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## Negative Questions in the Book of Mormon

Much research has been devoted to identifying and examining language patterns in the Book of Mormon that appear to reflect the book's underlying Semitic character.<sup>1</sup> One possible Hebraism in the Book of Mormon that has not received attention is the use of negative rhetorical questions when a positive meaning is intended. Some modern Bible translations now translate these negative questions in a positive or even emphatic way.<sup>2</sup> This rhetorical device occurs in English, but it is stronger and more common in biblical Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

Being aware of negative questions can help shed light on some Book of Mormon passages and in one case pertains directly to a criticism leveled against the book.

In Hebrew, questions that require a yes or no answer are prefixed by *hă* (an interrogative particle), and negative questions are prefixed by *hălô* (the particle plus the word for *no*).<sup>4</sup> In contrast to a "simple question, when the questioner is wholly uncertain as to the answer to be expected,"<sup>5</sup> these negative questions, Hebrew scholars have pointed out, sometimes have an "exclamatory nuance" or "a special force of asseveration" (i.e., they are being used for rhetorical effect, conveying positive or even emphatic force).<sup>6</sup>

### Old Testament Examples

A few examples will suffice to show that where the KJV translates the underlying Hebrew literally as a negative question,<sup>7</sup> some newer Bible versions prefer to translate the intended positive or emphatic effect upon the hearer.<sup>8</sup>

*Deuteronomy 11:30*

KJV **Are they not on the other side Jordan**, by the way where the sun goeth down, in the land of the Canaanites, which dwell in the champaign over against Gilgal, beside the plains of Moreh?

NIV **As you know, these mountains are across the Jordan**, west of the road, toward the setting sun, near the great trees of Moreh, in the territory of those Canaanites living in the Arabah in the vicinity of Gilgal.

*Isaiah 10:8*

KJV For he saith, **Are not my princes altogether kings?**

JPS For he thinks, "**After all, I have kings as my captains!**"

*Judges 4:14*

KJV And Deborah said unto Barak, Up; for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: **is not the Lord gone out before thee?** So Barak went down from mount Tabor,

and ten thousand men after him.

NRSV Then Deborah said to Barak, "Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. **The Lord is indeed going out before you.**" So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him.


### Book of Mormon Examples

One good example of a potentially Hebrew-based negative question in the Book of Mormon comes from Helaman 9, where Nephi is accused of murdering the chief judge, Seezoram. In prophetically sending the authorities to the true assassin, Seantum, Nephi instructs them to ask Seantum, "From whence cometh this blood [on your cloak]? *Do we not know* that it is the blood of your brother?" (Helaman 9:32). In other words, "We do indeed know that it is the blood of your brother." Seantum promptly confesses.

A second example is a well-known passage from Moroni 10:4. Some critics have charged that a positive response about the Book of Mormon as a result of prayer indicates that the Book of Mormon is not true, because of the phrasing of the passage. This argument is strained and untenable given the nature of rhetorical negative questions. Moroni asks that "when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you

that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are *not* true”—rather than “if these things are *indeed* true.” Though from a relatively late period in Nephite history, this example nevertheless seems valid since a form of “altered” Hebrew was still in use, at least for writing (see Mormon 9:33). Additional examples of negative questions may include 1 Nephi 15:12; 2 Nephi 31:7; Jacob 5:48; Mosiah 4:19; 7:23; 20:18; 27:15; and Alma 5:11; 27:18; 39:18; 39:19; 47:34.

The Book of Mormon also asks negative questions in which the speaker answers his own question with “Yea.” This may correspond to a slightly different category of questions using *hālô*, indicating that “an affirmative answer is expected.”<sup>9</sup> For example, Alma 5:59 reads, “For what shepherd is there among you having many sheep doth not watch over them, that the wolves enter not and devour his flock? And behold, if a wolf enter his flock doth he not drive him out? *Yea*, and at the last, if he can, he will destroy him.” Other examples include 1 Nephi 15:15; Mosiah 12:30; 13:33; Alma 26:35; 32:30; and Mormon 9:16.

Given what we know about biblical Hebrew and the Semitic background of the Book of Mormon, it seems probable that the authors of the Book of Mormon employed negative rhetorical questions to indicate positive emphasis in the same manner as their Old Testament counterparts did. 

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#### Notes

- 1 See, for example, Donald W. Parry, “Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities in the Book of Mormon,” in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 155–89; and John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1982), 33–52.
- 2 Examples are the NIV (New International Version) and JPS (Jewish Publication Society of America) Bible translations, demonstrating that the decision to translate negative questions positively is not an idiosyncrasy of one translator or theological bias.
- 3 In some ways the Hebrew usage is functionally closer to English question tags meant to affirm the validity of the statement: “It’s hot, isn’t it?” See Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §40.3n48.
- 4 Some scholars have argued that *lô* does not represent the negative particle, but an asseverative particle as exists in Ugaritic and Arabic. Since the two particles are formally the same, resolving the argument remains methodologically difficult. See Daniel Sivan and William Schniedewind, “Letting Your ‘Yes’ Be ‘No’ in Ancient Israel: A Study of the Asseverative  $\text{לֹ}$  and  $\text{לֹא}$ ,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 38/2 (1993): 209–26.
- 5 Wilhelm Gesenius, E. Kautzsch, and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §150 d.
- 6 Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblio, 1991), §161 b–c and 164 d.
- 7 The literal translation of these questions in KJV English minimizes any potential evidentiary value of this Semitic pattern in the Book of Mormon.
- 8 Further examples are listed in H. A. Brongers, “Some Remarks on the Biblical Particle *h<sup>a</sup>lô*,” *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 21 (1981): 188–89.
- 9 Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §40.3n48.

### Proceedings of the Tree of Life Symposium

We are pleased to announce plans to publish the proceedings of the recent FARMS-sponsored Tree of Life Symposium, held in September at Brigham Young University. Featuring papers by such noted scholars as Margaret Barker of Great Britain, James Lara of Yale Divinity School, Richard Oman of the Museum of Church History and Art, and Wilfred Griggs of BYU’s Department of Ancient Scripture, this volume will explore religious, cultural, historical, and botanical aspects of this rich and widespread symbol.