

# Hebraic Conditionals in the Book of Mormon

*“Yea and if he saith unto the earth move and it is moved.” (Helaman 12:13, 1830 edition)*

Recent research has yielded another interesting clue about the language of the Nephites and about the manner in which it was translated into English. By comparing the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon to the subsequent printed versions, Royal Skousen has found that the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon contained expressions that are uncharacteristic of English.<sup>1</sup> One such expression is a Hebrew-like conditional clause.

In English, it is common to express a conditional idea in the following manner: “*if* you come, *then* I will come,” with *then* being optional. In Hebrew this same idea is expressed in another manner: “*if* you come, *and* I will come.” This structure makes perfect sense in Hebrew but is not found in English. When Joseph Smith translated 1 Nephi 17:50, he dictated: “*if* he should command me that I should say unto this water be thou earth, *and* it shall be earth.” This non-English construction was removed by Oliver Cowdery as he copied the original manuscript to produce the printer’s manuscript. He deleted the word *and*, making the text read better in English. The sentence now reads: “*if* he should command me that I should say unto this water, be thou earth, it should be earth.”

Thirteen other occurrences of this Hebraic conditional were printed in the first edition of the Book of Mormon and then later removed by Joseph Smith in his grammatical editing in preparation for the second edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1837 in Kirtland, Ohio. One of these instances is the famous passage in Moroni 10:4, which originally read: “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 by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1830 ed., p. 586). In the 1837 and all subsequent editions, the *ands* in conditional clauses like this one have been dropped to express the idea appropriately in English.

This use of *and* is not due to scribal error. Strong evidence of this is found in Helaman 12:13–21, where the *if/and* expression occurred seven times in the 1830 edition (p. 440):

13 yea and *if* he saith unto the earth move and it is moved

14 yea *if* he say unto the earth thou shalt go back that it lengthen out the day for many hours *and* it is done

16 and behold also *if* he saith unto the waters of the great deep be thou dried up *and* it is done

17 behold *if* he saith 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

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

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

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

This type of structure is perfectly acceptable in Hebrew, but these verses were changed in 1837 to make the book read more smoothly and convey the proper meaning in English.

These observations support the idea that Joseph Smith's translation was a literal one and not simply a reflection of either his own dialect or the style of early modern English found in the King James Version of the Bible. They also support the idea that the language from which the book was translated into English was Hebrew or Hebrew-like.

*Research by Royal Skousen, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (December 1997): 2.*

### **Note**

1. See Royal Skousen, "The Original Language of the Book of Mormon: Upstate New York Dialect, King James English, or Hebrew?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 28–38; see also Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 61–93.