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## The Pleading Bar of God

Near the end of his life, the prophet Nephi referred to the day of judgment and declared that we, the readers of the Book of Mormon, will stand face to face with him before the bar of Christ (2 Nephi 33:11). Similarly, the prophets Jacob and Moroni referred to meeting us when we appear before “the pleasing bar” of God to be judged:

Jacob 6:13<sup>1</sup>

finally I bid you farewell  
until I shall meet you before **the pleasing bar** of God  
which bar striketh the wicked  
with awful dread and fear

Moroni 10:34

and now I bid unto all farewell.  
I soon go to rest in the paradise of God  
until my spirit and body shall again reunite  
and I am brought forth triumphant through the air  
to meet you before **the pleasing bar**  
of the great Jehovah  
the eternal judge of both quick and dead

For the righteous, the bar of God may well be pleasing, but not for the wicked, as Jacob himself says in Jacob 6:13: “which bar striketh the wicked with awful dread and fear.” Nor do the nine other occurrences of “the bar of God” denote anything necessarily pleasing. In fact, three of them refer to it negatively:

2 Nephi 33:15

for what I seal on earth shall be brought  
against you at the judgment bar

Jacob 6:9

to stand with shame and awful guilt  
before the bar of God

Alma 5:22

how will any of you feel if ye shall stand  
before the bar of God having your garments stained  
with blood and all manner of filthiness

Christian Gellinek (who studied law at the University of Göttingen in Germany) believes that the textually difficult reading “the pleasing

bar of God” can be readily resolved if we replace the word *pleasing* with *pleading*—in other words, Jacob and Moroni will meet us before “the pleading bar of God” (personal communication, 25 September 2003). Phonetically, the words *pleading* and *pleasing* are nearly identical. What seems to have happened is that Oliver Cowdery, being completely unfamiliar with the legal term *pleading bar*, twice substituted the more familiar word *pleasing* for *pleading*, even though *pleasing* does not make much sense.

There are a number of examples in the original manuscript where Oliver made this kind of mistake—that is, if a word or a phrase was unknown to him, he substituted a more common word or phrase (but with varying degrees of success). In each of these cases, the substitution seems to have occurred in the original manuscript (O) as Oliver took down Joseph Smith’s dictation and later copied it into the printer’s manuscript (P):

*weed* (O, P) instead of *reed* (1830 edition)

1 Nephi 17:48

and whoso shall lay their hands upon me  
shall wither even as a dried **weed** > **reed**<sup>2</sup>

*bosom* (O, P) instead of *besom* ‘broom’ (1830 edition)

2 Nephi 24:23

and I will sweep it  
with the **bosom** > **besom** of destruction

*arrest* (O, P, 1830) instead of *wrest* (1837 edition)

Alma 13:20

behold the scriptures are before you  
if ye will **arrest** > **wrest** them  
it shall be to your own destruction

Alma 41:1

for behold some have **arrested** > **wrested**  
the scriptures

*drugs* (O, P) instead of *dregs* (1830 edition)

Alma 40:26

and they drink the **drugs** > **dregs** of a bitter cup

*fraction* (O, P) instead of *faction* (1830 edition)

Alma 58:36

behold we fear that there is  
some **fraction** > **faction** in the government

The examples of *weed* for *reed* and *fraction* for *faction* are not impossible readings, but given

Oliver's predilection to misinterpret unfamiliar expressions, *weed* and *fraction* are probably errors (see, for instance, the discussion regarding *weed*, in the recently published part 1 of volume 4 of the critical text).<sup>3</sup> For each of the five cases listed above, English language usage supports the current reading.

For four of the expressions, the 1830 typesetter figured out the correct interpretation and emended the text appropriately (in the case of *besom*, he seems to have consulted his King James Bible). But the 1830 typesetter, just like Oliver Cowdery, could not figure out the correct reading for two cases—namely, the phrase “wrest the scriptures” and the legal expression “before the pleading bar.” The 1830 typesetter set both as Oliver had written them: “arrest the scriptures” and “before the pleasing bar.” The first of these was later corrected in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon, but the other has remained in all printed editions, apparently because no one until recently has recognized *pleasing bar* as a possible error for *pleading bar*.

One might wonder how Oliver Cowdery could have twice misinterpreted *pleading bar* as *pleasing bar*. Moroni 10:34 and Jacob 6:13 are located some distance apart; about 110 manuscript pages of O separates them (under the assumption that the small plates of Nephi were translated last). But one should note that the example of “wrest the scriptures” is also twice misinterpreted as “arrest the scriptures” and the distance between Alma 13:20 and Alma 41:1 is almost 70 manuscript pages of O, also a large amount. It is clearly possible to make the same misinterpretation at different times.

The term *pleading bar* appears to have been used in the English courts of earlier times, according to the following historical information available on the Internet:<sup>4</sup>

“The people who made the film reproduced the court room back at their studio. They had the jury bench, **the pleading bar**, everything, right down to the smallest detail of King Charles II's coat of arms. . . . In real life **the court's pleading bar, where prisoners stood while on trial**, is at the head of the stairs.

On the first floor is the Court Room where all criminal cases in Fordwich were tried until 1886. **The accused would stand flanked by the Town Constables, at the “pleading bar” situated at the head of the stairs. (Hence the expression “prisoner at the bar”).** The Judge

or chief magistrate was the Mayor for the time being and he sat in the chair at the north end of the room, flanked by six Jurats on each side, seated on the “bench”.


The term *pleading bar* is now archaic in England. Note that the first Internet citation provides a definition for “the court's pleading bar,” and the second uses quotation marks in referring to the “pleading bar.” The legal language now used in England refers to the defendant as “in the dock” (no longer “standing at the bar”). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists no citations of the term *pleading bar*, but my colleague Ed Cutler in the English Department at Brigham Young University has found the following two instances of the term on Literature Online; both citations date from the early 1600s (spelling regularized here):

John Harington, *Orlando Furioso* (1607), stanza 46, lines 369–72:

If you deny my claim, here I will prove it,  
This field the court, this list my **pleading bar**,  
My plea is such, as no writ can remove it,  
My judge must be the sequel of the war.

John Webster, *Appius and Virginia* (no later than 1634), act 5, scene 1

Fortune hath lift thee to my Chair,  
and thrown me headlong to thy **pleading bar**.

And the actual translator of the Book of Mormon—either the Lord himself or his translation committee—seems to have been familiar with the term! And it provides a vivid picture of how momentous and potentially dreadful the day of judgment will be for us as defendants standing at the pleading bar, with the Lord as judge, twelve apostles as jury (1 Nephi 12:8–10), and Nephi, Jacob, and Moroni as witnesses. 

## By Royal Skousen

### Notes

1. Scriptural citations are based on the original text. Normally expected capitalization and punctuation are omitted.
2. X > Y means that word X was replaced with word Y.
3. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1 – 2 Nephi 10* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004).
4. These three citations were accessed on the Internet 23 October 2003 via [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) under “pleading bar.”