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Was Joseph Smith Smarter Than the Average Fourth Year Hebrew Student? Finding a Restoration-Significant Hebraism in Book of Mormon Isaiah

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WAS JOSEPH SMITH SMARTER THAN THE AVERAGE FOURTH YEAR HEBREW STUDENT? FINDING A RESTORATION-SIGNIFICANT HEBRAISM IN BOOK OF MORMON ISAIAH

Paul Y. Hoskisson

Abstract: The brass plates version of Isaiah 2:2, as contained in 2 Nephi 12:2, contains a small difference, not attested in any other pre-1830 Isaiah witness, that not only helps clarify the meaning but also ties the verse to events of the Restoration. The change does so by introducing a Hebraism that would have been impossible for Joseph Smith, the Prophet, to have produced on his own.

The English text of the Isaiah verse in 2 Nephi 12:2 contains a variation that is not found in any English translation of Isaiah 2:2 or in any Hebrew text.¹ The variation may at first glance seem to introduce an awkward, even puzzling reading, possibly leading some to wonder what Joseph was thinking. Yet at the same time it opens up the text to a hitherto unrecognized Hebraism in the Book of Mormon that places Isaiah's prophecy clearly in the context of the Restoration.

The King James translation of this verse reads (with King James accidentals): "And it shall come to pass in the last days, *that* the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it."²

1 For that matter, the variant is not found in the Syriac, the Latin Vulgate, or Greek Septuagint translations.

2 This verse also appears in Micah 4:1: "But in the last days it shall come to pass, *that* the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it." The Hebrew version of Micah differs from the Hebrew version of Isaiah only in a slightly different word order and vocabulary and therefore does not contribute to the discussion here.

As the italicized *that* indicates, the Hebrew (i.e., Masoretic) text lacks any lexeme that corresponds with the English *that*.³ The King James translators supplied the *that* to help make the English text read smoothly. With or without the added *that*, the King James version makes perfect sense as a string of independent clauses that will find fulfillment “in the last days.”

English translations of Isaiah prior to the King James Bible are mixed with regard to the need for *that*. For example, the Wycliffe Bible — which was translated from the Latin Vulgate and not from the Hebrew — did not insert a relative pronoun. It reads “And in the laste daies the hil of the hous of the Lord schal be maad redi in the cop of hillis, and schal be reisid aboue litle hillis. And alle hethene men schulen flowe to hym.” However, both the 1537 Matthew Bible and the 1560 Geneva Bible insert *that*, without italics, where the King James also supplies *that*.⁴

Post King James translations are also mixed with regard to inserting *that*. Some translations include *that*, while others omit it. The three modern translations that follow, each from rather different types of Bibles, all omit the *that*: *The New English Bible* reads, “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be set over all the other mountains, lifted high above the hills. All the nations shall come streaming to it.”⁵ *The Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version* reads, “In the future, the mountain with the Lord’s temple will be the highest of all. It will reach above the hills. Every nation shall rush to it.”⁶ *The Jewish Study Bible* (Jewish publication Society TANAKH translation) reads, “In the days to come, the Mount of the Lord’s House shall stand firm above the

3 Neither the Syriac version of Isaiah nor the Vulgate contain a lexeme corresponding to *that*. The Septuagint does have “ὅτι, *that*,” but it is placed at the beginning of the verse and not where the intrusive *that* of the King James is inserted.

4 *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), and *Matthew’s Bible 1537 Edition* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2009). As the introduction to the King James Bible states, the translators were to use the previous English translations, which would have included the Geneva and Matthew Bibles. It should be noted here that the Hendrickson 2010 reprint of the 1611 King James Bible does not italicize *that*. However, the Phinney Bible printed in Cooperstown, NY, 1843, does italicize *that*, just as the 1979 LDS King James does.

5 *The New English Bible* (New York, NY: Oxford, 1971).

6 *The Holy Bible: Contemporary English Version* (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 1995).

mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy.”⁷

Given this emphasis on the mixed treatment of *that* in English translations, the reader already suspects that therein lies the tale of whether Joseph knew Hebrew or not.

If Joseph had been even moderately educated for his day, he might have known that italicized words in the King James Old Testament Bible of his day were added to aid in the translation. The italicized words are not translations of any Hebrew words, but were important to help make the English text read like English. Therefore, he could have simply, without much thought, omitted in the Book of Mormon version the italicized words of the King James translation and thereby could have created a text that was more Hebraic than the King James. In fact only twenty-nine percent of King James Isaiah italics was altered in the Book of Mormon renderings of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon version,⁸ which indicates Joseph was not mindlessly changing italicized words in the text.

In fact, in the Isaiah sections of the Book of Mormon, besides omitting italicized words, “many times the italics in the [King James Version] are replaced with other words.”⁹ Such is the case in the verse in question. Joseph’s dictated text omits the *that* in this verse and substitutes a different relative conjunction *when* in the place of the King James *that*: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, when the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow unto it.” This reading goes out on a rather precarious limb where no English translation — or any other translation that I am aware of — has gone. The Book of Mormon reading with *when* is unique among all Isaiah witnesses.¹⁰ If nothing else, Joseph can be credited with a daring emendation.

7 *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford, 1999).

8 Royal Skousen, “Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 382.

9 Royal Skousen, in a personal email to the author, dated 19 April 2015.

10 If there is a version of Isaiah somewhere with the relative conjunction *when* in this verse, I could not find it. And if I could not find one, it is unlikely that Joseph Smith could have found one from which to derive the unusual reading in 2 Nephi 12:2.

At this juncture, it is not important here to speculate whether this *when* might indicate that the *Urtext* — the brass plates on which 2 Nephi 12–24 is based — could have contained a textual variant not attested in any Hebrew witness, or whether this *when* is simply an interpretation of how to understand this verse in English. For example, the *when* in the King James translation of Genesis 4:8, “and it came to pass when they were in the field,” is not a literal translation of a Hebrew subordinate conjunction. Rather, it is the translation of a Hebrew verb form meaning “and it was.” On the other hand, the *when* in the King James translation of Genesis 12:12, “Therefore it shall come to pass when the Egyptians shall see thee that they shall say, This is his wife, and they will kill me,” does reflect the Hebrew conjunction *kî*. (This verse provides a fitting analogue in my analysis of 2 Nephi 12:2.) Therefore, the important task at hand here is not to speculate on what might have been in the *Urtext*, but rather to explore what the otherwise unattested presence of *when* in an English text of Isaiah is doing there.¹¹

The first issue is that the reading with *when* instead of *that* creates its own awkward syntax by changing the intelligible King James text into a difficult to understand construction. The subordinate clause, “When the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains,” does not appear to be resolved by a main clause. In technical terms, the protasis does not seem to have an apodosis. To resolve the awkwardness, one of the subsequent phrases should begin with *that* or *then* in order to resolve the *when*, much like the verse in Genesis 12:12 quoted above. Instead, all we have are two remaining instances of *and* in 2 Nephi 12:2, the same two *ands* that are in the Hebrew text.¹²

There is, however, a possible Hebraism hiding behind the awkwardness of the Book of Mormon English text of this verse. Note that for a Hebraism to be acceptable, it is not enough that it make sense within the meaning of the pericope; it must also be congruous with Standard Biblical Hebrew grammar. To produce a Hebraism hidden in the English text by inserting *when*, an otherwise unattested reading of this Isaiah verse, would seem like an impossible task for Joseph Smith, given that he had much less schooling than the average reader today. Yet that is exactly what he produced.

11 I thank the two anonymous reviewers who suggested that I clarify whether or not the *Urtext* might have had a textual variant.

12 The dependent clause could also be resolved if the second *and* were eliminated in the English text, which is exactly what some modern translations of the Hebrew do. See two of the three modern translations quoted above.

The resolution to the missing apodosis can be found in that venerable grammar of biblical Hebrew, *Gesenius*, as it is affectionately called. It was first published more than two hundred years ago in German and has been revised numerous times. The standard English edition first appeared in 1910 and is a revision of the 28th German edition.¹³ As a budding young prophet, Joseph Smith must have had *Gesenius* on the top of his must-read list if he were going to create a Hebraism. In any case, §112 contains a lengthy explanation of the grammatical structure of the Hebrew main clause, that is, the apodosis.

Rather than going into the minutia of technical Hebrew grammar in this paper, it is sufficient to say that the Hebrew lexeme *waw*, usually translated as *and*, can have several other meanings, including *even*, *that is*, *even so*, *but*, *or*, *then*, *therefore*, etc.¹⁴ These meanings are necessary when translating from Hebrew because *and* in English does not usually introduce the main clause, the apodosis, after a preceding dependent clause, the protasis. For example, Genesis 24:8 literally reads, “And if the woman will not come to go after you, and you are freed from this my oath.”¹⁵ The conjunction *and* that introduces the actual main clause in Hebrew does not make sense in English. Therefore, the King James translators, clearly understanding the conditional nature of these phrases, translated *then* instead of *and*, “And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then [*< and*] thou shalt be clear from this my oath.”¹⁶ Here the Hebrew conjunction *waw* introduces “the second part of a conditional clause”¹⁷ and means *then*.

As Royal Skousen has pointed out, the Hebraism *and*, meaning *then*, to introduce an apodosis occurs several times in the earliest received

13 *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, 2nd English edition revised in accordance with the twenty-eighth German edition (1909) by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). Sometimes this tome's designation is shortened to GKC.

14 See Ludwig Kohler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, CD-ROM, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), for ו, hereafter cited as HALOT.

15 The author's own translation.

16 Hebrew does not always use *and* to introduce an apodosis. In Genesis 13:16, the King James slips in an italic *then* to introduce the apodosis, indicating that the *then* does not translate any word in the Hebrew text, not even a *waw*.

17 HALOT, ו, 23.

text of the Book of Mormon.¹⁸ Beginning with the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon, many such occurrences were edited out, no doubt because *and* does not introduce an apodosis in English. The most prominent example comes from Moroni 4:10. The *and* that can be found in the printer's manuscript and in the 1830 edition between *Christ* and *he* was eliminated.¹⁹ If this *and* were the translation of a *waw* in a Hebrew vorlage, then Moroni 10:4 could have been read, "if ye shall ask with a sincere heart ... *then* (< *and*) he will manifest the truth of it unto you."

Some *when* ... *and* pericopes in the Book of Mormon are long and complicated and others are simple. The shortest example, 3 Nephi 23:8, contains just three clauses (reading with the corrected printer's manuscript): "and when Nephi had brought forth the records & laid them before him & he cast his eyes upon them & said." The sense of the pericope is: "And when Nephi had brought forth the records and laid them before him, *then* (< *and*) he cast his eyes upon them and said." A more complicated example of the Hebraistic construction in which *and* means *then* is found in Alma 8:13.²⁰ Following my normalization of the printer's manuscript, the verse reads, "Now when the people had said this and withstood all his words and reviled him & spit upon him and caused that he should be cast out of their City and he departed thence."²¹ The final *and* really means *then*. Therefore, this verse could be read, following the reading and accidentals of the 2013 edition, except for the Hebraism, "Now when the people had said this, and withstood all his words, and reviled him, and spit upon him, and caused that he should be cast out of their city, then he departed thence."

With this lengthy introduction to the *when* ... *and* Hebraism out of the way, it is time to return to 2 Nephi 12:2, with Joseph Smith's unique introduction of *when* in place of the King James version *that*. As remarked earlier, the placement of *when* seems to create an unresolved syntactical issue. The dependent clause created by *when* does not seem to be resolved, at least not if an appeal to English syntax is made. However,

18 "Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/1 (1990): 42–3.

19 Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004–2009), 6: 3950–1; hereafter *ATV*.

20 Royal Skousen, *ATV* 3:1739.

21 For the uncorrected text, see Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, Part One (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), 427.

the simple solution is to read the second *and* as a Hebraism for *then*. Thus the verse would read, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, when the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, *then* [*< and*] all nations shall flow unto it.”

Read thus, the missing apodosis appears exactly where it would be expected. In fact, our verse here complies with all the Book of Mormon examples of Hebraistic *when ... and* clauses listed by Royal Skousen, in that all of them insert at least one other subordinate clause between the initial *when* subordinate clause and the main clause beginning with *and*.²²

Not only does 2 Nephi 12:2 with its unique insertion of *when* make perfect sense when the final *and* is understood as *then*, but the passage aligns perfectly with Restoration doctrine: When the Lord’s restoration in the latter days has introduced the saving ordinances, including especially temple work, then will people of all nations flow to the temples of the Restoration. After all, Isaiah 2:2 is talking about the Restoration in the latter days, and reading *when ... then* resolves the meaning in a manner that astonishingly reflects the actual history of the Restoration.

Being the first Latter-day Saint — as far as I know²³ — to suggest the meaning *then* in place of the final *and* in 2 Nephi 12:2, some may accuse me of imagining Hebraisms where none really exist. However, I am not the first person who has read the *and* before the last phrase in Isaiah 2:2 as *then*. For example, the Anchor Bible translation reads, “It will come to pass in the days to come that the mountain, Yahveh’s house, shall be established at the top of the mountains, raised high over the hills. Then all nations shall stream towards it.”²⁴ The New Jerusalem Bible also translates with *then*: “It will happen in the final days that the mountain of Yahweh’s house will rise higher than the mountains and tower above

22 ATV 1:107–8.

23 I could find no mention of the Hebraism under discussion here in John A. Tvedtnes, *The Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1981); Carol F. Ellertson, *The Isaiah Passages in the Book of Mormon: A Non-Aligned Text*, Master’s Thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 2001; or in any of the chapters in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998).

24 *Isaiah* 1–39, Anchor Bible, trans. Joseph Blenkinsopp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 189.

the heights. Then all nations will stream to it.”²⁵ The Book of Mormon version, dating back to at least 1829, creates the same temporal connection between its protasis and apodosis that more modern English translations make. How smart was Joseph Smith?

In returning to that question, as posed in the title of this paper, “Was Joseph Smith Smarter Than the Average Fourth Year Hebrew Student?” I have to admit that the question was a red herring. The translation of the Book of Mormon was not a product of Joseph’s intellect or any other mortal skills. Whether he understood Hebrew grammar or not is totally irrelevant. Joseph Smith produced, by the gift and power of God, not by any native abilities he might have possessed, a unique reading of Isaiah that also contained a prediction of future Restoration events enclosed within a possible, obscure Hebraism, years before its fulfillment. As the next verse prophesies, “And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths” (2 Nephi 12:3).

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25 *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

