NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Classics from the Past: Literary Style Used in Book of Mormon Insured Accurate Translation

Author(s) Hugh Nibley

Reference *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/1 (2011): 69–72.

ISSN 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

Abstract Responding to an inquiry from a member of a different faith about why the Book of Mormon was translated into the English of the King James Version of the Bible, Nibley discusses the use of biblical language in contemporary society, citing in particular the language of prayer and the use of King James English in the translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This article also serves as a platform for Nibley to discuss other issues raised about the Book of Mormon, especially in reference to the King James version of the Bible.

CLASSICS FROM THE PAST

LITERARY STYLE USED IN BOOK OF MORMON INSURED ACCURATE TRANSLATION

HUGH NIBLEY

Nibley's response to a query was printed in the *Church News* section of the *Deseret News*, 29 July 1961, 10, 15. It was reprinted in *Saints' Herald* 108 (9 October 1961): 968–69, 975.

THE EDITOR OF THE *CHURCH NEWS* HAS forwarded to me your question about the Book of Mormon and the King James Bible. I welcome this opportunity to try to clear up that and a number of related points.

Readers of that valuable periodical *Christianity Today* have been treated to a number of lively discussions of the Book of Mormon in recent issues.[1] To me the most significant aspect of the various attacks on that book has been their concentration on the philological aspects of the problem.

All the old "scientific" objections seem to have fallen by the way, so that today we are back where we started, with heavy emphasis on the relationship of the Book of Mormon to the Bible, specifically to the King James Version. The main arguments, past and present, are these:

1. For many years the most crushing argument against the Book of Mormon was that it proclaimed itself to be the Word of God, right beside the Bible. Since the fourth century the doctors of the church had argued that since the Bible is the word of God, and God is perfect, the Bible itself must be perfect, and therefore complete. This no longer holds today; the discovery of other ancient and holy texts leads such devout scholars as F. M. Cross to exclaim: "It is as though God had added to his 'once for all' revelation."[2] But where does the Bible itself ever claim "once for all" revelation? Nowhere. As Professor C. M. Torrey points out, our Bible as we have it is the result of picking and choosing by men who claimed no inspiration for themselves, yet on their own authority decided what should be considered "revelation" and what should be labeled apocryphal or "outside" books.[3]

"Outside books?" writes Torrey. "By what authority? The authority was duly declared, but it continued to be disputed . . . down even to the nineteenth century. . . . A new terminology is needed; . . . the current classification . . . as Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is outworn and misleading, supported neither by history nor by present fact."[4]

The idea that any book not found in the Bible must be denied the status of revelation has thus been rejected today, yet for many years it was the principal argument against the Book of Mormon.

2. The next most crushing argument—a dead giveaway in the eyes of the critics—was the admission

on the title page of the Book of Mormon that it contained "the mistakes of men." How, it was asked, could an inspired book have any mistake at all? Today the answer is only too well known, and you will find in the very pages of *Christianity Today* long articles by ministers discussing frankly the imperfections of all our Bible manuscripts and translations.

Now it so happens that other Book of Mormon writers were also peculiarly fond of quoting from the record. Captain Moroni, for example, reminds his people of an old tradition about the two garments of Joseph, telling them a detailed story which I have found only in a thousand-year-old commentary on the Old Testament, a work still untranslated and quite unknown to the world of Joseph Smith.

"A first point is the obvious one," writes G. W. Bromiley, "that a human authorship is also assumed for all books of the Bible. . . . These men used ordinary media. They adopted or adapted known literary genres. . . . As the Lord Jesus Christ Himself took flesh, so the written word was clothed in the form of human writings."[5]

And E. M. Good writes: "And if we must await the time when biblical scholars happen to come with all the right guesses in them, what will we do meantime on Sunday morning? Every translation is provisional; . . . a translation is always also an interpretation. . . . No translation of the Bible into English will ever be more than a provisional translation."[6] The title of Good's article is "With All Its Faults"—and these men are talking about the Bible! It was because the Book of Mormon recognized these now well-known facts of scripture that it was assailed for a century as the most outrageous blasphemy.

3. The next most devastating argument against the Book of Mormon was that it actually quoted the Bible. The early critics were simply staggered by the incredible stupidity of including large sections of the Bible in a book that they insisted was specifically designed to fool the Bible-reading public. They screamed blasphemy and plagiarism at the top of their lungs, but today any biblical scholar knows that it would be extremely suspicious if a book purporting to be the product of a society of pious emigrants from Jerusalem in ancient times did not quote the Bible. No lengthy religious writing of the Hebrews could conceivably be genuine if it was not full of scriptural quotations.

These were once the three commonest arguments against the Book of Mormon. Since they have been silenced by the progress of discovery, the emphasis has now shifted to two other points, (1) that the Book of Mormon contains, to quote another writer of *Christianity Today*, "passages lifted bodily from the King James Version,"[7] and (2) that it quotes, not only

FROM THE EDITOR:

In response to an inquiry from an interested nonmember about why the Prophet Joseph Smith, in translating the Book of Mormon, did not use contemporary English instead of the King James English as found in the Bible, Hugh Nibley discusses contemporary language, as well as the language of prayer and scripture. Nibley also uses this as a platform to explore other possible criticisms aimed at the Book of Mormon: the revelatory value of extrabiblical books; the self-admission of mistakes in the Book of Mormon; biblical quotations in the book, particularly from the King James Version; and quotations from the New Testament on faith, hope, and charity. Though some things have changed since Dr. Nibley penned this article, it is still a delight to read.

from the Old Testament, but also the New Testament as well. Your own question, I leave to the last.

4. As to the "passages lifted bodily from the King James Version," we first ask, How else does one quote scripture if not bodily? And why should anyone quoting the Bible to American readers of 1830 not follow the only version of the Bible known to them?

Actually the Bible passages quoted in the Book of Mormon often differ from the King James Version, but where the latter is correct there is every reason why it should be followed. When Jesus and the apostles and, for that matter, the angel Gabriel quote the scriptures in the New Testament, do they recite from some mysterious Urtext? Do they quote the prophets of old in the ultimate original? Do they give their own inspired translations? No, they do not. They quote the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament prepared in the third century BC. Why so? Because that happened to be the received standard version of the Bible accepted by the readers of the Greek New Testament. When "holy men of God" quote the scriptures it is always in the received standard version of the people they are addressing.

We do not claim the King James Version of the Septuagint to be the original scriptures—in fact, nobody on earth today knows where the original scriptures are or what they say. Inspired men have in every age been content to accept the received version of the people among whom they labored, with the Spirit giving correction where correction was necessary.

Since the Book of Mormon is a translation, "with all its faults," into English for English-speaking people whose fathers for generations had known no other scriptures but the standard English Bible, it would be both pointless and confusing to present the scriptures to them in any other form, so far as their teachings were correct.

5. What is thought to be a very serious charge against the Book of Mormon today is that it, a book written down long before New Testament times and on the other side of the world, actually quotes the New Testament! True, it is the same Savior speaking in both, and the same Holy Ghost, and so we can expect the same doctrines in the same language.

But what about the "faith, hope, and charity" passage in Moroni 7:45? Its resemblance to 1 Corinthians 13 is undeniable. This particular passage, recently singled out for attack in *Christianity Today*, is actually one of those things that turn out to be a striking vindication of the Book of Mormon. For the whole passage, which scholars have labeled the "Hymn to Charity," was shown early in this century by a number of first-rate investigators working independently (A. Harnack, J. Weiss, R. Reizenstein) to have originated not with Paul at all, but to go back to some older but unknown source: Paul is merely quoting from the record.[8]

When "holy men of God" quote the scriptures it is always in the received standard version of the people they are addressing.

Now it so happens that other Book of Mormon writers were also peculiarly fond of quoting from the record. Captain Moroni, for example, reminds his people of an old tradition about the two garments of Joseph, telling them a detailed story which I have found only in a thousand-year-old commentary on the Old Testament, a work still untranslated and quite unknown to the world of Joseph Smith.[9] So I find it not a refutation but a confirmation of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon when Paul and Moroni both quote from a once well-known but now lost Hebrew writing.

6. Now as to your question, "Why did Joseph Smith, a nineteenth-century American farm boy, translate the Book of Mormon into seventeenth-century King James English instead of into contemporary language?"

The first thing to note is that the "contemporary language" of the country people of New England 130 [180] years ago was not so far from King James English. Even the New England writers of later generations, like Webster, Melville, and Emerson, lapse into its stately periods and "thees and thous" in their loftier passages.

For that matter, we still pray in that language and teach our small children to do the same; that is, we still recognize the validity of a special speech set apart for special occasions. My old Hebrew and Arabic teacher, Professor Popper, would throw a student out of the class who did not use "thee" and "thou" in constructing. "This is the word of God!" he would cry indignantly. "This is the Bible! Let

us show a little respect; let us have a little formal English here!"

Furthermore, the Book of Mormon is full of scripture, and for the world of Joseph Smith's day, the King James Version was the Scripture, as we have noted; large sections of the Book of Mormon, therefore, had to be in the language of the King James Version—and what of the rest of it? That is scripture, too.

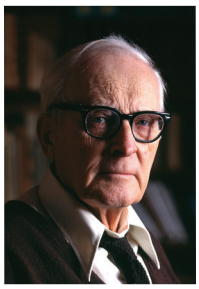
By frankly using that idiom, the Book of Mormon avoids the necessity of having to be redone into "modern English" every thirty or forty years. If the plates were being translated for the first time today, it would still be King James English!

One can think of lots of arguments for using King James English in the Book of Mormon, but the clearest comes out of very recent experience. In the past decade, as you know, certain ancient, nonbiblical texts, discovered near the Dead Sea, have been translated by modern, up-to-date American readers. I open at random a contemporary Protestant scholar's modern translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and what do I read? "For thine is the battle, and by the strength of thy hand their corpses were scattered without burial. Goliath the Hittite, a mighty man of valor, thou didst deliver into the hand of thy servant David."[10]

Obviously the man who wrote this knew the Bible, and we must not forget that ancient scribes were consciously archaic in their writing, so that most of the scriptures were probably in old-fashioned language the day they were written down. To efface that solemn antique style by the latest up-to-date usage is to translate falsely.

At any rate, Professor Burrows, in 1955 (not 1835!), falls naturally and without apology into the language of the King James Bible. Or take a modern Jewish scholar who purposely avoids archaisms in his translation of the scrolls for modern American readers: "All things are inscribed before Thee in a recording script, for every moment of time, for the infinite cycles of years, in their several appointed times. No single thing is hidden, naught missing from Thy presence."[11] Professor Gaster, too, falls under the spell of our religious idiom.

By frankly using that idiom, the Book of Mormon avoids the necessity of having to be redone into "modern English" every thirty or forty years. If the plates were being translated for the first time today, it would still be King James English! ■



Hugh Nibley (1910–2005) graduated summa cum laude from the University of California at Los Angeles and completed his PhD as a University Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley. He joined the faculty of Brigham Young University in 1946 as a professor of history and religion and devoted much time to research and writing.

NOTES

1. Wesley P. Walters, "Mormonism," *Christianity Today* 5/6 (19 December 1960): 8–10 [228–30]; editorial, "The Challenge of the Cults," *Christianity Today* 5/6 (19 December 1960): 20 [240].
2. Frank M. Cross, "The Scrolls from the Judean Wilderness," *Christian Century* 72 (1955): 890.
3. Charles C. Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), 4.
4. Torrey, *Apocryphal Literature*, 10–11.
5. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Bible Doctrine of Inspiration," *Christianity Today* 4/4 (1959): 10.
6. Edwin M. Good, "With All Its Faults," *Christianity Today* 5/8 (1961): 6–7.
7. Walters, "Mormonism," 8.
8. See references in Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 455–56, n. 4.
9. See references in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 487–88, nn. 12–17.
10. Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Michigan: Baker, 1955; repr. 1978), 1:397.
11. Theodore H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 136.