

Hebrew and Uto-Aztecan: Possible Linguistic Connections

Brian D. Stubbs

Mormon 9:32-33 "We have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech. . . . The Hebrew hath been altered by us also."

A few years ago Brian Stubbs, then a doctoral candidate in linguistics at the University of Utah, received a grant from F.A.R.M.S. to study the question of whether elements of Hebrew language could be detected among native tongues of the Uto-Aztecan family of western North America. Preliminary evidence had suggested to him that this unorthodox proposition had a basis in fact.

Stubbs first completed a paper ordering, summarizing, and extending his findings, and he presented some of the material at Brigham Young University. Then he prepared a lengthier piece for further publication.¹

Stubbs deals with Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Akkadian (Babylonian), and Ugaritic, all of the Semitic family from the Near East. In the New World, he examines the Uto-Aztecan tongues, which range from Northern Paiute and Shoshoni in the Great Basin, through Hopi and Papago in Arizona and Tarahumara and Yaqui of northern Mexico, to Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs of central and southern Mexico.

The data examined include sound correspondences, vocabulary, semantic patterns, fossilized verb forms, and other morphology. For example, Hebrew *yasav* ("he sat or dwelt") is notably similar to Hopi *yesiva* ("to sit"), and Hebrew *kanap* ("wing") recalls Proto-Uto-Aztecan *?anap* ("wing"; the ? sign indicated a glottal stop). However, the author, a well-trained linguist, does not fall into the trap that so often snares amateurs, of simply listing words "that sound the same," selected from dictionaries of languages, without firm criteria. He brings forward arrays of data showing systematic, consistent shifts in sounds, just as linguists have demonstrated for other diverging tongues. Thus Hebrew /r/ when not at the beginning of a word regularly appears to be replaced by /y/ or /i/ in Uto-Aztecan. Hebrew /g/ is equivalent to Hopi /ng/, as in *pgl* ("be thick") and *pongala* ("thick"), both patterns being manifested in a number of words.

An interesting ethnobotanical parallel is noted by Stubbs in the fact that two words that in the Near East each mean "truffle" (the edible underground rootlike fungus) have provocative equivalents in Uto-Aztecan with the meaning edible tubers. Arabic *kam?* ("truffle") recalls Nahuatl *kamo?* ("sweet potato"), while *tirmania*, another Mideast word meaning truffle, perhaps long ago borrowed from Greek, compares to Hopi *timna* or *timön* ("potato"). The author wisely calls for further investigation on this. Other cultural hints are scattered throughout the linguistic comparisons.

The present paper presents 203 equivalences between Semitic and Uto-Aztecan. Material still being analyzed contains over two hundred additional Hebrew roots with apparent reflexes in this North American language family. The similarities do not, however, demonstrate that Uto-Aztecan languages are descendants of Hebrew alone, although the number and nature of the relationships already brought out are sufficient to suggest that

Hebrew was one of the ancestor languages. (Incidentally, the patterns of sound changes indicate that specifically Hebrew and not other Semitic tongues provides the closest comparisons.) But much non-Semitic morphology and vocabulary is also evident in Uto-Aztecan.

Stubbs, therefore, suggests the possibility that the linguistic process known as “creolization” may have been involved. That term is used to describe the formation of an essentially new “mixed” language from two or more active ones, a process of increasingly active concern in linguistic research nowadays. This description matches quite well the description given by Moroni of the changes that had taken place in Nephite language over the years —that the traditional language was handed down but altered according to the manner of their contemporary spoken language (see Mormon 9:32-34).

Initial assessments of this work by two recognized linguists have been highly positive. Stubbs seems to have demonstrated once again the increasingly evident lesson that while events in the past were complex, meticulous research methods and patient labor may yet give us significant glimpses of what actually took place.

Based on research by Brian Stubbs, December 1987.

Footnotes

1. See Brian Stubbs, “Elements of Hebrew in Uto-Aztecan: A Summary of the Data” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1988).