



Type: Magazine Article

A Study of Book of Mormon Texts I

Author(s): J. M. Sjodahl

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 26, No. 9 (July 1923)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 825–830

Abstract: In this series, internal evidences of the Book of Mormon's authenticity are argued using analysis of words and names used in the book that reflect ancient Hebrew customs, and parallels between the Book of Mormon and American Indian languages. The first part covers the language of the Book of Mormon and its names, as well as "in the language of my father," "seer," "the earth," "a narrow pass," "crossing the deep," and "shining stones."

A Study of Book of Mormon Texts

I. Notes on Significant Words and Phrases

By J. M. Sjodahl

Superficial critics of the Book of Mormon have assumed that the proper names in that remarkable volume are either from the Bible or selected at random from various modern sources. The Bible names, they tell us, include words from the New Testament in their anglicized forms, which the alleged authors of the Book of Mormon could not have known. Going outside the Bible names, "Moroni," they assert, is Spanish; "Nephi" is Greek; "Antipas" is a contraction of "Antipater"; "Moroni" is Italian, and "Sam" is, of course, a Yankee nickname for "Samuel," and so on.

Nothing could be further from the truth than this assumption. A closer study of the names in the Book of Mormon reveals the stupendous and, to some startling truth that many of those names are still found in various Indian vocabularies, with the same fundamental meaning that they have in the records of Mormon and his predecessors. Joseph Smith could not have invented them; for he was not a scholar at the time he translated the plates. Chance could not have produced them, for they are found in great numbers and not only in an isolated instance or two. They are therefore among the strongest external evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon that can be produced.

Some of the etymological suggestions in the following paragraphs are offered tentatively, in full realization of the almost insurmountable difficulties by which the subject is surrounded. The facts are, I believe, as stated; whether I have erred in any of the inferences drawn or conclusion arrived at, I must leave to the judgment of the intelligent reader.

"I make a record in the language of my father." (1 Nephi 1:2.)

In the language of my father. Was there any reason why Nephi did not say, "I make a record in the Hebrew language?" His father's language was the Hebrew—"the learning of the Jews;" why did he not use the shorter term?

There was a sufficient reason. At the time Lehi left Jerusalem, the term "Hebrew" was not yet employed to denote the language spoken by his people. Abraham was called "the Hebrew" by his cotemporaries (Gen. 14:13), which was equivalent to our word "foreigner," and in the days of Lehi (See

Jeremiah 34:9) the term was applied to the Jews generally, but not to their language. Isaiah (36:13) calls it, "The Jews' language," and "The language of Canaan" (19:18). The term "Hebrew" was first applied to the language of the Jews by the Son of Sirach, about 130 B. C., but he did not mean the Hebrew of the Old Testament, spoken at the time of Lehi, but the Aramaean, just as we in our day frequently call the jargon of the modern Jews, "Hebrew," though "Yiddish" is the common name for it. Josephus, the Jewish historian, is supposed to have been the first who applied the name "Hebrew" to the language of Lehi. It is, therefore, obvious that if Nephi had used this word in its modern sense, which is not older than the days of Josephus, the text would have presented a serious difficulty. As it stands, it is a strong testimony for the genuineness of the Book of Mormon, as well as for its authenticity.

Mormon, four hundred years after Josephus, seems to have been the first in this part of the world to whom it occurred to call the language of Lehi "Hebrew" (Mor. 9:33), as it had occurred to Josephus in the Old World, probably in honor of "Abraham the Hebrew."

Seer. In Nephi 3:6, the author quotes a prophecy concerning our day and age, said to have been uttered by Joseph in Egypt, about 1500 B. C., thus: "A seer shall the Lord my God raise up who shall be a choice seer," etc.

Why is the word "seer" found here, instead of the more familiar title "prophet," which a modern writer almost certainly would have used?

If we recall historic fact, stated in 1 Sam. 9:9, that, "He that is now [at the time of Samuel, about 1100 B. C.] called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer," we realize that the word credited to Joseph is the very one he would have used in his remarkable evidence of the genuineness of that prophecy.

The title, "prophet" was known before Samuel, but it assumed new importance and dignity at that time. He to whom that office was given then stood as the representative of Jehovah in all things pertaining to the moral and sacred duties of the people. In this respect, even kings were subject to his judgment. The office of seer was about that time united with the prophetic office, wherefore the Prophet Gad is called "David's seer" (2 Sam. 24:11). The latter title was gradually lost sight of, and "prophet" became the general designation by which the spiritual representative of the Lord on earth was known.

By revelation, April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith was called "a seer, a translator, a prophet, an apostle of Jesus Christ, an elder of the Church." All the gifts and powers and authority pertaining to these various callings were united in the prophetic office of the Church. As the title of "seer" predominated in the

vision concerning him by Joseph in Egypt, so that title came first among five enumerated in this revelation. But like the title "prophet" from the time of Samuel, it included them all.

"And it came to pass that there was a voice heard among all the inhabitants of the earth, upon all the face of this land." (3 Nephi 9:1).

The Earth. In reading this passage, and others, it is necessary to remember that the writer was a descendant of a Hebrew familiar with the language of the Old Testament, and that he used Bible terms.

The Jews in olden days called their country "the world," "the earth or the land," as in Ps. 72:8 where the king's son (Solomon) is promised dominion "from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth." This manner of speaking was still common in New Testament times. Luke (2:1) says a decree had been issued by the emperor "that all the world" should be taxed, and our Savior (Matt. 12:42), speaking of the queen of Sheba, says she came "from the uttermost parts of the earth" to hear Solomon. James (5:17), referring to the drought in Palestine during the reign of Ahab, says, that it rained not "on the earth" for three years and six months. It is clear from these quotations that the Hebrews frequently used the expression "the earth" in a very limited sense, just as we sometimes call a very small portion of the solid surface of the earth and sometimes a larger one, "land."

When Nephi says a voice was heard among "all the inhabitants of the earth," he does not mean "earth" in the widest sense of the word, but, as he himself explains, only "this land;" that is to say, the particular land that was affected by the awful visitation he describes. He enumerates cities that were destroyed, thereby indicating the limits of the area of darkness and destruction.

But the point is this, the recorder of these events, by employing the term "the earth" as he does, proves that his ideas and vocabulary were those of a descendant of a Hebrew, and thus the text is, incidentally, a testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon.

A Narrow Pass. In Mormon 2:29 and 3:5, as in Alma 22:32; 50:34, etc., we read of a "narrow pass," or "passage," connecting the "land northward" with the "land southward."

Columbus, on his fourth and last voyage, 1502, as he crept along the coast in the direction of Veragua, looking for an opening towards the elusive West, learned of the natives with whom he came in friendly contact that if he kept his present

course he would soon come to a "narrow place" between two seas. (Fiske, *The Discovery of America*, Vol. 1, p. 510.) He was not looking for an isthmus but for a strait, and he fondly hoped that the "narrow place" would turn out to be a channel into another ocean.

The interesting point, however, is this, that the Indians on the coasts of Honduras or Nicaragua, when visited by Columbus, had a designation for the Isthmus that is found in the Book of Mormon.

Is this merely a coincidence? I, for one, prefer to regard it as an evidence of the accuracy of the authors of the Book of Mormon.

Again, according to that volume, there was a Nephite land, and also a city, called *Bountiful*. Curiously enough, we have a country named *Costa Rica*—Rich Coast. There was also a land called *Joshua*, which is the Hebrew form for the name by which *San Salvador* is known, "Joshua" meaning "Jehovah is Salvation." There was also a land called *Desolation*. The Indians at the time of the conquest called large cemeteries by that very name.

Crossing the deep. In Ether 2:16-18, we are informed that the brother of Jared, obeying divine instructions, built a number of barges or small vessels in which he and those with him eventually crossed "the great sea which divideth the lands."

Some centuries later, when Lehi and his company camped by the sea shore at a place called Bountiful, Nephi was commanded by the Lord to construct a vessel in which to cross over to the other side of the ocean. This was done and the voyage was made.

These wonderful voyages reminds us of some that are on record in the general history of the world, and of others of which persistent tradition gives us an intimation.

In the year 1500 Pedro Alvarez de Cabral left Lisbon in command of thirteen vessels carrying 1,200 men. His destination was East India. But, after having passed the Cape Verde Islands, he took a more westerly course than he should have done, and, finally, was driven across the Atlantic and landed somewhere on the Brazilian coast.

Jean Cousin, of Dieppe, it is said, had a similar experience in 1488. While he was sailing down the coast of Africa, he was caught in a storm and blown across to Brazil.

In the year 1000 of our era, as is now well known, Lief Erickson, having heard of the existence of a strange coast south of Greenland, sailed from Brattahlid with a crew of 35 men and after a successful voyage arrived at a point on the

American coast which they called Markland, and some days later at another place which they named Vinland.

But long before the time of the explorations of the Ice-lander, Japanese junks are said to have been driven ashore on the coasts of Oregon and California, and in the fifth century, so tradition has it, Buddhist priests crossed over from China by way of the Aleutian Islands and went as far south as Mexico. (See Fiske, *The Discovery of America*, chap. 2, Vol. I.)

This tradition though generally discounted, seems to be confirmed by recent discoveries in the long-buried city of Teotihuacan, near the City of Mexico. There were found unmistakable Chinese characters of archaic form. The Chinese Charge d'Affairs in Mexico, M. F. K. Tong, identified some of them as the Chinese signs for "sun," "moon," "eye," "turn to the right," and "turn to the left." This proves that some one familiar with the Chinese ancient characters, in the dim past inhabited that locality. (See *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 18, 1920.)

The trans-ocean voyages recorded in the Book of Mormon present no greater difficulties than those mentioned by history and authentic traditions.

Jared and his brother were co-temporary with Noah, for that great patriarch lived after the flood 350 years (Gen. 9:28), and consequently more than a century after the Tower of Babel.

In all probability they had seen the ark. They had, undoubtedly, heard Noah describe his ship and voyage and the land from which he and his family came. It is more than probable that during the many years that intervened between the flood and the futile attempt at centralizing the human family around the Tower and preventing it from spreading over the surface of the earth, many an adventurous spirit had cast longing eyes toward that far-away land from which Noah came. We know that the Jaredites on their way to the ocean, built boats in which they crossed lakes and rivers so that when they finally came to the shore of the great deep, ship-building and navigation were not entirely unknown to them.

The family of Lehi, as inhabitants of Jerusalem, must have been familiar with Phoenician ships and sailors. The latter were great navigators in their day. It is stated by Herodotus that Phoenicians, about 600 years before our era, circumnavigated Africa, starting from the Red Sea and returning by way of the Mediterranean. Such a feat would have been the subject of common talk in the reports of the countries adjacent to the coast strip occupied by the Phoenicians and along all the trade routes frequented by their merchants. It is not improbable that

Lehi and his sons had heard all about this voyage, unless they had left Jerusalem before the home coming of the sailors.

Shining Stones. In Ether (6:3) we are told that the Lord, in answer to prayer (Ether 3:4) "caused stones to shine in darkness," to give light to those who were to cross the ocean in the vessels built for that purpose. The stones, it is said (Ether 3:1) were "white and clear, even as transparent glass."

In connection with this it is interesting to read a press dispatch from London, dated June 20th, 1920, in which it was stated that a scientist, Dr. T. Coke Squance, of Sunderland, had obtained some marvelous results by exposing precious stones to the action of x rays. During the process, the report said, the lustre of a sapphire was increased to such an extent that the stone had almost the brilliancy of a diamond. A diamond was made to glow with a beautiful green. To the question whether the acquired lustre would be permanent, Dr. Squance replied that he did not know, but that the sapphire on which he had experimented had kept its color for three years. "The most remarkable feature of the treatment," he added, "is the brilliancy which the stones acquire when shut up with the rays." He showed an enormous ruby which glowed and sparkled brilliantly.

It seems, then, that when the brother of Jared asked the Lord to make the stones he had obtained on Mount Shelam to "shine forth in darkness," he stood on strictly scientific ground. His request was reasonable, as is every prayer dictated by the Spirit of God.

(To be Continued)

The Winged Deluge

By Robert Sparks Walker

Jobless, penniless, homeless—three spectres which can produce a mental concoction as poisonous as a rattler's bite! It might have done so in the case which I am about to relate, but a little weakling insect, known as the ephemeral, or May, fly, destroyed that concoction by banishing the mental fatigue of Egbert Emmert, and proved thereby that the concoction hitherto regarded as venomous is volatile after all.

It was not a home, it was not a hovel, it was not a hut, that sheltered Egbert from the rude and oftentimes unmerciful elements. If he had had a cave or a hollow tree, his would have been a