



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 24 | Number 2

Article 2

January 2004

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Recommended Citation

Hardy, Grant (2004) "Of Punctuation and Parentage," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 24: No. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol24/iss2/2>

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Of Punctuation and Parentage

As is well known, when the words of the Book of Mormon were translated “by the gift and power of God,” there was no punctuation at all in the early manuscripts, and that is the way the translated text was delivered to E. B. Grandin’s print shop. Typesetter John Gilbert reported that when he sat down to prepare the text for publication, “every chapter . . . was one solid paragraph, without a punctuation mark, from beginning to end.”¹ So he added punctuation and paragraphing as he went along. He did a good job, especially for someone reading the book for the first time, but there are a few sentences that could have been punctuated in more than one way, with slightly different results. Since the punctuation of the Book of Mormon does not enjoy the same revealed status as the words themselves, it may be worth considering some of the alternatives.

For instance, Alma 54:23–24 currently reads as follows:

I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem. And behold now, I am a bold Lamanite; behold, this war . . .

The word *behold* is a common interjection in the Book of Mormon that means something like “pay attention to what follows,” and *behold now* may simply be an intensification of that idea (as in Helaman 7:29). But what if

we shifted the comma after *now* back one word?

I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem. And behold, now I am a bold Lamanite; behold, this war . . .

It may be preferable to apply the *now* to what follows because Ammoron’s point is that once he was a Zoramite (allied with the Nephites) but now he is a Lamanite. In fact, he is now the king of the Lamanites (so the word *behold* may even be taken in the unusual sense of “look at me!”). This reading makes sense in the context of the passage as well: Ammoron is closing a belligerent letter to Moroni with a strong rejection of Nephite culture and everything associated with it. (Incidentally, the original manuscript has a slightly different wording here that seems to support the alternative punctuation: “And behold I am now a bold Lamanite . . .”)

Another example of punctuation affecting meaning is the familiar confession of faith by Helaman’s 2,000 stripling warriors in Alma 56:48:

And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it.

As the verse now stands, it appears that the young men are expressing confidence in their mothers’ testimonies: “We do

not doubt [that] our mothers knew it.” But with a break in the middle—either a semicolon or a period—the meaning changes slightly: “We do not doubt; our mothers knew it,” which to me implies something along the lines of “We do not doubt, because our mothers knew it.” Or even, “We do not doubt. After all, our mothers knew it.” Once again, the amended punctuation fits the context better—the previous verse makes it clear that God’s promise of deliverance depended on the faith of the young men themselves rather than on the belief of their mothers. And indeed, in the next chapter Helaman credits their miraculous preservation to their own lack of doubts (Alma 57:21, 26–27).

The two examples above make for relatively minor changes in meaning, but there is at least one verse where alternative punctuation takes us into the world of the ancient Hebrews. In the current version of 2 Nephi 4:3, Nephi begins his account of Lehi’s last words and blessings as follows:

Wherefore, after my father had made an end of speaking concerning the prophecies of Joseph, he called the children of Laman, his sons, and his daughters, and said unto them . . .

The word *called* here means “summoned,” but with the deletion of a couple of commas, the scene shifts dramatically:

Wherefore, after my father had made an end of speak-

ing concerning the prophecies of Joseph, he called the children of Laman his sons and his daughters, and said unto them . . .

In this reading, when Lehi “called the children of Laman his sons and his daughters,” he was actually adopting his grandchildren as his own children. This may seem counterintuitive, but it makes sense of the words that follow in that verse (“Behold, my sons, and my daughters, who are the sons and the daughters of my first-born”) as well as in verse 5, where he definitely refers to his grandchildren as his own sons and daughters.

Even more tellingly, Lehi’s actions echo those of the patriarch Jacob, who in a similar situation—giving last blessings and dividing territory—adopted the sons of his son Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) and made them independent tribes (see Genesis 48:1–6). This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Lehi has just spoken at length in chapter 3 about Joseph and his descendants, and he himself comes from the tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3); he is certainly aware of the precedent. (Note that Lehi similarly adopts the children of Lemuel in 2 Nephi 4:8–9).²

As with other passages in the Bible, Genesis 48 has been thoroughly analyzed by generations of scholars. Adoption was rare in ancient Israel and is not mentioned in the Mosaic law, but this instance seems fairly straightforward. Jacob says to his son Joseph:


And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee

into Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine. And thy issue, which thou begettest after them, shall be thine, and shall be called after the name of their brethren in their inheritance. (Genesis 48:5–6)

In fact, the placing of the children on Jacob’s lap, mentioned in verse 12 (“And Joseph brought them out from between his [Jacob’s] knees”), is often regarded as a part of an ancient adoption ceremony (see also Genesis 30:3).³ And Jacob specifically mentions that his actions are the result of a revelation about his descendants in the land of promise.

As he came to the end of his life, Lehi, like Jacob, tried to prepare his family for a future in a new land. In particular, he was concerned about the children of his two oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, who had already shown signs of rebellion. He adopted these grandchildren in an effort to tie them more closely to himself and to the covenant given by the Lord (in 2 Nephi 4:4 he reminds them of the terms of that covenant: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land”).

This adoption was a bold move, but it was not entirely new. It was part of the family history of a man who, after God called him to relive sacred history by traveling to a promised land, named his next two sons Jacob and Joseph. (This was something of a departure in his family; none of the four older boys were named after patriarchs.) With the deletion of a few commas, the Hebrew roots

of Lehi’s last words come more clearly into focus. How was John Gilbert to know? 

By Grant Hardy

Notes

1. Gilbert’s entire memorandum that contains this statement (dated 8 September 1892) is reproduced in Royal Skousen, “John Gilbert’s 1892 Account of the 1830 Printing of the Book of Mormon,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (2000). The statement is on page 402 (p. 3 of Gilbert’s memorandum); capitalization has been normalized.
2. Royal Skousen suggests that the wording in 2 Nephi 4:8 (“he caused the sons and daughters of Lemuel to be brought before him”) is equivalent to the wording in verse 3 (“he called the children of Laman”). He explains that the two passages are part of a narrative sequence in which calling for (summoning) the children makes sense, since “it appears that [Lehi] had all of his immediate family around him, but the children of his two sons had to be called.” Nevertheless, Skousen agrees that “obviously, Lehi treats these grandchildren as his children—he calls both groups ‘my sons and my daughters.’ It is as if he has given up on Laman and Lemuel; he never directly addresses them as individuals” (private communication, 5 Jan. 2004).
3. For the Near Eastern background of this practice, see “Adoption” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. John W. Welch has written of the cultural and legal issues surrounding 2 Nephi 1–4 (though without this particular interpretation). See his “Lehi’s Last Will and Testament: A Legal Approach,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (1989), 61–82.