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Royal Skousen

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# Hebraisms in the Original Text of the Book of Mormon

Royal Skousen

John Gilbert, compositor for the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, was apparently the first to note the ungrammaticality of the original text of the Book of Mormon. In a later statement Gilbert recalled that

On the second day [of printing]—[Martin] Harris and [Hyrum] Smith being in the office—I called their attention to a grammatical error, and asked whether I should correct it? Harris consulted with Smith a short time, and turned to me and said: “The Old Testament is ungrammatical, set it as it is written.”<sup>1</sup>

Complaints about the grammar of the original text later led Joseph Smith to make numerous grammatical changes for the second edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1837 in Kirtland, Ohio. Over the years, other editors have continued to make minor changes in the text. As a consequence, the language of our current text of the Book of Mormon differs in a number of important ways from the original text. Even the 1830 edition — as well as the printer’s manuscript — accidentally corrects some non-standard forms that occurred in the original, dictated manuscript. The basic thrust of nearly all these changes has been to remove grammatical uses that are non-standard in modern English.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, many of these editorial changes have removed expressions that are characteristic of the language of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. For instance, in passages quoting Isaiah, double plurals such as *seraphims* have been replaced by the appropriate plural form (in this case, *seraphim*), as in 2 Nephi 16:6:

then flew one of the *seraphims* unto me > *seraphim* (1920)

<original B of M text = KJV Isaiah 6:6>

Similarly, uses of *which* have been changed to *who* or *whom* (or sometimes *that*) when the referent is

human, as in 3 Nephi 13:9 when the Lord’s prayer is quoted:

our father *which* art in heaven > *who* (1837)

<original B of M text = KJV Matthew 6:9>

Other examples of ungrammatical King James expressions that have been systematically removed from the Book of Mormon text include the conjunction *that* when preceded by a subordinate conjunction, the preposition *for* when followed by the infinitive marker *to*, and the prepositional *a* when followed by a verbal ending in *-ing*:

because *that* he was a visionary man [1 Nephi 2:11] >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

cf. because that in it he had rested [Genesis 2:3]

after their many struggles *for* to destroy them [Alma 27:1] >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

cf. all their works they do *for* to be seen of men [Matthew 23:5]

the armies of the Lamanites are *a* marching towards the city of Cumeni [Alma 57:31] >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

cf. I go *a* fishing [John 21:3]

Of course, many of the ungrammatical forms in the original text of the Book of Mormon can be explained as non-standard dialectal forms, as in the following examples:

they *was* yet wroth [1 Nephi 4:4] > *were* (1830)

I had *smote* [1 Nephi 4:19] > *smitten* (1830)

this shall be your language in *them* days [Helaman 13:37] > *those* (1837)

In fact, it is sometimes difficult to unambiguously identify the source of a non-standard form. For instance, many of the ungrammatical King James expressions could also be explained as non-standard American dialectal forms. Thus *which* can occur

Royal Skousen is a professor of English at BYU. He is the editor of the Book of Mormon critical text project. He is the author of three books on linguistic theory, the most recent of which is *Analogy and Structure* (Kluwer, 1992).

instead of *who*, as it does in chapter 17 of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

... two young women which I couldn't see right well.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Willard Richards' entry for 13 December 1841 in Joseph Smith's Illinois Journal has an occurrence of *because that*:

the inhabitants of Warsaw ... were much enraged because that Esquire David ... was appointed clerk of the county by Judge Douglass.<sup>4</sup>

And we have Joseph Smith's use of *for to* in his 1832 history:

but the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book.<sup>5</sup>

One important question has been the origin of the ungrammaticality in the original text of the Book of Mormon: if we accept Joseph Smith's claim that the translation was inspired of God, do we have to accept the non-standard forms as also coming from God? B. H. Roberts argued that such a claim would be tantamount to blasphemy:

if ... it is insisted that the divine instrument, Urim and Thummim, did all ... then the divine instrument is responsible for such errors in grammar and diction as occur. But this is to assign responsibility for errors in language to a divine instrumentality, which amounts to assigning such errors to God. But that is unthinkable, not to say blasphemous.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the implication of this argument is that if God had given the English translation word for word, then he would have given it in B. H. Roberts' proper English and not Joseph Smith's upstate New York dialect. It seems to me that since God is not a native speaker of English nor a respecter of tongues, he is perfectly willing to speak to his "servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding."<sup>7</sup> In fact, internal evidence from the original manuscript as well as statements from witnesses of the translation provide strong support that the Lord exercised "tight control" over the translation process and that he indeed is the source for the original text of the Book of Mormon.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, Joseph Smith's editing for the second edition of the Book of Mormon may be viewed as translating the text into standard English rather than cleaning up grammatical errors.<sup>9</sup>

Such an open attitude encourages us to take a fresh look at the text of the Book of Mormon, in particular the original text. This kind of approach to the text will, I believe, lead us to realize that the Book of Mormon text is more sophisticated than we might have thought. Consider, for instance, what linguists refer to as multiple nested embedding, a kind of sentential chiasmus. In this structure we have a sequence of subjects followed by a

sequence of matching predicates such that the earlier the subject the later its corresponding predicate. In an important study, Carol Hicks, currently a graduate student in linguistics at Stanford University, has provided a number of examples of multiple nested embeddings:<sup>10</sup>

The question  
| that linguists  
| | who  
| | study this matter  
| have debated  
| is whether  
| nesting  
| can occur to the level of two.

The apartments  
| the guy  
| | I  
| | dated last year  
| lived in  
| had a jacuzzi.

The book  
| that the teacher of the class  
| that I'm  
| taking  
| told us to get  
| is out of print.

The first example of a bona fide multiple nested embedding was discovered about five years ago by Kent Chauncey, a graduate student in linguistics at Brigham Young University.<sup>11</sup> Erle Stanley Gardner, under the pseudonym A. A. Fair, produced this example of multiple nested embedding in *Bachelors Get Lonely*:<sup>12</sup>

The card  
| the man  
| | I  
| | was shadowing  
| had filled out  
| was on the table.

Interestingly, Hicks has discovered an example of this same complex syntactic structure in the Book of Mormon; namely, in 3 Nephi 5:14:

and it  
hath become expedient  
that I  
| according to the will of God  
| that the prayers of those  
| | which  
| | have gone hence  
| | which  
| | were the holy ones  
| should be fulfilled according to their faith  
| should make a record of these things  
| which  
| have been done

One of the interesting complexities of the original text of the Book of Mormon is that it contains expressions that appear to be uncharacteristic of English in all of its dialects and historical stages. These structures support the notion that Joseph Smith's translation is a literal one and not simply a reflection of either his own dialect or King James English. For instance, in the original text of the Book of Mormon we find a number of occurrences of a Hebrew-like conditional clause. In English, we have conditional clauses like "if you come, then I will come," with *then* being optional. In Hebrew this same clause is expressed as "if you come and I will come." In the original text of the Book of Mormon, there were at least 14 occurrences of this non-English expression. One occurrence was accidentally removed in 1 Nephi 17:50 as Oliver Cowdery was producing the printer's manuscript (P) by copying from the original manuscript (O):

if he should command me that I should say unto this water be thou earth *and it shall* be earth (O)  
>  $\emptyset$ , *should* (P)

The remaining 13 occurrences were all removed by Joseph Smith in his editing for the second edition, including this one from the famous passage in Moroni 10:4:

and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart with real intent having faith in Christ *and* he will manifest the truth of it unto you >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

This use of *and* is not due to scribal error, especially since this *if-and* expression occurs seven times in one brief passage, Helaman 12:13-21:

13 yea and if he sayeth unto the earth move *and* it is moved >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

14 yea if he sayeth unto the earth thou shalt go back that it lengthen out the day for many hours *and* it is done ... >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

16 and behold also if he sayeth unto the waters of the great deep be thou dried up *and* it is done >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

17 behold if he sayeth unto this mountain be thou raised up and come over and fall upon that city that it be buried up *and* behold it is done ... >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

19 and if the Lord shall say be thou accursed that no man shall find thee from this time henceforth and forever *and* behold no man getteth it henceforth and forever >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

20 and behold if the Lord shall say unto a man because of thine iniquities thou shalt be accursed forever *and* it shall be done >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

21 and if the Lord shall say because of thine iniquities thou shalt be cut off from my presence *and* he will cause that it shall be so >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

Finally, the original text of the Book of Mormon contains expressions which seem inappropri-

ate or improper in some of their uses. For example, in the original text a good many occurrences of the phrase "and it came to pass" are found in inappropriate contexts. In his editing for the 1837 edition, Joseph Smith removed at least 47 of these apparently extraneous uses of this well-worked phrase. In most cases, there were two or more examples of "it came to pass" in close proximity; in some cases, nothing new had "come to pass." Now the King James phrase "and it came to pass" corresponds to the Hebrew word /wayehi/ 'and it happened'. When translating the Hebrew Bible, the King James translators avoided translating /wayehi/ whenever it wouldn't make sense in English, especially when too many events were "coming to pass" or when nothing had really "come to pass"—in other words, in those very places that the original text of the Book of Mormon "inappropriately" allows "and it came to pass" to occur. Consider the following three Book of Mormon examples with corresponding examples from Genesis, given in the King James version, but with the originally untranslated examples of the Hebrew /wayehi/ given as "it came to pass that" and placed in square brackets:

(1) two occurrences within the same sentence:

2 Nephi 4:10

and it came to pass that when my father had made an end of speaking unto them behold *it came to pass that* he spake unto the sons of Ishmael yea and even all his household >  $\emptyset$  (1837)

Genesis 27:30

and it came to pass as soon as Isaac had made an end of blessing Jacob and [it came to pass that] Jacob was yet scarce gone out from the presence of Isaac his father that Esau his brother came in from his hunting

Note here that the first use of "it came to pass" controls only a subordinate clause and thus the second "it came to pass" seems inappropriate for English speakers. Thus Joseph Smith removed the second occurrence in his later editing, just as the King James translators chose to ignore the second /wayehi/ in the Genesis passage.

(2) three occurrences close together, with repetition of clausal elements:

Alma 8:18-19

now it came to pass that after Alma had received his message from the angel of the Lord he returned speedily to the land of Ammonihah and it came to pass that he entered the city by another way yea by the way which was on the south of the city Ammonihah and it came to pass that as he entered the city he was an hungered and he sayeth to a man will ye give to an humble servant of God something to eat >  $\emptyset$ ,  $\emptyset$  (1837)

Genesis 35:16-18

and they journeyed from Bethel and [it came to pass that] there was but a little way to come to Ephrath and Rachel travailed and she had hard labour and it came to pass when she was in hard labour that the midwife said unto her fear not thou shalt have this son also and it came to pass as her soul was in departing for she died that she called his name Benoni but his father called him Benjamin

(3) two occurrences, with parallelism:

Alma 14:4-5

but it came to pass that they did not [put them away privily] but they took them and bound them with strong cords and took them before the chief judge of the land and the people went forth and witnessed against them <followed by a list of charges> and many such things did the people testify against Alma and Amulek and it came to pass that it was done before the chief judge of the land > now this (1837)

Genesis 39:5

and it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house and over all that he had that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake and [it came to pass that] the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house and in the field

In these two examples "it came to pass" is used to repeat an idea without anything "coming to pass."

All these examples would suggest that /wayehi/ and the corresponding English phrase "and it came to pass" actually represents a discourse marker facilitating narrative cohesion. Perhaps it may be considered equivalent to *and then* or *and so*.

Although these examples suggest a Hebrew basis underlying the original text of the Book of Mormon, some caution is in order. Just because two languages have similar syntactic constructions does not demonstrate that they are related languages. For instance, both Hebrew and Russian as well as pidgin English omit the present tense form of the *be* verb (thus producing sentences like "he the man" and "she good"). But this is not evidence that Russian is derived from Hebrew—or that Hebrew is derived from Hawaiian pidgin. There are some close syntactic connections between Hebrew and the original language of the Book of Mormon, but some

of these may be due to independent historical development rather than linguistic relationship.

What is important here is to realize that the original text of the Book of Mormon apparently contains expressions that are not characteristic of English at any place or time, in particular neither Joseph Smith's upstate New York dialect nor the King James Bible. Subsequent editing of the text into standard English has systematically removed these non-English expressions from the text—the very expressions that provide the strongest support for the hypothesis that the Book of Mormon is a literal translation of a non-English text. Further, the potential Hebraisms found in the original text are consistent with the belief, but do not prove, that the source text is related to the language of the Hebrew Bible.

End Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Memorandum, made by John H. Gilbert, Esq., SEPT. 8TH, 1892, PALMYRA, N.Y."; Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Publishers Press, 1958), xxix-xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of this editing process, see 42-50 of Royal Skousen, "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30:1 (Winter 1990): 41-69.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Walter Blair and Victor Fischer (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985), 133.

<sup>4</sup> Dean C. Jessee (editor), *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, volume 2: Journal, 1832-1842 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1992), 342.

<sup>5</sup> Dean C. Jessee (editor), *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1984), 8.

<sup>6</sup> B. H. Roberts, "Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 9 (April 1906), 428-429.

<sup>7</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants* 1:24.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Skousen (op. cit.), 51-54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Hicks, "How Deep is Two Deep?: The Grammaticality of Multiple Nested Embeddings," paper for Royal Skousen's English 529 course, Brigham Young University, Spring 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Kenton L. Chauncey, *Automatic Recognition of Relative Clauses with Missing Relative Pronoun* (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1989), 77-78.

<sup>12</sup> A. A. Fair, *Bachelors Get Lonely* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1961), 85.