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## Book of Mormon Textual Changes

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## *Book of Mormon Textual Changes*

Thousands of textual changes have been made to the Book of Mormon since it was first printed in 1830. Critics seem to think that scripture must be perfect to be inspired. The Bible, however, has also gone through *numerous* changes, updates, corrections, and clarifications.

Among the Book of Mormon changes we must include footnotes, headers, chapter re-divisions, and verse breakdowns (the original edition of the Book of Mormon had chapters but not verses. Other changes affect the text, though not necessarily the meaning of the text). Textual changes were made for the following reasons: typographical errors, spelling variants, clarification, and grammatical improvements. To understand the first two reasons we must go back to the printing of the original edition.

### *Typographical Errors*

After locating a printer, Oliver Cowdery made a copy of the original manuscript so that the original would not be lost. John H. Gilbert, the non-Mormon typesetter, working under the non-Mormon E.B. Grandin (the printer for the Book of Mormon) said that the entire printer's copy was one solid paragraph without punctuation. While names of people and places were generally capitalized, Gilbert punctuated the manuscript—with nearly 35,000 punctuation marks—according to how he supposed it was intended to read.

In some instances, Oliver's handwriting presented a challenge for the typesetter. His "r", for instance, often looked like his "n" and his "b" occasionally looked like an "l." This led to some interesting errors. In the first printing, for example, Gadianton is once called the "nobler" rather than the "robber." Dozens of other misspellings were generated during typesetting.

Other typesetting errors included accidental omissions. Some things that were in the original manuscript were overlooked in the printer's manuscript. These omissions ranged from a mere letter, to whole sentences. Sometimes there were accidental *additions* where the typesetter repeated a word or phrase. Even in our day of computers and word processors, typographical errors still occur. When we look back at the early 1800s we should not be surprised to find many typographical errors in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. Later editions, of course, were revised to correct those initial errors.

## Spelling

Today we take it for granted that a word in English is spelled the same throughout the country and by every literate person. This was not the case, however, in the 1800s. So different were the various dictionaries of the times that when Noah Webster introduced his dictionary in the late eighteenth century “there erupted a rather violent ‘war of the dictionaries’...”<sup>1</sup> In 1828 there were six major dictionaries in use, many of which spelled the same words quite differently. “Scripture,” for instance, was spelled, *scriptshur*, *scriptshure*, *scripture*, and *scriptyur*. Famous contemporary authors also used unusual spellings. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, wrote *ancles*, *chrystal*, and *mosquito*. Washington Irving used variations of “smoke” including *snoak*, *smocke*, and *schmoke*. In the same sentence he used *received* and *recieved*. President Andrew Johnson used *som*, *whent*, *anxus*, *propper*, and many other spellings that appear odd to us today. According to the Oxford English Dictionary of the day, many of Oliver Cowdery's “mis-spellings” were actually legitimate English variants.

Most of the changes to the Book of Mormon involve spelling and grammatical corrections and do not change the basic meaning of the text.

## Clarification

The last two categories involve deliberate changes to the text. Many of these were for clarification. For example, in the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 8:4, which originally read, “for, behold, me thought I saw a dark and dreary wilderness,” was changed to, “for behold, me thought I saw in my dream, a dark and dreary wilderness.” This change simply clarifies the meaning of the text. Several other similar changes were made.

Some verses were clarified to accurately reflect specific members of deity. In the 1830 edition of 1 Nephi 11:18 we read: “Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh.” In the 1837 edition this was changed to: “Behold, the virgin whom thou seest, is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.” Several other Book of Mormon passages were modified to distinguish Christ from the Father. According to the critics, this shows that Joseph Smith originally believed in a Trinitarian God and that his LDS view of God evolved

later. Researcher Van Hale, however, has shown that the 1830 edition amply teaches the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and that the later changes were simply made for clarification of a doctrine already present in the Book of Mormon.<sup>2</sup>

### *Grammar*

Many of the textual changes constitute changes in grammar. The word *which*, for instance, was changed 707 times to *who*. According to the critics the Book of Mormon's poor grammar is an obvious indication that Joseph Smith authored the book. Like so many other charges made by the critics, this argument has backfired.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Book of Mormon was undoubtedly translated into the language of Joseph Smith. In fact the Lord said that revelations are given to His servants in the "manner of *their* language" (D&C 1:24; emphasis added). Not only does this explain the non-standard grammar but it also helps us understand why the Book of Mormon is written in the King James English style. Joseph's language, according to his understanding of what scripture should look like, would have been the King James English. Many modern translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered fewer than seventy years ago) have also been translated into the King James English. This does not mean that the Dead Sea Community spoke King James English, but rather that the translators used the King James English as a vehicle to convey the meaning and tone of these texts.

### *Hebraisms*

While Joseph's language is apparent in the English translation of the Book of Mormon, there is evidence that, at least in some cases, the translation was more literal and reveals the underlying original ancient language. In many of the instances where expressions are ungrammatical in English we find that they are perfectly grammatical in Hebrew. The Book of Mormon, for example, contains distinct Egyptian and Hebrew *idioms* (or Hebraisms; characteristics that are peculiar to Hebrew and Egyptian but uncharacteristic in English).

Initially, neither members nor critics noticed Book of Mormon Hebraisms. Once they were pointed out by LDS scholars, however, critics were quick to claim that Joseph inadvertently included Hebraisms because he mimicked the language of the Bible. Joseph, however, began to study Hebrew five years *after* the Book of Mormon had already been published. It wasn't until decades later that LDS scholars first noticed the Hebrew idioms.

While the Nephite language had undergone nearly a thousand years of change since they left Jerusalem, enough of the Hebrew language apparently survived in the Nephite script that idioms can be found throughout the book, most prominently in the first and earliest portion of the work. First Nephi through Omni (which were written on what Book of Mormon prophets called the "Small Plates") were the closest chronologically to the Jerusalem departure and were not edited by Mormon—

therefore these chapters had the best chances of retaining Hebrew idioms. As we examine the text, we find that such is the case. Due to space, I will only list a few of the many examples.

In the Small Plates and in Hebrew, conjunctions are used much more frequently than in English. For example, in English, one might write a list of items thus: “nuts, bolts, nails, screws, and staples.” In Hebrew a conjunction, such as “and,” is usually used before each item. The Book of Mormon contains many such examples: “in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores” (2 Nephi 5:15). This type of repetition in the Book of Mormon is so prominent that it caught the attention of the non-LDS President of the Hebrew Language Academy, Professor Haim Rabin. According to Hebrew specialist John Tvedtnes, during a lecture to illustrate this principle Rabin chose a Book of Mormon passage because it was a better example than any passage from the English Bible.

In Hebrew such lists also include repetitive conjunction prepositions, articles, and possessive pronouns. Here are some Book of Mormon examples, with appropriate emphasis added:

*And* it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness. *And* he left his house, *and* the land of his inheritance, *and* his gold, *and* his silver, *and* his precious things, *and* took nothing with him, save it were his family and provisions, *and* tents, *and* [he, 1830] departed into the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:4).

*And* it came to pass that we went down to the land of our inheritance, *and* we did gather together our gold, *and* our silver, *and* our precious things (1 Nephi 3:22).

...with our bows *and* our arrows *and* our stones and our slings... (1 Nephi 16:4).

...wherefore, I did arm myself *with* a bow and a arrow, *with* a sling and *with* stones... (1 Nephi 16:23).

Some critics have laughed at all the *ands* in the Book of Mormon, claiming that this proves fraud because such useless repetition would take too much space on the metal plates. Tvedtnes, however, notes that “and with” and “and their” (etc.) are necessary in both Egyptian and Hebrew and take up very little space compared to their English counterparts.

The frequent use of not only *and* but the more lengthy *and it came to pass* has been the target of ridicule since the Book of Mormon was published. Mark Twain claimed this was Smith’s most frequently used “pet” phrase. Had Smith left it out, teased Twain, the Book of Mormon “would have been only a pamphlet.”<sup>3</sup> The phrase *it came to pass* and similar monotonous phrases are grammatically necessary for both Hebrew and Egyptian historical texts and may not be omitted.<sup>4</sup>

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Other interesting Hebraisms found in the Book of Mormon include possessive pronouns added to the end of a noun.

...hear *the words of me* (Jacob 5:2)

...the Gentiles shall be great in *the eyes of me* (2 Nephi 10:8)

...how unsearchable are the depths of *the mysteries of him* (Jacob 4:8)

...they are delivered by *the power of him* (2 Nephi 9:25)

...setteth at naught *the atonement of him* and the power of his redemption (Moroni 8:20).

One particular Book of Mormon Hebraism involves the construct state. In a strict Hebrew to English translation we would read of an *altar of stones* rather than a *stone altar*—as would typically be expressed in English. This is exactly what we find in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 2:7). Other examples include: *plates of brass* (1 Nephi 3:3) and never *brass plates, words of plainness* (Jacob 4:14) rather than *plain words, skin of blackness* (2 Nephi 5:21) instead of *black skin, vapor of darkness* (1 Nephi 12:5) instead of *dark vapor, rod of iron* (1 Nephi 8:19) and never *iron rod, daughters of Ishmael, house of Laban*, and the list goes on and on.

Because Hebrew has fewer adverbs than English, prepositional phrases often use the preposition meaning *in* or *with* instead of an adverb:

“with patience” instead of patiently (Mosiah 24:15)

“with much harshness” instead of very harshly (1 Nephi 18:11)

“with joy” instead of joyfully (Jacob 4:3) “in spirit and in truth” instead of spiritually and truly (Alma 34:38)

“in righteousness” instead of righteously (1 Nephi 20:1)

“with gladness” instead of gladly (2 Nephi 28:28)

As noted previously, newer editions of the Book of Mormon changed “that” or “which” to “who” or “whom.” This correction was needed for proper English. In Hebrew, however, the relative pronoun *aser* translates as either “that” or “which” as well as “who” or “whom.”

On page 351 of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon we find this unusual expression:

And when Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the rent of his garment in the air, that all might see

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the writing which he had *wrote upon the rent*, and crying with a loud voice... [emphasis added].

For clarification and to improve the grammar, the current edition of the Book of Mormon reads:

And when Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the rent part of his garment in the air, that all might see the writing which he had *written upon the rent part*, and crying with a loud voice... (Alma 46:19; emphasis added).

The language used in the first edition to describe this event is ungrammatical, as the critics have been quick to point out. How could a “rent” be written upon? In Hebrew, however, *rent* derives from a word that is both a verb and a noun, just as is we find in the Book of Mormon.

Royal Skousen (an internationally known linguistic theorist) and Daniel Peterson have recently noted the odd and foreign yet authentically ancient Hebrew “if/and conditional sentence.” In the original Book of Mormon manuscript, dictated by Joseph and recorded by Oliver, we find the following (a few of several examples):

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

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

...and behold also *if* he saith unto the waters of the great deep be thou dried up *and* it is done...<sup>5</sup>

These phrases were modified in later printings to sound more grammatically correct to English readers. As Peterson points out, neither he nor Skousen have been able to find any nineteenth-century English example of the if/and conditional sentence. It exists in biblical Hebrew, but not in the English translations of the Bible published in Joseph’s lifetime nor in any other English text from the period (as far as we know).

Other possible Book of Mormon Hebraisms include cognates, compound prepositions, subordinate clauses, relative clauses, extrapositional nouns and pronouns, interchangeable prepositions, comparisons, naming conventions, colophons, parallelism, merismus and difrasismo, antenantiosis, epanalepsis, antithetical parallels, climatic forms, enallage, and others.

“[I]t is apparent,” observed the late Dr. Sidney Sperry (professor of religion), “that a far stronger case can be made out of the Book of Mormon as translation English than can be made for the Four Gospels as translation Greek...” By *translation English* Sperry simply means that the Book of Mormon is “not English freely composed but is rather that type of English that would be produced by a translator who frequently follows the original too closely...” In other words, Sperry believes that in

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at least some cases the Book of Mormon “often betrays a too literal adherence to an apparent Hebrew original.”<sup>6</sup>

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