

# Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Survey

*John A. Tvedtnes*

Though the Book of Mormon expressly states that it is written in the “language of the Egyptians,” (1 Nephi 1:2), nevertheless, it quite clearly reflects a number of Hebrew idioms and contains numerous Hebrew words. This is no doubt due to the fact that the Nephites retained the Hebrew language, albeit in an altered form (See Mormon 9:35). Moreover, it is not impossible that the plates themselves contained Hebrew words, idioms, and syntax written in Egyptian cursive script (Moroni’s “reformed Egyptian”—see Mormon 9:32).

In this present treatise, we will not be concerned so much with the methodology involved in the writing of the Book of Mormon as with the evidence for the use of Hebrew expressions, or of expressions akin thereto. Only the more important examples will be cited.

It should first of all be pointed out that the author will contend, on the basis of the evidence to be given, that the Book of Mormon, in its English form as provided by Joseph Smith, is in many respects a nearly literal translation. Thus, many of the expressions found therein do not properly belong to the English language, but rather to the language from which the book was translated. Indeed, in most cases thus far investigated, Book of Mormon expressions which are ungrammatical in English are perfect Hebrew grammar. (In view of the fact that Joseph Smith did not know Hebrew in those early years, this is good evidence for the authenticity of the translation.) For example, in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, we read that “when Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the *rent* of his garment in the air” (p. 351). When the word “rent” is used as a noun in English, it may refer to a hole caused by rending, but not, to my knowledge, to a portion of rent cloth; the unlikely usage of “rent” in English as a noun no doubt contributed to the fact that, in subsequent editions of the Book of Mormon, it was changed to read “rent part” (Alma 46:19). But the Hebrew would, in this instance, use but one word, *qera’*, “rent (part),”

coming from *qāra*‘, “he rent, tore,” for nouns, in Hebrew, are derived from roots—as are Hebrew verbs—by the addition of certain vowel patterns that distinguish them from other parts of speech.

Another example is that of the frequent usage of “that” or “which” in the first edition, where in English, “who, whom” properly belongs. The change to the latter is, of course, warranted in the English language, but unfortunately a Hebraism is lost by such a transformation. For, in Hebrew, the relative “pronoun” *’āšer* is used for both human and non-human, as well as for place relativization.

### Singular-Plural Distinctions

Certain Hebrew words are treated differently in regards to number than their English correspondences. The plural form of “God” (*’ēl*), for example, is *’ēlohīm*, which (except where referring to pagan gods) takes a *singular* verb (see Genesis 1:1), reminding us that Joseph Smith speaks of a “council of the Gods.” A council would be a single body, and would therefore take a singular verb. (This would explain why the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are said to be *one God*—*’elohim*—in the Book of Mormon; see 2 Nephi 31:21; Mosiah 15:4; Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:27, 28, 36; 28:10; Mormon 7:7.)

Some Hebrew words have no singular form at all, but always appear in the dual or the plural. One such is *hayyīm*, “lives,” which is generally translated as “life,” though Joseph Smith said that it should always be rendered “lives” in the expression “eternal life”—referring to the eternal increase in posterity for those who attain exaltation. Two words that exist only in the dual form are *šāmayim* (“heavens”) and its related word *mayim* (“waters”). The author can find no examples of “heaven” (singular) in the Book of Mormon, and “water” is most often rendered in the plural.

The English word “people,” except when used collectively, takes a plural verb. Its Hebrew equivalent, *’am*, however, takes a singular verb in most instances. Thus, we read in Alma 30:2425: “. . . this people is . . .” (This is, however, weak evidence of a Hebraism, inasmuch as the verb “to be” is not used to reflect present tense in Hebrew; nevertheless, Joseph Smith’s use of “is” instead of “are”—and, indeed, of “this” instead of “these”—could reflect the notion of singularity of the noun.)

## Most Common Idioms

The most common Hebraic idioms found in the Book of Mormon involve the frequent repetition of “yea,” and of “and,” the use of “behold,” and the phrase “it came to pass.”

The Revised Standard Version uses the words “yea” and “yes” (not in response to a question) 81 times. Of these, 33 are translations of the word *kī* (sometimes translated “that, for, because”), 12 from the word *gam* (“also”), 1 from a combination of both *kī* and *gam*, 18 from the word *u*, (“and”), and 11 from the word *’ap* (often a sign of affirmation). Six occurrences represent the addition of the English word not translated from the Hebrew, while there are two occurrences each of a translation from *’ak* and *hinnēh*. Whether or not these words should have been translated “yea” or by another term (“truly, surely, indeed, for, and, behold,” etc.) is unimportant; they are, it would seem, used for emphasis in public discourses. Such usage appears frequently in the Book of Mormon, and often in series. The following example is taken from Alma 5:9–11:

*And* again I ask, were the bands of death broken, *and* the chains of hell which encircled them about, were they loosed? I say unto you, *Yea*, they were loosed, *and* their souls did expand, *and* they did sing redeeming love, *And* I say unto you that they are saved. *And now* I ask of you on what conditions are they saved? *Yea*, what grounds had they to hope for salvation? What is the cause of their being loosed from the bands of death, *yea and also* the chains of hell? *Behold*, I can tell you— . . .

The word “and,” italicized above, could just as well have been translated “yea.” In addition to this device, Alma uses the expression “I say unto you” for emphasis. The latter is a common Hebraism denoting authority on the part of the speaker. The reader will recall its frequent use by the Savior (“Verily, verily, I say unto you. . .”).

Hebrew uses the conjunction “and” (*w*) much more frequently than English. It is frequently used at the *beginning* of a sentence, even when there is no reason for linking that sentence up with the preceding sentence (in English, we use “and” to link up syntactically related words, clauses, and sentences only; in Hebrew it may sometimes be used for special emphasis). The Hebrew *w* may oftentimes be translated “now” or “for” instead of “and.” In many instances in the Book of Mormon (such as Enos 13), it is translated “and now.” An excellent example of its frequent use is found in Alma 43:16–20:

*Now*, the leader of the Nephites, or the man who had been appointed to be the chief captain over the Nephites—*now* the chief captain took

the command of all the armies of the Nephites—and his name was Moroni; *and* Moroni took all the command. *And* he was only twenty and five years old. . . . *And* it came to pass that he met the Lamanites in the borders of Jershon, *and* his people were armed *with* swords, *and with* cimeters, *and* all manner of weapons of war. *And* when the armies of the Lamanites saw . . . that Moroni, had prepared his people *with* breastplates *and with* armshields, *yea, and also* shields to defend their heads, *and also* they were dressed with thick clothing—*Now* the army of Zerahemnah was not prepared with any such thing; they had only *their* swords *and their* cimeters, *their* bows *and their* arrows, *their* stones *and their* slings; *and* they were naked. . . .

The multiplicity of particles such as “and with,” and “and their” in the foregoing may seem, to the lay reader, a waste of precious space on the plates. They are, however, necessary items in Hebrew; moreover, in both Egyptian and Hebrew they are treated as affixes to the noun, and take up very little space in writing compared to their English counterparts. (The use of the pronominal suffix is discussed below in more detail.) Hebraists will note that some of the glosses of “and” given above are no doubt examples of *waw* conversive.

The occurrence of “and also” is frequent in Hebrew; its use is clearly reflected in this passage from Jacob 4:5:

Behold, they believed in Christ and worshipped the Father in his name, *and also* we worship the Father in his name.

While this is perfect Hebrew, “and also” (*wegam*) being written as one “word,” (with the possible translation of “yea, also”) English would more properly render it “*and we also* worship the Father. . . .”

The expression “it came to pass” occurs so frequently in the Book of Mormon that in the present French edition it has been deleted in the translation from the English, with the notation that wherever the asterisk appears the expression exists in the original. The phrase is particularly elaborate in Alma 25:1, where we read, “And behold, now it came to pass. . . .” In Jacob 5:6 it reads, “And it came to pass that after many days. . . .” In the Hebrew this would have said, “And it came to pass in those many days.”

Once again, brevity is no excuse for deleting this expression in Hebrew, though we tire of it quickly in its lengthy English version. The Hebrew word *hāyāh* (“it was, it became”; also “he was, became”) is our ever-present “it came to pass.” With the preceding conjunction, by a

process known as *waw* conversive (the nature of which is much too complex for our present discussion), it becomes *wāy<sup>e</sup>hiy* (“and it was”).

### Pronominal Suffixes

In Hebrew, pronouns used for possession and direct object are ordinarily attached as suffixes to the noun (in case of possession) and verb (in case of direct object). In instances of possession, therefore, one cannot say “his house and family and friends, etc.,” but rather, one is obliged to say “his house and his family, and his friends,” attaching the pronominal suffix “his” to *each noun*. This, too, is clearly reflected in the Book of Mormon. For example, we find in 1 Nephi 2:4:

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 . . . (The rest of the verse shows English usage, however.)

Such constructions in Hebrew could properly (though not grammatically, as far as English is concerned) be translated as “(noun) of *him*.” This we find in Jacob 5:2, where Jacob says, “hear the *words of me*,” instead of “my words.” This, then, is an excellent example of the Hebrew usage of the pronominal suffix.

### Construct State

The possessive examples above bring us to what is called the construct state, wherein two nouns are placed one after the other because they are in close grammatical relationship one to another. An example in English would be “the book of Jack,” as opposed to “Jack’s book.” In Hebrew, we find such expressions as these, extracted from numerous verses in the Book of Mormon:

altar of stones	mist of darkness
state of probation	skin of blackness
words of plainness	night of darkness
land of promise	rod of iron
plates of brass (gold)	bands of death
chains of hell	voice of the people

Some of these are used in English, but most are uncommon though not impossible. The author can find no examples in the Book of Mormon of constructions such as “stone altar,” “black skin,” “dark mist,” “plain

words,” “iron rod,” “brass (gold) plates,” etc., though “promised land” does occasionally appear (albeit fewer times than “land of promise”).

### Adverbs

There are very few adverbs in Hebrew. At least one adjective (*har**ē**bēh*, “many, exceeding”) is used adverbially, but more often a prepositional phrase is used. The Book of Mormon is replete with adverbial usage of the adjective “exceeding” (as in “exceeding great joy”—instead of “exceedingly”—in 1 Nephi 8:12.) The use of a preposition to produce an adverb is common in Hebrew, and is likewise common in the Book of Mormon, from which the following have been extracted as examples:

“with harshness”	instead of	“harshly”
“with joy”	instead of	“joyfully”
“with gladness”	instead of	“gladly”
“with patience”	instead of	“patiently”
“with diligence”	instead of	“diligently”
“in diligence”	instead of	“diligently”
“in abundance”	instead of	“abundantly”
“in righteousness”	instead of	“righteously”
“in the spirit”	instead of	“spiritually”
“in truth” (N.T. “verily”)	instead of	“truly, verily”
“(be with) strength”	instead of	“strongly”
“of worth”	instead of	“worthy”
“of a surety”	instead of	“surely”

All of these examples would reflect the Hebrew proposition *b* (“in, with, by, through,” sometimes “of”) plus the noun. The Book of Mormon has many more of these, but it contains but few examples of true English adverbs.

### The Hebrew *Bō*

In connection with the above, we should consider further evidence for the usage of the preposition *b* in the Book of Mormon. With the appended pronominal suffix *ō* (“him, it”), we have meanings such as “in it,” “by it,” “with it,” “through it,” etc. These have their English correspondences, “in which,” “therein,” “therewith,” and “thereby,” in the Book of Mormon, where these latter terms are quite prevalent. For example,

2 Nephi 1:4 (“For, behold, said he, I have seen a vision, *in which* I know that Jerusalem is destroyed.”) would read “And, behold, said he, I have seen a vision, *in it* I know that Jerusalem is destroyed.”

The above examples (“therein,” “therewith,” and “thereby”) should not be combined with the common “thereof” of the Book of Mormon, however. The latter is part of the pronominal suffixes mentioned earlier, and means “of it,” or, if human, “of him.” Thus, “. . . when a man was dead, that was the end *thereof*,” (Alma 30:18) could properly read, “. . . when a man was dead, that was the end of him (or ‘his end’).” Likewise, 1 Nephi 2:8 (“and the valley was in the borders near the mouth *thereof*”) could read “and the valley was in the borders near *its* mouth.” Joseph Smith, in his near-literal rendition of the text, has, for the most part, avoided English possessive pronouns and replaced them by the “there” plus preposition (“in,” “of,” “by,” “with”). In 1 Nephi 22:14, moreover, he has preserved the Hebraism rather well: “Yea, that great and abominable church, shall tumble to the dust and great shall be the *fall of it*.” (In both Hebrew and Egyptian, the underlined words would appear as but one word, though two morphemes are involved.) In this latter example, we see another common Hebraism. Normally, we would expect the English text to read, “and its fall shall be great.” But here we find the predicate adjective (“great”) appearing *before* the verb, and the subject afterwards. This, too, is proper Hebrew usage for sentences in which the predicate is an adjective.

There exists in the Semitic languages a construction called the “cognate accusative.” It consists of a verb immediately followed by a noun derived from the same root, and is often used for emphasis. The Book of Mormon has examples of this:

“they are *cursed with a sore cursing*” (i.e., cursed sorely) Jacob 3:3

“*work all manner of fine work*” (i.e., work well) Mosiah 11:10

“and he did *judge righteous judgments*” (i.e., judge righteously) Mosiah 29:43

In these examples it should be noted that, as is usual in Hebrew (except where predicate), the adjectives “sore,” “fine,” and “righteous” would follow their nouns.

Perhaps the most well-known cognate accusative in the Book of Mormon is found in Lehi’s conversation with his son Nephi: “Behold I have *dreamed a dream*, in the which (i.e., “in it”). . . .” (1 Nephi 3:2).

In Enos 13, we find a Hebrew construction similar to, though not identical to, the cognate accusative, in which the noun is derived from

its accompanying verbal root: “And now behold, this was the *desire which I desired* of him. . . .”

### Miscellaneous Idioms

In 1 Nephi 2:8, the following appears: “And it came to pass that he called the name of the river, Laman. . . .” In English, we would ordinarily expect to read “he called the river Laman (or, by the *name* of Laman),” or “he named the river Laman.” If we assume that the original text used the Semitic *šmm*, “to name,” we would have a construction similar to the cognate accusative, reading, “he named the name. . . .” But *šmm*, though extant in Arabic, does not appear in the Biblical texts, though it most certainly existed in Hebrew at one time, as is evidenced by the existence of its noun, *šēm*, “name.” The Bible uses the term *qārā b’sēm*, “he called by the name.” Either way, the expression stands out as a Hebraism.

The Hebrew background of the Book of Mormon would most certainly be suspect if the text did not include that one must “go up to Jerusalem” and “go down” therefrom (e.g., 1 Nephi 7:2–3). Jerusalem was considered to be the holy place where God came down to manifest Himself in the temple, and was thus closer to the heavens than other points on the earth. Hence one “ascends” in going to the Holy City.

In the Book of Mormon, direct quotations are often introduced by statements such as this one from 1 Nephi 2:19:

“And it came to pass that the Lord *spake unto me, saying*. . . .” The narrative portions of the Book of Mormon containing dialogue are replete with this introduction. This common Hebraism, *’āmar lēmōr*, means, literally, “he spake, to speak.”

Another common Hebraism found in the Book of Mormon is “he said in his heart,” meaning “he thought.”

### Special Words

A number of words in the Book of Mormon text seem to reflect a Hebrew, rather than an English, usage in the original, and thus provide additional evidence for the authenticity of the book. Witness the use of “anger” as a verb in 2 Nephi 4:29. While one Hebrew word (*k’š*) can mean “to anger,” in English we must use “be angry, become angry,” etc.

The Hebrew particle *l* (an inseparable preposition, prefixed to nouns, pronouns, and verbs) means not only “to” (its usual meaning), but also “for,” and “belonging to.” Thus, in Moroni’s preface to the Book of Mormon, the statement “and also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile”



should read “for the convincing,” for clarity. Nevertheless, both renditions are valid translations of the Hebrew.

Verse 22 of 2 Nephi 4 reads: “He hath confounded mine enemies, *unto the causing of them to quake* before me.” The English text is lengthy for such a simple statement. But, in Hebrew, all of the italicized portion can be handled, by *one verb* and its affixes. This is no doubt why the rendering in English is awkward.

In Hebrew (other than in prepositional phrases), the indirect object is merely a second direct object. Thus, one may say, “*we . . . desired him* that he would give unto us the records,” (1 Nephi 3:24), instead of “we desired *of him*” (as in English). (In this example, we have, properly speaking, two direct objects: (1) “him,” and (2) “that he would give . . .”)

As Lehi “prayed unto the Lord, there came a pillar of fire and *dwelt* upon a rock before him.” (1 Nephi 1:6) The use of the verb “dwelt” rather than the usual “sat” may seem peculiar to those unacquainted with the fact that one word, *yšb*, in Hebrew, has both the meaning of “dwell” and of “sit.”

Likewise, the Hebrew word *’iššāh* (plural *nāšīm*) means both “woman” and “wife.” Thus, when Nephi speaks of “our women” (1 Nephi 17:20), he is not being disrespectful, but is merely displaying proper Hebrew usage of the term. By the same token, we learn that Amulek (“my women”) was a polygamist. (Alma 10:11)

Nephi’s statements about the wicked who “seek . . . to *hide their counsel* from the Lord” (2 Nephi 27: 27; 28:9), while not totally illogical, is somewhat vague in meaning. This situation can be clarified by pointing out that the Hebrew word for conversing, consulting, or counseling, *šōd*, also means “*secret*.” One can more readily imagine the wicked attempting to hide their “secrets” from the Lord. (With this meaning, another rendition of Amos 3:7 would be: “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his COUNSEL [instead of “secret”] unto his servants the prophets.” In many ways, this is preferable; on the other hand, the “secret” would have to be the secret of *His being*.)

In the Book of Mormon, the word “towards” is often used where we would expect the word “to.” The former, in English usage, generally indicates “in the direction of,” but without indicating whether or not the traveler has or will arrive at the place indicated; he may have, as his destination, an intermediate point. “To,” on the other hand, would indicate arrival at the destination. In Hebrew, the old accusative ending *-ah*, added to a definite noun, gives the meaning of “towards” or “to,” without distinction as to whether or not the destination is the noun used.

(eg.: *micrayim*. “Egypt,” becomes *micrayimah*, “toward [to] Egypt.”) This ending is quite commonly used to mean simply “to,” even though it may be indefinite. Thus, in Joseph Smith’s near-literal translation, we read that Nephi “went forth towards (instead of “to”) the house of Laban.” (1 Nephi 4:5)

In the foregoing, we have detailed but a few of the Hebraisms evident in the English text of the Book of Mormon. Only the more important of those thus far noted have been given here. The author has not yet completed his systematic survey of the Book of Mormon, in a search for evidences of a Hebrew origin, and time precludes the possibility of completing this task at present. The project will not lie dormant, however, for the work is not only interesting, but fruitful. More importantly, it serves to strengthen an already strong testimony of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

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John A. Tvedtnes is a teaching assistant in Hebrew at the University of Utah and an instructor in anthropology at the BYU Salt Lake Center. A specialist in linguistics and the Semitic languages, Mr. Tvedtnes is author of *The Church of the Old Testament* and has also written a number of articles.