered form, until near the end of their existence.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Hebrew modes of expression could have influenced their writing.

Furthermore, the translation process as described by those involved would permit a reasonably literal translation of the original so that these Hebrew modes of expression could have been carried over into English.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Joseph Smith was an inexperienced translator, and inexperienced translators tend to be literal in their translations. In fact, Joseph Smith claimed with respect to at least part of the translation that it was not his own work but rather a "literal translation....not by any means a modern composition."<sup>5</sup> Exactly what he ment by "literal" is impossible to know, but his point was obviously that he was staying close to the original text, not creating freely as he worked.

So, beginning with Brookbank, considerable work has been done by Mormon scholars in examining the Book of Mormon for evidence of Hebrew influence on its language in connection with vocabulary, modes of expression and syntax. Many such "Hebraisms" have been found, but most of them have their counterparts in the King James Version, the English of which has been extensively influenced by the Hebrew original.<sup>6</sup>

Since Joseph Smith was acquainted with the King James Version, and obviously tried to use a religious-language style in producing the Book of Mormon, he could have reproduced Hebraisms in the King James Version in his translation; consequently, their value as witnesses for the language on the plates is diminished.

In this paper we shall consider three examples of possible Hebrew influence on the translation of the Book of Mormon which do not have counterparts in the King James Version and, consequently, could be independent evidence of Hebrew influence on Joseph Smith's translation attributable to the language of the original plates.

The first example is the use of the word "under" instead of the expression "instead of". This example was first pointed out by Sidney B. Sperry some time ago.<sup>7</sup>

The Book of Mormon text is Alma 13:18 (260).<sup>8</sup> Speaking of the great king Melchizedek it reads, "and Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the Prince of Peace, for he was the king of Salem; and he did reign under his father" "He did reign under his father"--This could possibly mean that Melchizedek reigned as a viceroy under his father, but such a statement here seems unlikely. The whole tenor of this section is to extol the greatness and uniqueness of Melchizedek. To say that, after all, he was number two is an unfitting anticlimax.

Rather, the idea of the original was probably that Melchizedek followed his father as king of Salem. This probability is strengthened on noting that the following verse, nineteen, goes on to talk about succession, "there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards."

The preposition "under" is used here instead of an expression such as "in the place of." Now, it happens that in Hebrew the preposition "under" (tahat) is used to express this idea.<sup>9</sup> For example, in Genesis 35:36 we read, "And Hadad died, and Samiah of Masrekah reigned in his stead." "in his stead" is the translation of tahat "under" in Hebrew (see also 1 Kings 5:1, 2 Kings 14:21 etc.). In all the instances where this usage occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures, the King James translators have translated it correctly into English; consequently, Joseph Smith could not have picked up the literal translation from the English King James Version.

My second example is the use of the word "word" in the Book of Mormon where the context requires "thing." Our prime example is in Alma 14:18 (263). The account here relates that while Alma and Amulek were in prison, some persons came to see them, and "they questioned them about many words; but they answered them nothing." Now, as this is phrased, it appears that there was a dictionary quiz going on in the jail--"they questioned them about many words." It seems, however, more likely that the questions would have been about religious doctrines or political matters. A more accurate statement would be that they questioned them about many matters or things.

The confusion here could again be the result of one word in Hebrew, davar, being the equivalent of two words in English, "word" or "thing".<sup>10</sup> In the King James Version davar is translated "word(s)" over 500 times and "thing(s)" more than 200 times.<sup>11</sup> In Alma 14:18 "things" would definitely have been better than "words."

There is no example of a similar mistranslation in the Old Testament. An instance when such a translation could have occurred is Ecclesiastes 5:2, "Be not rash with they mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing (lit. a word [davar] before God." Here, as in many other places, although the context is that of speaking, the translators have appropriately translated davar "thing" rather than "word."

Another example from the Book of Mormon is found in Helaman 9:2 (431), which reads, in part, "if this thing which he hath said concerning the Chief Judge be true, that he be dead, then will we believe that the other words which he hath spoken is true." It would have been more natural to say "we will believe the other things which he has said are true."<sup>12</sup>

Our third example is the usage of the word "that" before a direct quotation. One example is in 1 Nephi 3:15 (10), "But behold I said unto them, that as the Lord liveth, and as we live, we will not go down unto our father in the wilderness, until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord hath commanded us." We see here direct discourse preceded by the word "that," which should introduce indirect discourse. If "that" were replaced by quotation marks the sentence would be grammatically correct. Another example occurs in chapter seventeen verse fourteen (43), "Yea, and the Lord said also, that after ye have arrived to the promised land, ye shall know that I, the Lord, am God..."<sup>13</sup>

Now the vocable ki in Hebrew which generally serves as a conjunction meaning "because" or "that" may also be used to introduce direct discourse.<sup>14</sup>

An example where this construction occurs in the Old Testament is Genesis 21:30 "And he said, For these seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand . . ." The Hebrew reads literally, "And he said, that (ki) seven ewe lambs . . ." Here the King James translators have translated ki as an emphatic for. They then felt the need to add the word "these." A simpler translation is possible when one recognizes that ki is being used as a marker of direct quotation: "and he said, 'seven ewe lambs shalt thou take . . .'"

Note that, although the King James Translators did not recognize ki as being equivalent to quotation marks, they have avoided a literal translation which would have introduced the direct discourse with the word "that." Joseph Smith could not have picked up the literal construction from reading his English Old Testament.

In summary, then, these three examples of unusual or incorrect English usage in the Book of Mormon: "under" for "instead of," "words" for "things," and "that" as marker of direct discourse could be instances of Hebrew usage influencing the translation English of the Book of Mormon. Since they are not a reflection of Hebrew influence on the King James Version which Joseph Smith might have assimilated through reading the Bible, one must explain their existence in some other way.

One explanation would be that they are literal translations reflecting the vocabulary or thought patterns as recorded on the plates by the original authors whose writing was influenced by Hebrew.

#### END NOTES

1. Volumes 13 (1909-1910), 17 (1913-1914) and 18 (1914).
2. See the bibliography in the author's Brigham Young University M.A. Thesis, "Possible Lexical Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon (Words of Mormon - Moroni)", 1973 (unpublished).
3. Mormon 9:32-33, see Joseph Smith Jr., The Book of Mormon (Palmyra, E. B. Grandin, 1830) p. 538.
4. See Pack, "Possible Lexical Hebraisms," pp. 21-33.
5. See Joseph Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1951) I, 71.
6. See William Rosenau, Hebraisms in the Authorized Version of the Bible (Baltimore: The Lord Baltimore Press, 1902).
7. Sidney B. Sperry, "Hebrew Idioms in the Book of Mormon," The Improvement Era, 57 (1954) 703.
8. References to chapter and verse are as in the 1981 edition. They are followed by parenthesis containing the corresponding page in the 1830 edition. Quotations are as in the 1830 edition.
9. Francis Brown et al., A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford, The Oxford University Press, 1972) 1065 2.b.
10. Brown, Lexicon, 182 ff.
11. See Robert Young, Young's Analytical Concordance (Grand Rapids, Mich.) 975-977, 1068-1070.
12. Italics are mine.
13. Italics are mine.
14. See A. E. Cowley, ed., Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) 491 para. 157 (b).