

Words and Phrases

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Ether 12:25 "Thou hast also made our words powerful and great."

The words and phrases of the Book of Mormon are "powerful and great" (Ether 12:25). Treasures await the pondering mind that contemplates virtually every word, idiom, figure of speech, or semantic value in the texts of this remarkable record.

Several studies are underway to examine distinctive words and phrases in the Book of Mormon. To aid these studies of language in the Book of Mormon, extensive lists of vocabulary, formulaic phrases, and idioms have recently been compiled. The computerized scripture program is also a powerful research tool. Judging by the results so far, many valuable insights wait to be uncovered by careful scrutiny of Book of Mormon expressions.

Some of these studies have focused on particular words. For example, as discussed previously, it has been shown that a fundamental difference existed in ancient law between a "thief" and a "robber."¹ Knowing this distinction brings to light a similar Book of Mormon usage, which appears to differentiate between these two words in precisely the same ways as did the ancients.

Other studies are scrutinizing phrase distributions among individual Book of Mormon authors. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the phrases *Lord God Omnipotent* or *Lord Omnipotent* appear six times in the Book of Mormon, and all six of them are in King Benjamin's speech. Apparently this name for God, spoken four times by the angel in Mosiah 3, and once by the people and once by Benjamin in Mosiah 5, was distinctive to Benjamin's speech and perhaps was not generally used by other Nephites outside of Benjamin's text.

And again, as David Fox has pointed out, the phrase *the Holy One of Israel* never appears in the Book of Mormon except in the Small Plates of Nephi and in passages quoted from Isaiah. This name for God appears some thirty times in the Old Testament, and almost all of those occurrences are in Isaiah or in texts that originated around the time of Lehi. Perhaps this name reflects attitudes about God that were particularly relevant and current around Lehi's time.

Many phrases may shed light on the prevailing ideas or particular experiences of Book of Mormon personalities. The word *island* and the phrase *isles of the sea* appear exclusively in the books of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi. Why should the important prophecies of Isaiah about the Lord remembering "those who are upon the isles of the sea" (2 Nephi 10:21; Isaiah 11:11; 49:1; 51:5) be so prominent here but unmentioned later? Perhaps at first the Nephites figured they were upon an island of the sea, and it took a few years for the Nephites to explore their new land far enough to realize that they were upon a much larger land mass than an island.

It is also remarkable that the phrase *great and abominable church* likewise appears only in the early Nephite writings—twelve times. Nephi uses the phrase eleven times, and his brother Jacob uses it once in 2 Nephi 6:12. This phrase appears to have remained so distinctively associated with Nephi’s vision that it did not enter into any widely used Nephite theological discourse.

Wade Brown has pointed out a number of phrases that are unique to Zenos. Roger Keller is working on the characteristics of the autographic writings of Mormon and Moroni. Paul Hoskisson and Deloy Pack have recently examined words and phrases relating to the *heart*.

Many of these expressions open windows onto ancient Near Eastern concepts. The phrase found in 2 Nephi 1:14 describing the grave as the land “from whence no traveler can return” has been claimed by some to have come from Hamlet. In fact, the phrase is common to many ancient Near Eastern texts.² The idea of “the second death” likewise is at home in Egyptian texts and iconography depicting the divine judgment of Osiris (see illustration below).³

Relevant impressions may be gleaned from the New World as well. For several years, researchers have been aware that the phrase *and it came to pass* is a good translation of a common Hebrew element.⁴ Bruce Warren also reports the confirmation by Mayan experts that an element translated “and it came to pass” functioned in at least four ways in Mayan texts: (1) As a posterior *date* indicator in a text that meant “to count forward to the next date,” and (2) as an anterior date indicator that signified “to count backward to the given date.” Additionally it could function (3) as a posterior or (4) anterior *event* indicator, meaning “counting forward or backward to a certain event.”⁵ Warren finds instances of all four functions of *and it came to pass* in the Book of Mormon, as well as *combined* date and event indications in both posterior and anterior expressions. For example, “And it came to pass that the people began . . .” is a posterior event indicator (3 Nephi 2:3), whereas “And it *had* come to pass . . .” is an anterior event indicator (3 Nephi 1:20).

Words and phrases may tell a great deal about such things as the meaning, history, peculiarity, and artistry of the Book of Mormon. Remarkable patterns of word distributions and phrase densities may indeed yield valuable results, although it is too early to tell what such findings may or may not ultimately mean. An enormous amount of research and reflection remains to be done before scholars can speak definitively about such matters.

Based on research by John Welch, David Fox, Roger Keller, Paul Hoskisson, Deloy Pack, Robert Smith, and Bruce Warren, April 1987.

Footnotes

1. See Bernard S. Jackson, *Theft in Early Jewish Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 1-19, 53-58; John W. Welch, “Theft and Robbery in the Book of Mormon and in Ancient Near Eastern Law” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1989); also discussed in this book on pages 248-49.

2. See Robert F. Smith, “Shakespeare and the Book of Mormon” (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1980).

3. See Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, trans. Timothy Hallet (New York: Crossroads, 1985), 73.

4. Discussed by Robert F. Smith, " 'It Came to Pass' in the Bible and the Book of Mormon" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1980).

5. Linda Schele, *Maya Glyphs: The Verbs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 22; John Eric Sidney Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1950; reprinted with the same pagination, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 162-64.