DOES THE BOOK OF MORMON CONTAIN ANACHRONISTIC LANGUAGE?

by Kevin Christensen

Critics of the Book of Mormon often charge that it cannot be a translation from ancient writings because it contains obvious anachronisms in the text. (An *anachronism* is an element that seems misplaced in time; for instance a movie in which Columbus is shown crossing the Atlantic on a steam-powered ship would certainly be anachronistic.) Instead, they say the presence of the "nineteenth century" elements proves that Joseph Smith must have composed the book, rather than translated from an ancient record with divine inspiration, as he claims.

In order to judge these claims fairly, the reader must first gain some perspective. All claims that the Book of Mormon contains anachronisms rest on assumptions about adequate research and translation factors. Certitude in *identifying* an anachronism always rests on the assumptions that nothing has been overlooked, nothing has been misunderstood, nothing has been lost, and nothing has been forgotten about a certain time and place. For instance, until recently no remains of Judaean lions had ever been found,[1] so someone relying solely on this lack of evidence to draw their conclusions might have decided that the biblical story of David killing a lion was an anachronism. Now that such remains have been found, it can clearly be seen that what once might have been viewed as an anachronism clearly is not. In their haste to condemn, the critics overlook much, misunderstand much, and continually have their claims discredited by subsequent research and discoveries.

Very often those making charges of anachronism in the Book of Mormon have not bothered to adequately research the time and setting in which the Book of Mormon claims the events in question occurred. In fact, they typically have not consulted ancient documents such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and other early Jewish and Christian writings, or even the Bible, which describe similar ancient settings. Therefore, their charges should be considered with extreme caution. In many cases reading against the ancient context illuminates the text far more than does comparison with the translator's context,[2] so simply noting that elements in the text have nineteenth century parallels can be misleading.

Another thing to keep in mind is the problem of assessing the *significance* of an apparent anachronism in an inspired translation. For example, to argue that the Book of Mormon could not be authentic because it contains English words that did not exist in the 600 B.C. to 400 A.D. time period of the main text would be absurd. This is not because the English would not be anachronistic in the ancient setting, but because the Book of Mormon is a *translation*[3] from one language and culture into another. Joseph Smith's own cultural background is necessarily part of the translation.[4] Just how big a part is open to discussion, but such discussion requires adequate consideration of both the translator's context and the ancient context.[5] Furthermore, if we apply Joseph Smith's own definitions of the "translation" process in connection with other revelations, we must consider the potentials for prophetic commentary and interpretation in the text. Just as the Bible text shows evidence of the efforts and motives of the authors, editors, transmitters, and translators, so the Book of Mormon text contains evidence of Mormon and Moroni working as editors and abridgers of Nephite and Jaredite records,[6] and evidence of Joseph Smith as the translator.[7] Critics often overlook the potential in the text for editorial or translator anachronism that do not impair the inspiration of the text. On the other hand, we don't need to assume that suggestions for alleged "translator anachronisms" won't fall to the same kinds of reversals that many of the more cynical allegations have met.

After decades of watching how these claims of anachronism have fared in light of subsequent research and discovery, they no longer bother me. When viewed from a reasonable perspective, they consistently fail to hold up. A number of examples will be provided here to illustrate,

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and the reader should consult the resources cited in the "Further Reading" section for a more complete treatment of the issue.

AN INSTRUCTIVE CASE: SHAKESPEARE AND LEHI

Certainly the presence of the writings of Shakespeare in the Book of Mormon would be an anachronism, since the Book of Mormon claims to have been written before about A.D. 421, and Shakespeare lived in the seventeenth century. However, we aren't talking about an entire act, scene, or even a full line from a sonnet. For years critics have been claiming that Joseph Smith lifted and adapted a single, rather unremarkable, phrase from Shakespeare to be included in the Book of Mormon. If such a phrase were part of Joseph Smith's linguistic background, it seems obvious that he could have translated an ancient phrase with similar intent into language reminiscent of Shakespeare. But even if that were not the case, it turns out that there are a number of even closer parallels to the language of the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi in the literature of the ancient Near East—i.e., the environment Lehi is supposed to have come from. A recent article by Matthew Roper[8] provides a fine refutation of this charge, as presented by critics Jerald and Sandra Tanner:

> The Tanners assert that Lehi's phrase "From whence no traveller can return" (2 Nephi 1:14) comes from Shakespeare's description of death as "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns" (pp. 84–85). Unlike other critics, however, they do not insist that Joseph Smith borrowed directly from Shakespeare's works, but suggest that he may have got it at second hand through the writings of Josiah Priest, who appears to quote the phrase in his *Wonders of Nature and Providence Displayed*. In support of this theory, they note that Priest's paraphrase "from whence no traveler returns" is even closer to Lehi than Shakespeare. But this makes little difference since similar ideas were expressed in Lehi's day. Hugh Nibley has pointed out that such language was common in Near Eastern thought. The issue has also been discussed by Sidney Sperry, B. H. Roberts, and others. More recently Robert F. Smith has noted that the whole context of 2 Nephi 1:13–15 (not just this one brief phrase) fits nicely into an ancient Near Eastern context (he cites numerous examples). Smith demonstrates that most of the ideas spoken of by Lehi can also be found in Jewish, Sumerian, and Egyptian texts of an-

tiquity, many of which would likely have been a part of Lehi's intellectual milieu. A few examples are listed below.

Descent of Inanna

"Why, pray, have you come to the 'Land of no return,' on the road whose traveller returns never?"

Pyramid Texts

"May you go on the roads of the western ones [the dead]; They who go on them [travellers] do not return."

…

Similar ideas can also be found in Jewish scripture (2 Samuel 12:24; Job 10:21; 16:22; Proverbs 2:19) and are clearly at home in the Near Eastern world from which Lehi came.

NEGLECTING THE BACKGROUNDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Critics often claim that the Book of Mormon quotes New Testament passages before those passages were written, but they rarely pause to consider the possibility that those New Testament passages might be quotations or paraphrases of much older writings. Furthermore, the King James New Testament phrasology is part of the translator's context, and may often be appropriate. (That is, Joseph Smith's entire culture considered King James English as the standard scriptural mode of expression. Therefore, it might be entirely legitimate for the Prophet to use linguistic elements of the KJV to translate identical concepts from an ancient language. Also, the use of similar language for similar concepts is helpful, in that it aids readers in cross-referencing with the KJV.) Consider the bold headline in a George D. Smith essay[9] that proclaimed "The Book of Mormon has Christ quoting the words of Peter, before Peter spoke them." But were Peter's words original? This question must be asked, because if Peter was quoting some more ancient document that could have been available to the Book of Mormon people, or quoting the words of Jesus, which might have also been spoken directly to the Book of Mormon people, then the "anachronism" disappears.

It turns out that the Book of Mormon has the resurrected Jesus Christ saying words similar to some Peter spoke to a crowd of Jews in Acts. It seems plausible that Peter was simply quoting the words of Christ after Christ spoke them, and in the Book of Mormon Christ was repeating his own words to the people there. After

pending on how complete our knowledge is of influences on the author of Hebrews and Jacob's sources. Influence from such passages might be a legitimate translator resource, as Ostler argues. But in emphasizing possible translator resources, he did not adequately examine the ancient context.[22]

More recently, critics have used computer searches to locate supposed anachronisms. Matthew Roper[23] explored these claims carefully and found that:

> [T]he authors' parallels [make] no attempt to show where Book of Mormon prophets may have drawn upon Old Testament material, which could have been found on the brass plates. This is certainly an important issue in evaluating the worth of their comparisons. Yet they have failed to include this kind of information in their list. Since I used the same computer media they did, I can only assume that they have ignored those passages altogether. It is unfortunate that they would suppress this information.

> Having reviewed the material in question, I conclude that most of the evidence may be divided into three groups:

> 1. Examples where Old Testament language is equal to or closer to that of the New Testament passage given by the authors as proof of plagiarism.

> 2. Examples where Old Testament language can be found which very closely resembles that of the New Testament language.

> 3. Examples in which the Book of Mormon could have drawn upon Old Testament ideas.

Non-Biblical Sources Unknown to Joseph Smith and Neglected by Critics

The Book of Mormon contains many close parallels to Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal writings that were unknown in Joseph Smith's day,[24] and it happens that some examples of supposed anachronisms resemble such texts. For example, 1st Enoch, a significant influence on the New Testament, shows that non-Biblical sources might lie behind some of the purported anachronisms. Compare the following Book of Mormon passage, the New Testament passage it supposedly quotes anachronistically, and a passage from 1 Enoch the critics failed to take into account.

> But wo unto the rich. (2 Nephi 9:30)

> But woe unto you that are rich. (Luke 6:24)

> But woe unto the rich, for ye have trusted in your riches, and from you your riches shall depart. (1 Enoch 94:8)[25]

Roper also shows how recent discoveries can expose critical judgments as premature.[26]

> Another example of the problems with assuming that certain passages from the New Testament represent later developments, peculiar to Christianity, is seen in the Book of Mormon usage of the terms "Son of God" and "Son of the Most High God" (1 Nephi 11:6-7). These terms are seen by the Tanners as obvious plagiarisms from New Testament gospels (pp. 89-90, 159). Yet both titles have recently turned up in an unpublished Dead Sea Scroll fragment written in Aramaic from before the time of Jesus. Although it is unknown to whom the prophecy refers, the fragment states:

>> [X] shall be great upon the earth. [O king, all (people) shall] make [peace], and all shall serve [him. He shall be called the son of] the [G]reat [God], and by his name shall be hailed (as) the Son of God, and they shall call him Son of the Most High,"

> The writer for Biblical Archaeology Review states, "This is the first time that the term 'Son of God' has been found in a Palestinian text outside the Bible. ... Previously some scholars have insisted that the origin of terms like 'Most High' and 'Son of the Most High' were to be found in Hellenistic usage outside of Palestine and that therefore they relate to later development of Christian doctrine. Now we know that these terms were part of Christianity's original Jewish heritage."

> If one small fragment can change our understanding of this term, is it really that hard to believe that other ideas and phrases found in the Book of Mormon, heretofore thought to be anachronistic, might also be verified in the future?

Misreading to Create False Anachronism

At times the critics have misread the Book of Mormon text, for example, misreading the liahona as a mariner's compass,[27] misreading the authentic-to-the-ancient-near-east money based on weights, as anachronistic

coinage,[28] and misreading the Gadianton Robbers as New York Masons.[29] These kinds of examples should show that careful reading, "searching to see whether these things are so" (Acts 17:11) in the ancient context, should be the rule, rather than "seeking to make a man an offender for a word" (Isaiah 29:20-21) by looking only to Joseph Smith's context.

THE ISAIAH PROBLEM

Many Isaiah scholars assert that the writings of Isaiah are a compilation of two or three authors—the original Isaiah who wrote in the eighth century B.C., plus a Deutero Isaiah who wrote in his name during the Babylonian Exile, and a Tritero Isaiah after the return to Jerusalem. Since the Book of Mormon quotes some chapters associated with Deutero Isaiah, several critics see this as evidence of anachronism, since the Book of Mormon people migrated from Palestine around 600 B.C., just before the Exile. However, other Isaiah scholars have offered strong arguments in favor of the unity of Isaiah, and still others have suggested how the Book of Mormon can accommodate the multiple authorship theory.[30] As long as we have plausible arguments for either case, believers need not worry about how the situation ultimately resolves.

Part of this issue is more ideological than evidential. Is there such a thing as prophetic foreknowledge? One of the "evidences" that some scholars use for dating portions of Isaiah is the mention of Cyrus in Isaiah 45:1. A scholar who does not believe in prophecy must conclude that the passage was written (or rewritten) during or after Cyrus's reign, long after Isaiah's death. Those who believe in prophetic foreknowledge can interpret the evidence differently.

CURRENT TRENDS IN BOOK OF MORMON CRITICISM

Recent critical studies claim to find ideational anachronisms through comparisons to notions as nineteenth century Universalism, and New York revivals, post-reformation sacramental language, St. Anselm's Medieval theory of the atonement, pre-Christian baptism, and an alleged dependence of Alma 13 on the discussion of Melchezedek in Hebrews.[31] The conclusions of all of these studies have been challenged effectively by competent scholars who have both read the Book of Mormon and its context more closely, and who have looked further into ancient traditions than the critics.[32] Furthermore, none of these critical scholars have adequately explained how Joseph Smith, or anyone, could have produced an inspiring record with a multitude of

authentic details of ancient life and customs across a broad range of times and cultures.[33] They strain at the gnat, and swallow the camel.

JUDAISM BEFORE THE EXILE AND THE DEUTERONOMIST REFORM: A CHANGING PICTURE

One aspect of the Book of Mormon that has received considerable attention recently is that the pre-Exilic Jewish protagonists of the story are portrayed as being much more "Christian" than many have thought possible. In these cases, critical arguments depend on assumptions about just what was original to Christianity and just what was the nature of pre-Exilic Judaism. Margaret Barker, a respected Biblical scholar and Methodist preacher, has been looking to understand the origins of Christianity. In so doing, she has argued for a different picture of pre-Exilic Judaism than is assumed by Book of Mormon critics, asking "Was there more, far more, in the religion of pre-Exilic Jerusalem than later writers wished to perpetuate?"[34]

This statement invites us to compare her picture of these other suppressed traditions with what we have in the Book of Mormon, the narrative of which begins in the sixth century B.C. just before the Babylonian Exile.[35] She credits the suppression of significant ideas to the Deuteronomists, whose influence started with the discovery of the "Book of the Law" during a renovation of the Jerusalem temple during the reign of King Josiah,[36] and continued through the Exile and Return. Indeed, some Deuteronomist traits are conspicuous in the Book of Mormon, such as the emphasis on Moses and the Exodus. This is appropriate since Lehi was a contemporary of King Josiah. However most of the re-interpretation and suppression that Barker describes occurred during turmoil of the Exile and after the Return. In several remarkable books, she builds a picture of the Pre-Exilic religion centered on the old atonement rites in the temple.

> We can now add to our pattern of vision [of God and the Heavenly Host], knowledge [of the creation], judgement, ascent and angelic status [symbolized by white garments and anointing], several more elements: the royal figure called 'a son of man' the Eden temple setting with the river of life giving water, the lamp representing both the presence of God and the Tree of Life whose fruits made man immortal (Gen. 3:22), and the clouds which took a son of man figure to heaven.[37]

This is very congenial to the Book of Mormon, as it should be, if the Book of Mormon text is authentic. For example, King Benjamin discourses at the Temple with the atonement as his theme (Mosiah 2–5), Lehi reports visions of God and host (1 Nephi 1:8–14), the Tree of Life and the river of life (1 Nephi 7:10–14; 11:25), demonstrates knowledge of the purpose of the creation (2 Nephi 2), and Nephi tells of the coming judgment (1 Nephi 11:34–36). Finally the image of the clouds occur in 3 Nephi 18:39. Certain of Barker's interpretations differ from ours to be sure, but here is a serious body of work exploring pre-Exilic beliefs independent of Book of Mormon scholarship. Her picture often checks the claim that the Book of Mormon ascribes anachronistic beliefs to pre-Exilic Israel. Much of the picture demonstrates striking correspondence with conspicuous Book of Mormon themes, ideas, and imagery, and invites serious investigation by Mormon scholars.

CONCLUSIONS

In Book of Mormon studies, time has a corrosive effect on critic's arguments. In many cases, what had been seen as evidence against the Book of Mormon transforms into evidence in its favor.[38] In facing open questions, why should believers expect currently fashionable criticisms to fare any better?

In considering my own experience, when I consider new questions, I have to consider the testimony that came to me on my third prayerful reading of the Book of Mormon. I have learned much more since then that has, in Alma's terms, "enlightened my mind" and "filled my soul with joy" (see Alma 32). It would have been tragic to miss that joy because I failed to nourish the seed in good soil, but rather succumbed to cares of the world, or to have faulty scholarship pull up the seed before it grew, and to have missed tasting the fruit of the tree of life. I would encourage anyone investigating the Book of Mormon to be both prayerful and diligent, taking advantage of the scholarship that exists, and trusting the witness of the Spirit that the book itself promises (see Moroni 10:4–6).

FURTHER READINGS

Aston, Warren P. and Michaela Knoth Aston. *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi's Journey Across Arabia to Bountiful.*

Nibley, Hugh W. *An Approach to the Book of Mormon.* John W. Welch, editor. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 6. Third Edition. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988.

Nibly, Hugh W. *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites.* John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister, editors. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 5. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988.

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Peterson, Daniel C., editor. *FARMS Review of Books* (formerly, Review of Books on the Book of Mormon).

Reynolds, Noel B., editor. *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins.* Provo: FARMS, 1997.

Ricks, Stephen and John Sorenson, editors. *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies.*

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Tvedtnes, John A. *The Most Correct Book.* Salt Lake City and Phoenix: Cornerstone Publishing and Distribution, 1999.

Welch, John W. and Mel Thorne, editors. *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon.* Provo: FARMS, 1999.

Welch, John W. *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1990.

Welch, John W., editor. *Reexploring the Book of Mormon.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1992.

NOTES

1. L. Martin, "The Faunal Remains from Tell es Saidiyeh," *Levant* 20 (1988):83–84. Thanks to John Tvedtnes and Matt Roper for pointing this out.

2. See Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," *King Benjamin's Speech* (Provo: FARMS, 1998).

3. The word means to "carry across."

4. D&C 1:24–29 and D&C 9.

5. Because a word-for-word translation between languages is impossible, the unresolved question is whether the Book of Mormon translation was loose or tight. Ostler argues for a very loose translation, makes some good points, but downplays evidence for a tight translation, such as poetic forms, and computer word prints. More recently, Royal Skousen's "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence From the Original Manuscript" in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, (Provo: FARMS, 1997) has provided more direct evidence for a tight translation. Compare John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple: A Latter-day Saint Perspective* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1990), 130–144.

6. See Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) and John W. Welch, editor, *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1992), 269–271.

7. A few friendly critics, such as the non-LDS James Charlesworth, as well as LDS scholars like Hugh Nibley and Blake Ostler, have suggested that some seeming anachronisms may be due to commentary, interpretation, and or midrashic expansion by the translator or transmitters. See Blake Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as an Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue* 20:1 (1987), 66–123, especially 86–87, 102–115.

8. Matthew Roper, review of *Covering up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* by Gerald and Sandra Tanner in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* vol 3, 170–187.

9. In *Sunstone* 6:3, 47. This was a survey called "Book of Mormon Difficulties."

10. That is, they are more than a unique comment on the prophetic fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18:15–19.

11. Compare Ezekiel 18:30, Zechariah 1:3–6, Jeremiah 25:4–5; 26:3–5; 29:19; 36:3; 44:4; Isaiah 55:7; Ezekiel 3:17–18; 33:11; 2 Chronicles 36:15–16. Also compare Acts 3:24 and 2 Kings 17:13; Psalm 99:6.

12. Compare Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon,* John W. Welch, editor. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 8. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 407–434.

13. Compare Nibley, ibid., and Richard L. Anderson, "Imitation Gospels and Christ's Book of Mormon Ministry," *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day* Saints, C. Wilfred Griggs, editor. (Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1986), 311–332.

14. All scholars make errors. Fortunately, scholarship can be useful without being perfect.

15. Blake Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as an Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue* 20:1 (1987), 77.

16. Ibid.

17. Compare John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1990), 166–29, "Although most Christians assume that Jesus' words were completely original, in fact many of the words and phrases were taken directly from the Old Testament."

18. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon,* John W. Welch, editor. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 8 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 87.

19. Kevin Christensen, review in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon,* vol 2, 214–257.

20. The Book of Enoch is an ancient Jewish apocalypse dating to before the time of Christ. In this century the Book of Enoch is recognized as having significant influence on the New Testament.

21. Christensen in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon,* vol 2, 241–246.

22. See ibid, note 22 for references to additional responses to Ostler.

23. See Roper in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon,* vol 3, 174.

24. For example, see John W. Welch, "The Narrative of Zosimus and the Book of Mormon," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited* (Provo: FARMS, 1997), 323–374.

25. Cited in Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967) and Blake Ostler, 71–73. Also, compare Hugh Nibley *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 327–328, showing that a recent translation of 1 Enoch 97:10 actually uses "slippery" in reference to riches, which, contra Ostler, supports the validity of the word in the Book of Mormon in this context.

26. Roper in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon,* vol 3, 173.

27. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967), 251–263.

28. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967), 224–225, and John W. Welch "Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon" in *JBMS* 8:2, 37–45.

29. Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonary'" in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon,* Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, editors. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1990) 174–224.

30. See Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, editors, *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo: FARMS, 1998).

31. Brent Lee Metcalfe, editor, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).

32. See reviews of *New Approaches* in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6:1, 6:2, 7:1, 7:2 and 8:1.

33. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites,* John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister, editors. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 5 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988).

34. Margaret Barker*, The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 13.

35. 1 Nephi 1:4; 10:4.

36. II Kings 22:8–20, 23:1–3; II Chronicles 34:15–33. Also, William J. Doorly, *Obsession With Justice: The Story of the Deuteronomists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

37. Margaret Barker, *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and its Influence on Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988), 56.

38. A classic survey of this phenomenon is Hugh Nibley's essay "Howlers in the Book of Mormon," in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon,* John W. Welch, editor. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 8 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989), 243–258. More recent volumes from FARMS provide similar examples.

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