Type: Book Chapter

The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon

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Chapter 8

THE HEBREW BACKGROUND OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

John A. Tvedtnes

The English translation of the Book of Mormon shows many characteristics of the Hebrew language. In many places the words that have been used and the ways in which the words have been put together are more typical of Hebrew than of English. These *Hebraisms,* as I will call them, are evidence of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon — evidence that Joseph Smith did not write a book in English but translated an ancient text and that his translation reflects the Hebrew words and word order of the original.

There can be no doubt that the Nephites spoke Hebrew. Not only did they come from Jerusalem, where Hebrew was commonly spoken at that time, but Moroni himself indicated that they knew Hebrew (see Mormon 9:32–34). Therefore, the English translation of the Book of Mormon not surprisingly contains characteristics of Hebrew.

We do not know exactly what language was used on the original plates of the Book of Mormon. Nephi described the writing system as a combination of "the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). Moroni, writing a thousand years later, called it "reformed Egyptian" (Mormon 9:32–34). This might mean that they used Egyptian symbols to represent Egyptian words, or that they used Egyptian symbols as a shorthand to represent Hebrew words, or even that they used both Egyptian and Hebrew symbols to represent Hebrew words. Whatever reformed Egyptian was, it must have been influenced by the language that the Nephites used in daily

speech—Hebrew. That influence can be seen in the Hebraisms preserved in the English translation.

The Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon help persuade us that it is authentic. The following story will illustrate. During the years 1968–71, I taught Hebrew at the University of Utah. My practice was to ask new students to respond to a questionnaire, giving some idea of their interests and linguistic background. One student wrote that she wanted to study Hebrew in order to prove the Book of Mormon was a fraud. She approached me after class to explain.

When I inquired why she felt the Book of Mormon was fraudulent, she stated that it was full of errors. I asked for an example. She drew my attention to Alma 46:19, where we read, "When Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the rent part of his garment in the air." She noted that in the 1830 edition (p. 351), this read simply "waving the rent of his garment." In English, the *rent* is the hole in the garment, not the piece torn out of the garment. Therefore, Moroni could not have waved it. This was an error, she contended, and adding the word *part* later was mere deception.

This was my first introduction to variations in different editions of the Book of Mormon. Without a Hebrew background, I might have been bothered by it. But the explanation was clear when I considered how Mormon would have written that sentence. Hebrew does not have to add the word *part* to a verbal substantive like *rent* as English requires. Thus, *broken* in Hebrew can refer to a *broken thing* or a *broken part,* while *new* can refer to a *new thing.* In the verse the student cited, *rent* would mean *rent thing* or *rent part.* Thus, the "error" she saw as evidence of fraud was really a Hebraism that was evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

Significantly, the first (1830) edition of the Book of Mormon contains many more Hebraisms than later editions. Later editions, especially in 1837, 1840, and 1876, were edited to improve the English in areas where the text appeared to be awkward. Unfortunately, this destroyed some of the evidence for a Hebrew

original. Therefore, I will occasionally refer to the reading of the 1830 edition to illustrate Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon.

Construct State

When English shows a possessive or descriptive relationship between two nouns, it usually puts the possessive or descriptive noun first: *the king's house* or *wood house*. Hebrew, however, uses the opposite order: *house the king* (which would usually be translated *house of the king*) or *house wood* (*house of wood*). If the Hebrew word order is kept in the English translation, the word *of* must be added, even though it does not exist in the Hebrew.

The Book of Mormon contains a large number of what appear to be translations from the Hebrew preserving the Hebrew word order:

> "plates of brass" instead of brass plates (1 Nephi 3:24)
>
> "works of righteousness" instead of righteous works (Alma 5:16)
>
> "words of plainness" instead of plain words (Jacob 4:14)
>
> "chains of hell" instead of hell's chains (Alma 5:7)
>
> "voice of the Spirit" instead of the Spirit's voice (1 Nephi 4:18)
>
> "skin of blackness" instead of black skin (2 Nephi 5:21)
>
> "night of darkness" instead of dark night (Alma 34:33)
>
> "rod of iron" instead of iron rod (1 Nephi 8:19)

The Hebrew-like expression *land of promise* appears twenty-two times in the Book of Mormon, while *promised land* (common in English) is found only ten times.

Adverbials

Hebrew has fewer adverbs than English. Instead, it often uses prepositional phrases with the preposition meaning *in* or *with*. The English translation of the Book of Mormon contains

more of these prepositional phrases in place of adverbs than we would expect if the book had been written in English originally — another Hebraism. Here are some examples:

> "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)

Cognates

Cognates are related words that come from the same root. For example, the English noun *student* is cognate to the verb *study* and the adjective *studious*. In Hebrew, a verb is sometimes followed by a noun that is a cognate, such as "**wrote** upon it a **writing**" (Exodus 39:30) and "she **vowed** a **vow**" (1 Samuel 1:11). In English, cognates are used much less often. Using such cognates is often considered an awkward or inelegant style in English. Someone writing in English would be more likely to use "she vowed" or "she made a vow." Even in translation from the Hebrew, the King James Bible sometimes avoids using cognates. In Genesis 1:11, a literal translation of the Hebrew would be "Let the earth **grass grass**," but the English translation reads "Let the earth bring forth grass."

The Book of Mormon uses cognates much more often than we would expect if the book had originally been written in English. These cognates show the Hebrew influence of the original. One of the best-known examples is "I have **dreamed** a **dream**" (1 Nephi 8:2). That is exactly the way that the same idea is expressed in literal translation of the Old Testament Hebrew (see Genesis 37:5; 41:11).

Here are some other examples of the use of cognates in the

Book of Mormon, each followed by the more normal expression for English:

> "**work** all manner of fine **work**" (Mosiah 11:10) instead of *work well*
>
> "and he did **judge** righteous **judgments**" (Mosiah 29:43) instead of *judge righteously* or *make righteous judgments*
>
> "**build buildings**" (2 Nephi 5:15; Mosiah 23:5) instead of *erect buildings* or simply *build*
>
> "this was the **desire** which I **desired** of him" (Enos 1:13) instead of *what I desired*
>
> "I will **work** a great and a marvelous **work**" (1 Nephi 14:7) instead of *perform a great and marvelous work*
>
> "**taxed** with a **tax**" (Mosiah 7:15) instead of *taxed*
>
> "**cursed** with a sore **cursing**" (2 Nephi 1:22; Jacob 3:3) instead of *cursed sorely*

Compound Prepositions

Hebrew often uses compound prepositions, made up of a preposition plus a noun, in places where English would normally use just a preposition. For example, Hebrew uses compound prepositions that would be translated literally as *by the hand of* and *by the mouth of*. English would normally use just *by*. The Book of Mormon contains many examples that appear to show the influence of this Hebrew use of compound prepositions:

> "ye shall be taken **by the hand of** your enemies" (Mosiah 17:18)
>
> "I have also acquired much riches **by the hand of** my industry" (Alma 10:4)
>
> "sold into Egypt **by the hands of** his brethren" (Alma 10:3)
>
> "the words which have been spoken **by the mouth of** all the holy prophets" (1 Nephi 3:20)
>
> "**by the mouth of** angels, doth he declare it" (Alma 13:22)

Hebrew uses another compound preposition that would be translated literally as *from before the presence of* or *from before the face of.* English would normally use simply *from.* The influence of the Hebrew can be seen in these Book of Mormon passages:

"they fled **from before my presence**" (1 Nephi
4:28)

"he had gone **from before my presence**" (1 Ne-
phi 11:12)

"they were carried away . . . **from before my
face**" (1 Nephi 11:29)

The Conjunction

Hebrew uses conjunctions much more frequently than English does. One clear example of this can be found in lists of items. In English, the conjunction *and* is normally used only before the last item in a list, such as *wood, iron, copper, and brass.* But Hebrew usually uses a conjunction before each item. The Book of Mormon contains many examples of this Hebrew-like usage, such as this one found in 2 Nephi 5:15: "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."

This kind of repetition is so prominent in the Book of Mormon that Professor Haim Rabin, President of the Hebrew Language Academy and a specialist in the history of the Hebrew language, once used a passage from the Book of Mormon in a lecture in English to illustrate this principle, because, he explained, it was a better illustration than passages from the English Bible.

In such lists, Hebrew also repeats related elements such as prepositions, articles, and possessive pronouns. Here are some examples from the Book of Mormon:

"**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).

" . . . All mankind were **in a** lost **and in a** fallen state . . . " (1 Nephi 10:6).

" . . . **My** gospel . . . **and my** rock **and my** salvation . . . " (1 Nephi 13:36).

" . . . **The city of** Laman, **and the city of** Josh, **and the city of** Gad, **and the city of** Kishkumen, have I caused to be burned with fire" (3 Nephi 9:10).

" . . . **All their** men **and all their** women **and all their** children . . . " (Mosiah 24:22).

Such repetition seems to be a waste of precious space on the plates, except for the fact that it is required by the Hebrew language.

Another difference between Hebrew and English conjunctions is that in Hebrew the same conjunction can carry both the meaning *and* and also the opposite meaning *but*. Here are two well-known Bible passages in which the King James Version renders the conjunction *but*:

"Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: **but** of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it" (Genesis 2:16–17).

"And as for Ishmael . . . I will make him a great nation. **But** my covenant will I establish with Isaac" (Genesis 17:20–21).

Evidence for Hebraism in the Book of Mormon lies in the fact that some passages use the conjunction *and* when *but* is expected. Here, for example, are two different versions of the Lord's promise to Lehi:

"Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments

> ye shall prosper in the land; **but** inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence" (2 Nephi 1:20; compare Alma 50:20).
>
> "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; **and** inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence" (2 Nephi 4:4).

In one of the quotations of this promise, Joseph Smith rendered the conjunction *and*, while in another place, he rendered it *but*. In other Book of Mormon passages, Joseph translated *and* when in English we would expect *but* because a contrastive meaning is clearly called for:

> "And when I speak the word of God with sharpness they tremble and anger against me; **and (= but)** when I use no sharpness they harden their hearts against it" (Moroni 9:4).
>
> "He commanded the multitude that they should cease to pray, and also his disciples. **And (= but)** he commanded them that they should not cease to pray in their hearts" (3 Nephi 20:1).

Another difference in the use of conjunctions is that in biblical Hebrew, a language with no punctuation, the conjunction also serves as a marker of parenthesis. The words we would put inside parentheses in English are preceded by the conjunction in Hebrew, and, at the conclusion, the next phrase is introduced by the conjunction. In the following biblical example, the same conjunction has been variously rendered *and, for,* and *that* by the King James translators to fit the requirements of the English language: "As they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water, **(for** Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,) **that** the waters . . . stood and rose up" (Joshua 3:15–16). We see that *for* and *that,* two English renditions of the

same Hebrew conjunction, served to set off what the English translators chose to mark with the parentheses.

The Book of Mormon also uses conjunctions to mark parenthetical phrases. In the Book of Mormon examples listed below, I have added parentheses to illustrate:

> "After I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God (**and** the Son of God was the Messiah which should come) **and** it came to pass that I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things" (1 Nephi 10:17, reading of 1830 edition).
>
> "When Jesus had spoken these words unto Nephi, and to those who had been called, (**now** the number of them who had been called, and received power and authority to baptize, was twelve) **and** behold, he stretched forth his hand . . . " (3 Nephi 12:1).

A special use in Hebrew of this kind of parenthetical phrase is the introduction of a name. In English, we usually say something like, "there was a man named X," or "there was a man whose name was X." While the Book of Mormon has many such examples, it often reflects the Hebrew usage, which is, "there was a man (**and** his name was X.)" In the examples which follow, I have added parentheses where necessary:

> "Zoram did take courage at the words which I spake (**now** Zoram was the name of the servant) **and** he promised . . . " (1 Nephi 4:35).
>
> "They took him (**and** his name was Nehor) **and** they carried him . . . " (Alma 1:15).

Another Hebrew-like use of the conjunction in the Book of Mormon is the expression *and also*. In Hebrew, it is used to

emphasize the close links between two things, as in this biblical passage: "**Both** drink thou, **and** I will **also** draw for thy camels" (Genesis 24:44). Here are some examples from the Book of Mormon that seem to reflect the Hebrew usage:

> "They . . . worshiped the Father in his name, **and also** we worship the Father in his name" (Jacob 4:5).
>
> "The Lord hath heard the prayers of his people, **and also** the prayers of his servant, Alma" (Mosiah 27:14).
>
> " . . . What the Lord had done for his son, **and also** for those that were with him . . ." (Mosiah 27:21).
>
> "**Now** the sons of Mosiah were numbered among the unbelievers; **and also** one of the sons of Alma was numbered among them" (Mosiah 27:8).

Subordinate Clauses

Biblical Hebrew begins subordinate clauses with prepositions plus a word that translates as *that,* such as in Ezekiel 40:1: "**after that** the city was smitten." Such a use of *that* in English is awkward and therefore rare. Yet it appears frequently in the Book of Mormon, another evidence of Hebrew influence. It was even more frequent in the 1830 edition, but many of the *that*s were dropped from later editions to read more smoothly (noted in the following examples by brackets).

> "And **because that** they are redeemed from the
>   fall" (2 Nephi 2:26)
> "**because that** my heart is broken" (2 Nephi 4:32)
> "**because that** ye shall receive more of my word"
>   (2 Nephi 29:8)
> "**because [that]** they had hardened their hearts"
>   (1 Nephi 16:22)
> "**because [that]** ye are of the house of Israel" (2
>   Nephi 6:5)
> "**before [that]** they were slain" (1 Nephi 13:15)

> "**before** [that] he shall manifest himself in the
>   flesh" (Enos 1:8)
> "and **after that** I had been lifted up upon the
>   cross" (3 Nephi 27:14)
> "**after that** I am gone to the Father" (3 Nephi
>   28:1)
> "**after** [that] I have abridged" (1 Nephi 1:17)
> "**after** [that] he hath been commanded to flee" (1
>   Nephi 3:18)

The Relative Clause

In Hebrew, the word that marks the beginning of a relative clause (generally translated *which* or *who* in English) does not always closely follow the word it refers back to, as it usually does in English. Some Book of Mormon passages give the impression of having been translated from such Hebrew sentences:

> "Our brother Nephi . . . has taken it upon him
> to be our ruler and our teacher, **who** are his elder
> brethren" (1 Nephi 16:37) instead of *to be a ruler
> and teacher to us, who are his elder brethren.*
>
> "The Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea,
> **who** were the armies of Pharaoh" (1 Nephi 17:27)
> instead of *the Egyptians, who were the armies of Phar-
> aoh, were drowned in the Red Sea.*
>
> "Then shall they confess, **who** live without God
> in the world" (Mosiah 27:31) instead of *then shall
> they who live without God in the world confess.*

Extrapositional Nouns and Pronouns

Hebrew often uses a noun or pronoun as the direct object of the verb in one clause and a pronoun referring to the same person or thing in the following clause in a way that seems unnecessary or redundant in English. For example in Genesis 1:4, we read, "God saw the **light,** that **it** was good." In this case, the King James Bible reflects the Hebrew wording, despite the fact that in English the normal way of saying this would be,

"God saw that the light was good." This Hebraic usage is also found in the Book of Mormon:

> "I beheld, and saw **the people of the seed of my brethren** that **they** had overcome my seed" (1 Nephi 12:20).
>
> "I beheld **the wrath of God,** that **it** was upon the seed of my brethren" (1 Nephi 13:14).
>
> "And I beheld **the Spirit of the Lord,** that **it** was upon the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:15).
>
> "I . . . beheld **the power of the Lamb of God,** that **it** descended" (1 Nephi 14:14).

Interchangeable Prepositions

In biblical Hebrew, the prepositions that are translated *in* and *to* in English are often interchangeable. This would not usually work in English. In at least two Book of Mormon passages, the 1830 edition used *to* and *in* in ways that reflect the Hebrew usage, although later editions were changed to reflect the normal English use.

In 1 Nephi 7:12, the 1830 edition read "let us be faithful **in** him." Both *in* and *to* are possible in biblical Hebrew, but, when speaking of God, *faithful in* is usual. *Faithful to* is more normal in English, and *in* was changed to *to* in later editions of the Book of Mormon.

In 1 Nephi 17:14, the 1830 edition read "after ye have arrived **to** the promised land." Both *in* and *to* are possible in biblical Hebrew, but *arrive to* is much more common. English prefers *arrive at*.

Comparison

Comparison in English is usually expressed in this way: a certain thing is more X than a second thing, or a certain thing is Xer than a second thing. The words *more* and *than* or the suffix *-er* express the comparison. In Hebrew, comparison is expressed by a word that is translated as *from* in this way: a certain thing is X *from* a second thing. The Book of Mormon frequently uses

the word *above* in comparisons in a way that is more like the Hebrew use of *from* than the English use of *more* or *-er*, apparently reflecting a Hebrew influence.

"a land which is **choice above** all other lands" (1 Nephi 2:20; see 13:30)

"the tree which is **precious above** all" (1 Nephi 11:9; see 15:36)

"most **abominable above** all sins" (Alma 39:5)

"the fruit . . . which is **sweet above** all that is sweet, and which is **white above** all that is white, yea, and **pure above** all that is pure" (Alma 32:42)

Naming Conventions

When a child is born, we say in English that his father and mother "called him X" or "named him X." The same is true in naming places, for example, "He called his ranch Pleasant Valley." But Hebrew expresses it quite differently: "He called the name of his son X." In Hebrew, it is the *name* that is "called," not the child or the place. Perhaps the best-known example from the Bible is the one found in Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall **call his name** Immanuel." This idiom is found in a number of places in the Book of Mormon:

"we did call the **name** of the place Shazer" (1 Nephi 16:13)

"and they called the **name** of the city Moroni" (Alma 50:13–14)

"he had three sons; and he called their **names** Mosiah, and Helorum, and Helaman" (Mosiah 1:2)

"they called their **names** Anti-Nephi-Lehies" (Alma 23:17)

Possessive Pronouns

In Hebrew, a possessive pronoun is added to the end of the noun. Thus *my book* would be *the book of me*. This Hebraic usage is reflected in several examples from the Book of Mormon:

"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)

Words Used in Unusual Ways

At several points in the Book of Mormon, we encounter English words used in ways that are unknown or unexpected in our language. King Mosiah said, "I shall give this people a name, that thereby they may be distinguished **above** all the people" (Mosiah 1:11). In English we would expect *distinguished from.* But the Book of Mormon passage reflects the normal Hebrew expression, which uses the compound preposition that means *from above.*

Jacob wrote that Nephi instructed him regarding Nephite sacred preaching, revelations, and prophecies that "I should engraven the **heads** of them upon these plates" (Jacob 1:4). The term *head* seems out of place. We would expect something like *most important* to be used. But the expression is readily explainable in terms of Hebrew. The Hebrew word for the head of the body is sometimes used to describe things as *chief* (see Deuteronomy 33:15; Psalm 137:6; and Proverbs 1:21) or *precious* (see Amos 6:1; Song of Solomon 4:14; Ezekiel 27:22). This is probably the sense in which Jacob used the word.

Nephi wrote, "We are upon an **isle** of the sea" (2 Nephi 10:20). It seems strange to have Nephi call the American continent an island. But the Hebrew word generally translated *isle* in the Bible has a wider range of meaning than just *island.* It most often refers to coastal lands.

Alma 13:18, speaking of Melchizedek, notes that "he was the king of Salem; and he did reign **under** his father." This may

reflect the normal biblical Hebrew use of the preposition *under* for the meaning *instead of*. The same preposition is rendered *instead of* in some passages of the King James Bible. For example, after King Amaziah had been murdered, "all the people of Judah took Azariah . . . and made him king **instead of** his father Amaziah" (2 Kings 14:21).

In Ether 8:11 we read "he desired her **to** wife." English would prefer *for a wife*. There is a Hebrew preposition that means both *to* and *for*. Furthermore, the Hebrew word used for *wife* really means *woman*. In three Book of Mormon passages, the word *women* appears to mean *wives*:

> "Our **women** did bear children" (1 Nephi 17:1).
> "Our **women** have toiled, being big with child;
> and they have borne children" (1 Nephi 17:20).
> "For behold, he hath blessed mine house, he hath
> blessed me, and my **women,** and my children, and
> my father and my kinsfolk; yea, even all my kindred
> hath he blessed" (Alma 10:11).

There is much more linguistic evidence for the influence of Hebrew on the Book of Mormon, but the examples of Hebraisms that I have cited should be enough to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text influenced by Hebrew. Many expressions used in the Book of Mormon are awkward or unexpected in English, even in Joseph Smith's time. Yet they make good sense when viewed as translations, perhaps as too literal translations, from an ancient text written in a Hebrew-like language.