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Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 218-25.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

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Hebrew Idioms in the Book of Mormon

Abstract: Literal translations of Hebrew idioms are prevalent in the Book of Mormon, as are literal renditions of compound Hebrew prepositions. Parallels can be found in the Old and New Testaments, especially in the Hebrew translation of the Old Testament.

The English of the Book of Mormon contains idioms that are immediately recognizable by students of the ancient Near East as originating in that area. Notice this clause which says that Melchizedek “did reign under his father” (Alma 13:18). The average reader, if he does not pass it by completely, seldom asks himself the meaning of the clause. It is quite unlikely that it means that Melchizedek reigned under the direction of his father, but if it does not mean that, what does it mean? More likely is the view that it is a Hebrew idiom (the Nephites wrote and spoke Hebrew) translated very literally by the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Hebrew Bible gives us every reason to believe that this view is the correct one. Here are some good examples:

And Bela died, and Jobab, the son of Zera of Bozrah *reigned in his stead.* (italics literally “under him” in Hebrew; Genesis 36:33; similarly in Genesis 36:34–39)

And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants unto Solomon; for he had heard that they had anointed him king *in the room of* his father. (italics literally “under”; 1 Kings 5:1)

And all the people of Judah took Azariah, which was sixteen years old, and made him king *instead of* his father Amaziah. (italics literally “under”; 2 Kings 14:21)

Thus, according to common Hebrew usage, for a man to reign “under” someone else is simply to reign in his stead. We may therefore assume with some confidence that when Melchizedek “did reign under his father” the text simply means that the great high priest “did reign in his father’s stead” (see also Jacob 1:11; Mosiah 10:6). Joseph Smith usually translated the idiom in the conventional manner, but in this particular instance (Alma 13:18) he translated literally—to our interest and profit.

The use of compound Hebrew prepositions, rendered literally by Joseph Smith, is very noticeable in the Book of Mormon. The use of *bḏyadh* “by the hand of,” indicating agency or instrumentality, occurs forty-seven times in the Nephite record. This use has been noted before, either by myself or others, but let me give a few new examples:

Joseph . . . who was preserved *by the hand of* the Lord. (italics meaning “by” the Lord; 1 Nephi 5:14)

And after they go forth *by the hand of* the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (1 Nephi 13:26)

And they shall be afflicted *by the hand of* their enemies. (Mosiah 11:21)

Similar cases are found in the Old Testament in Genesis 38:20 and Exodus 4:13.

The use of this compound in the plural should be noted here. *Bīdhê*, “by the hands of,” occurs in the Book of Mormon eight times. These are examples:

They were brought into bondage *by the hands of* the Lamanites [italics meaning “by” or “through”],

... even by the hands of their own brethren? (Alma 9:10)

There is one fairly clear instance of this usage in the Old Testament, but it will be necessary to translate it literally in order to illustrate it:

Their judges have been thrown down by the hands of [i.e., by means of] the crag. (see Psalms 141:6, author's translation)

The verse is obscure, but the idiom is there nevertheless. Another instance may arise in Lamentations 1:14, but the interpretation is too much in doubt.

Still another compound preposition is *mippānê*, "from" (literally "from before"). In the Book of Mormon it very often receives a literal translation. Notice a few illustrations:

And they fled from before my presence. (1 Nephi 4:28)

For he had gone from before my presence. (1 Nephi 11:12)

Insomuch that they did fall back from before them. (3 Nephi 4:12; see also Mosiah 17:4; Alma 44:12; Mormon 4:20)

In the Old Testament part of the King James Version we find the idiom translated *from* (1 Samuel 19:8; Isaiah 31:8), "out of the presence of" (1 Samuel 19:10), "from the presence of" (Genesis 3:8), "because of" (Genesis 7:7), "from the face of" (Exodus 2:15), by way of illustration, but it is also translated the same way as in the Book of Mormon:

And Moses fled from before it. (Exodus 4:3)

The Lord God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel. (Judges 11:23; see also 1 Chronicles 11:13; Zechariah 14:5)

The compound *ba²ābhûr*, "on account of," occurs a number of times in the Book of Mormon (Alma 13:4; 15:3; 19:16), but

because of the regular use of the translated compound (phrasal preposition) in English, it is difficult to make any special point of it other than the fact that it does occur. Numerous examples occur in the Old Testament though the usual translations may make it difficult for the average reader to spot them (Genesis 12:13, 16; 1 Samuel 23:10).

The idiom *bəphî*, "by the mouth of," occurs in the Nephite record about fifteen times. Here are some illustrations:

And also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken *by the mouth of* all the holy prophets. (1 Nephi 3:20)

And also many prophecies which have been spoken *by the mouth of* Jeremiah. (1 Nephi 5:13)

Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken *by the mouth of* Isaiah. (2 Nephi 25:1)

This idiom is certainly foreign to our manner of speaking, but it is typically Nephite, that is to say, Hebrew. Notice these illustrations from the Old Testament:

To fulfil the word of the Lord *by the mouth of* Jeremiah. . . . Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken *by the mouth of* Jeremiah might be accomplished. (2 Chronicles 36:21–22)

Another similar compound, *mippî*, "from the mouth of," will be found in the Book of Mormon six times. Three illustrations follow:

Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth *from the mouth of* a Jew; and when it proceeded forth *from the mouth of* a Jew it contained the plainness of the gospel of the Lord. (1 Nephi 13:24)

And now Limhi was again filled with joy in learning *from the mouth of* Ammon that king Mosiah had a gift from God. (Mosiah 21:28)

Here are some Old Testament examples:

And Baruch wrote *from the mouth of* Jeremiah all the words of the Lord. (Jeremiah 36:4; see also Jeremiah 36:32)

And hearkened not unto the words of Necho *from the mouth of* God. (2 Chronicles 35:22)

The common Hebraic idiom "to open the mouth" appears in the Book of Mormon. Notice these occurrences:

And king Benjamin again *opened his mouth* and began to speak unto them. (Mosiah 4:4)

King Lamoni *did open his mouth*, and said unto him. (Alma 18:18)

This manner of writing is somewhat foreign to us, but occurs in the Old Testament as these examples attest:

After this *opened* Job *his mouth* and cursed his day. (Job 3:1)

Behold, now I have *opened my mouth*, my tongue hath spoken in my mouth. (Job 33:2)

Then I *opened my mouth*, and spake. (Daniel 10:16)

The Hebrew idiom, "multiply exceedingly," which is not as strange to present English usage as the foregoing, may be illustrated by these three examples from the Nephite record:

And we *multiplied exceedingly*, and spread upon the face of the land. (Jarom 1:8)

For they had *multiplied exceedingly* and waxed great in the land. (Mosiah 2:2)

And this church did *multiply exceedingly* because of iniquity. (4 Nephi 1:28)

The Hebrew idiom "to stiffen the neck" occurs a number of times in the Nephite record. These illustrations will suffice:

And after they have hardened their hearts and *stiffened their necks* against the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 6:10)

But because of priestcrafts and iniquities, they at Jerusalem will *stiffen their necks* against him. (2 Nephi 10:5; see also 25:12; 28:14; Jacob 2:13; Jarom 1:3; Helaman 9:21)

The parallels in the King James Version of the Old Testament usually have the rendering "hard of neck," but some are rendered similar to the examples in the Book of Mormon:

Who had made him swear by God: but *he stiffened his neck* (2 Chronicles 36:13)

But made their *neck stiff*, that they might not hear. (Jeremiah 17:23)

Hebrew has an idiom, "to lift up the face," or "distinguish the face," that is used to convey meaning with respect to or showing partiality to a person. For example in Leviticus 19:15 we find the following in the Hebrew text: "Thou shalt not *lift up the faces* of the poor." This expression is rendered by the King James Version: "Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor" (Leviticus 19:15). The meaning of this is shown by the next clause "nor honour the person of the mighty," that is to say, no partiality was to be shown.

Notice this in the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 1:17: "Ye shall not *distinguish* [discern] faces in judgment." This is rendered by the King James Version: "Ye shall not respect persons in judgment"; here again no partiality was to be shown.

That the Nephites understood this idiom may be reasonably deduced from these references:

They did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, . . . whether out of the church or in the church having no *respect* ["lifting up" or "distinguishing"] to *persons* ["faces"], continually. (Alma 1:30)

If not so, God is a partial ["lifter up of faces"] God, and also a changeable God, and a *respector of persons*. (Moroni 8:12; cf. Acts 10:34)

One of my friends has noticed in the Book of Mormon an apparent Hebrew idiom, "to give up the ghost," which is used to express the death of a person. Let us look at it for a moment. The expression occurs three times in the Book of Mormon:

And it came to pass that when he had said these words he could say no more, and *he gave up the ghost*. As he was about to *give up the ghost*, they were astonished exceedingly. (Jacob 7:20-21)

Yea at the time that he [Christ] shall *yield up the ghost* there shall be thunderings. (Helaman 14:21)

As is well known, parallels to these are found in both the Old and New Testaments. Let us examine two or three examples from the Old Testament:

She hath given up the ghost; her sun is gone down. (Jeremiah 15:9)

In this example the Hebrew of the words in italics reads literally: "She has breathed [or blown] out her soul [*nephesh*]." The same essential words (not used grammatically the same) will be found in Job 11:20.

However, a different usage of the Hebrew can be found in other examples in the Old Testament:

Then Abraham *gave up the ghost*, and died in a good old age. (Genesis 25:8)

Here the Hebrew original of the words in italics, *wayyigwa*, is completely different from those in Jeremiah 15:9 given above. In contrast to the King James Version, this may be translated: "Then Abraham *expired*, and died in a good old age."

It is highly probable that the Nephites used both Hebrew expressions "breathe out the soul" and "expired" in referring to the death of a person. To "give up the ghost" in old English simply means to "give up the spirit [*gast*]," that is, to die.

This article presents only a few of the Hebrew idioms observed in the Book of Mormon. At a later time others may be described.

It may be appropriate at this point to make a few observations concerning the old problem of the original language of the Nephite record. These studies support the idea that the Book of Mormon was originally written in Hebrew. Most of the idioms in the book appear to be typically Hebrew; there appear to be few which could be called Egyptian. To be sure Egyptian names are found in the Nephite record, and other evidences point to the fact that the Nephite historians were acquainted with the language and customs of Egypt, but the text proper shows the strong influence of Hebrew.