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The Book of Mormon and the Charge "The Product of One Man of Mediocre Ability" - Part 1

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Abstract: An apologetic work responding to claims that the Book of Mormon is the product of one man of mediocre ability. The author reports the finds of an analysis comparing the styles of different Book of Mormon writers and concludes that the different writers each have different styles. This supports Joseph Smith's claim that he translated the work.

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The Book of Mormon

AND THE CHARGE "THE PRODUCT
OF ONE MAN OF MEDIOCRE ABILITY"

Part I

In the year 1901, at a meeting of the Ministerial Association in Salt Lake City, a speaker charged that the Book of Mormon was definitely the product of one man. He said it contained the sameness of style and expression from cover to cover, while in the Bible each writer had some distinctive characteristics which would be identified by persons familiar with Bible literature. Presenting his only evidence, he said,

"... there is much monotony and sameness of the style and expression of the writers that there can be no other conclusion than that the Book of Mormon was written by one writer—and that he was of rather mediocre ability. Such expressions as 'I Nephi,' and 'And it came to pass,' occurred hundreds of times in the Book of Mormon, although the first and the last writers were separated by many centuries of time. . . . Considering these and other points, it is impossible to accept the Book of Mormon as anything other than the product of one man of mediocre ability."¹

Charge after charge has been leveled at the Book of Mormon, warning its readers that it is the fanciful product of an unlearned farmboy. The Rev. M. T. Lamb claimed the book lacked the trace of God's hand and was nothing but a modern fabrication.² Alexander Campbell wrote that the Book of Mormon was the product of Joseph Smith only, as it bore only the style of Joseph Smith's

writing.³ Many other criticisms have been prof-fered, but little evidence has been used to back up the claims.

What of this subject of writing style? Does it offer a means of identifying an individual's writing? Can a certain writing style be dissected and labeled?

Remy de Gourmont, the great French critic who influenced such writers as T. S. Eliot⁴ and others, has claimed:

"... style is as personal as the colour of the eyes or the sound of the voice. One can learn to write; one cannot learn to have a style. A writer can dye his style, as he does his hair, but he must begin over again every morning, and have no distractions. It is so little possible to acquire a style, that one is often lost in the course of a lifetime. . . ."⁵

Style is not "as is sometimes supposed, an artificial trick," according to Painter. "It derives its leading characteristics from the intellect, culture, and character of the writer,"⁶ and "Literary art is shown in the choice of words and in their arrangement in sentences and paragraphs."⁷

I. A. Richards,⁸ Rudolph Flesch,⁹ Norman Foerster,¹⁰ the Modern Language Association Committee on Research Activities,¹¹ and others have claimed that it is possible to determine and under certain conditions to identify style by word counts and the enumeration of phrases, idioms, gram-matical constructions, methods of emphasis, and

rhetorical figures. This method is called "practical criticism"¹² or "technical description."¹³ Historiographers have used this method to determine identity of an author; however, attempts at identification are extremely dangerous, especially where subject matter is not similar and the quantity of material is small; for example, some Bible scholars claim to identify style in merely a few verses of material; this is quite impossible. The investigation of the Book of Mormon described here does not attempt to identify authorship but to determine whether there are differences in style in different parts of the Book of Mormon.

Styles vary with different writers in original documents; but what about the Book of Mormon which is claimed to be a translation by one man? Would the style differences of the various writers show through or would the translation be the style of Joseph Smith? A translator must put his translation into the language of his reader or (Continued on page 46)



	NEPHI	JACOB	MORMON	MORONI
SUBORDINATE CLAUSE	10%	8½%	6%	10½%
INFINITIVE PHRASES				
HISTORY	8	6	8	3
DISCOURSE	3	3	4	3
REDUNDANT CONSTRUCTION				
HISTORY	.9	2.6	2.9	0
DISCOURSE	0	.5	.4	0
ELLIPTICAL EXPRESSIONS				
HISTORY	.3	.5	.6	3.2
DISCOURSE	2.4	6.6	.8	2.3
APPOSITIVES				
HISTORY	5	6	2	3
DISCOURSE	4	7	2	3
PART II -				
BEHOLD	4	4	6	8
AND IT CAME TO PASS	6	4	1	1
RHETORICAL QUESTION	7.5	9.0	3.0	12.0
EXCLAMATION	4	6	4	3
DIALOGUE	37	17	8	12

the results would be in some cases unintelligible. It would appear that styles would not be found to any great degree in the Book of Mormon; however, the author felt that there was indication from the research of Book of Mormon scholars that the book must be quite a literal translation. Dr. Sidney B. Sperry has called attention to the common use of Hebrew idioms and typical Semetic sentence structures.¹⁴ T. W. Brookbank has done the same.¹⁵ Dr. Hugh Nibley has demonstrated ancient Near Eastern characteristics.¹⁶ These studies along

with A. S. Reynolds¹⁷ and others seem to indicate that the translation must have followed the original very closely in character. With this encouragement, it was felt this study would be practical. Style studies by others have been small, and none has been done from a detailed statistical point of view. J. M. Sjordahl noted a few contrasts in repetitions and expressions.¹⁸ J. N. Washburn recognized contrasts in the abridgments of Mormon and Moroni compared with their regular writings.¹⁹ T. W. Brookbank discovered a difference in vocabulary

comparisons.²⁰ Along with these, a master's thesis from the University of Nebraska²¹ has noted some style differences.

In the study described here, only the sections of the Book of Mormon which were definitely labeled as the first-hand writings of separate individuals were chosen for investigation. Quantity also had to be considered in order to get a reliable indication of the writers' style habits. Therefore, the writings attributed to Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni were selected. The reader will recall that the writings of Nephi and Jacob were from the Small Plates of Nephi which were unabridged. The material attributed to Mormon was taken from his book which—if abridged—was abridged by himself, from the Words of Mormon, and the editorial comments found scattered among his abridgments. The portion attributed to Moroni was taken from Mormon 8 and 9, the book of Moroni, and the editorial comments of Moroni in the book of Ether. All of this material was then analyzed and classified as being either *history* or *discourse* in order to keep out any influences which might appear because of the difference in the subject matter.

As another check, portions of the abridgments of Mormon and Moroni were analyzed and compared with their historical writings because of their similarity in nature. Although the historical writings of Moroni were not adequate for an accurate examination, yet some of their trends along with all those of Mormon aligned consistently with the statistics determined from the abridgments. The figures for Moroni's writings were included in the report because the amount of discourse was ample for analysis.

Some of the highlights of the over-all investigation follow.

Wordiness.—Some individuals take more words than others to put over their ideas. Such is the case in the Book of Mormon. A count of words used per sentence (using the latest edition of the Book of Mormon for its modern punctuation) showed Mormon used nearly three words more in every sentence than did Nephi and nearly five more than Jacob. The reader might try to add three or four words to every sentence he utters to appreciate this difference. Because of the ques-

“One step enough for me . . .”

RICHARD L. EVANS



Last week we talked of heroic people, of those who carry their problems, meet their obligations; who forthrightly, honorably, patiently live their lives, serving, sharing, moving forward, facing facts, and not running away. “Most of us,” said an eminent

American, “are living under a strain that human nature never was intended to bear.”¹ All people have problems, and some days, no doubt, the difficulties and discouragements may seem all but insurmountable. And being so very much preoccupied with our own problems, it may surprise us to know the problems and heartaches others have, the burdens others bear. In many hearts and homes there are sorrow, disappointment; in many lives plans and hopes have had to be abandoned or long delayed. Most, if not all of us, have had to reconcile ourselves to something less than we once wished; to readjust, to gather the threads together, to pick up the pieces and save as much of the pattern as we can, and still carry on. The old, the young, the in-between ages, all at times have their problems and perplexities. But our opportunity, our obligation, after all, is to do what we have to do a day at a time and not try to carry the whole future before us. We cannot afford to be fearful of everything that ever could happen or ever might happen. This suggests a line from “Lead, Kindly Light”: “I do not ask to see the distant scene. One step enough for me.”² We cannot see a hundred years or a hundred days or a hundred hours ahead, nor even tomorrow morning. We must have patience and faith to take the first step we can see, and trust for the next step to show itself, and trust that the light will ever lead us to meet each obligation and opportunity, and to know that there are plans and purposes and everlasting promise. Now may we cite some comforting sentences from some reassuring sources: “Keep forever in view the momentous value of life.”³ “The best preparation for the future, is the present well seen to, and the last duty done.”⁴ “Let the peace of God rule in your hearts.”⁵ Move forward with faith. Be not afraid.

¹Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Twelve Tests of Character*.

²John Henry Newman, *Lead, Kindly Light*.

³John Foster, Am. lawyer, 1836-1917.

⁴George Macdonald, Scotch novelist, 1824-1905.

⁵Colossians 3:15.

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tionableness of using punctuation as a basis for reference (there was no punctuation in the Book of Mormon manuscript), a count was made of the average length of dependent and independent clauses. The writings of Mormon remained slightly more verbose even though Nephi's writings contained more subordination.

An example of the abundant clauses which typified the writings of Nephi follows:

"And now, my brethren, I have spoken plainly that ye cannot err. And as the Lord liveth that brought Israel up out of the land of Egypt, and gave unto Moses power that he should heal the nations after they had been bitten by the poisonous serpents, if they would cast their eyes unto the serpent which he did raise up before them, and also gave him power that he should smite the rock and the water should come forth; yea, behold I say unto you, that as these things are true, and as the Lord liveth, there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved." (2 Nephi 25:20.)

Another distinctive feature was the preference of Moroni to use a subordinate clause at the beginning of his sentences. A comparison showed the preferences to be: Nephi, 10 percent; Jacob, 8½ percent; Mormon, 6 percent; Moroni, 10½ percent.

Moroni also contained noun clauses at the beginning of the sentences in a ratio of 4 to 1 over the others.

Infinitive phrases.—As the research progressed, it was noticed that the writings of Mormon contained an abundance of infinitive phrases, such as: ". . . which gave unto me to know that they were prepared to come again to battle. . . ." Average use per 1,000 words was:

	Nephi	Jacob	Mormon	Moroni
History	8	6	8	3(?)
Discourse	3	3	4	3

Other parts of speech were analyzed. Contrasts were sometimes significant and sometimes not significant.

Redundant construction.—While reading the works of Jacob and Mormon, one becomes aware of a strange sentence construction which appears there more frequently than in the rest of the Book of Mormon. First the subject is stated, then a

participial phrase with other additions, then the subject again. For example:

". . . I, Jacob according to the responsibility which I am under to God, to magnify mine office with soberness, and that I might rid my garments of your sins, I came up into the temple. . . ." (Jac. 2:2.)

The appearance of this construction per 1,000 words of material was:

	Nephi	Jacob	Mormon	Moroni
History	.9	2.6	2.9	0
Discourse	0	.5	.4	0

Elliptical expressions.—Jacob 2:20 reads: ". . . because ye were proud in your hearts, of the things which God hath given you, . . ." and 2:15: "O that he would show you. . . ." These two quotations reveal an interesting omission of the typical "unto" in the prepositional phrases at the end. From the table below, it seems quite evident that if Mormon were stating the same thing he probably would have said: ". . . of the things which God hath given unto you, . . ." or, "O that he would

Thanks — for all this . . .

RICHARD L. EVANS



Surely it is gracious and proper to thank people whenever they perform some service. This we would well remember in every household and in every relationship in life. This all of us should remember in thanking others always. Service could be dull drudgery if there were no appreciation, no thanks for it. And since expressing thanks is so important to people, how much more important is our frequent thanks to the Father of us all, the Provider of all, who gave us life and loved ones, who keeps the seasons constantly recurring, and who keeps creation in its course. "In every honest man," wrote a thoughtful observer, "there is an instinctive feeling that there ought to be some relation between the gift and the worth of the recipient. . . . He who receives a gift worthily always asks himself what he has done to deserve [it]. . . . Perhaps the finest part of a gift is the searching of soul which it brings with it; and the greater the gift the more frankly ought the man who receives it to [search] himself. . . ."¹ This being so, we would here do some inner searching, and besides our obligation to all others, present and past, and especially to loved ones with whom we live, we would offer gratitude to God for the rising of the morning sun, for the hopeful dawning of each day, for the beauty of the earth, for fertile fields, for health, for law, for law, for the love of loved ones, for truth, for intelligence, "for the open doors of schools and universities,"² for the God-given right of freedom of thought, of action, and of utterance; for patriots who have helped preserve it; for work to do, for the kindly softening that follows the acuteness of a sorrow, for repentance, for forgiveness, for the privilege of improving. And may we give thanks not "only for finished harvests, . . . for completed achievements, . . . for work done," but for work to do, "for men to lift themselves into the light; . . . for the things which make for the healing of the world; not only for the life that has been lived, but for the boundless life that is to be; . . . for the great open door of the future . . ."³—for the great plan and purpose, for the promise of limitless possibilities, and of life and loved ones everlastingly. "Let every man search his heart and his life and consider . . . how good and gracious God has been."³

¹Editorial, *The Outlook*, Nov. 29, 1902.

²*Ibid.*, Nov. 26, 1904.

³*Ibid.*, Nov. 28, 1903.

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show unto you. . . .”

	Nephi	Jacob	Mormon	Moroni
History	.3	.5	.6	3.2(?)
Discourse	2.4	6.6	.8	2.3

Appositives.—Book of Mormon readers are more than familiar with sentences beginning “I, Nephi, . . .” or “I, Jacob, . . .” These and other appositives occurred as follows per 1,000 words:

	Nephi	Jacob	Mormon	Moroni
History	5	6	2	3(?)
Discourse	4	7	2	3

Leaving the analysis of structure and grammar, we might now turn to the examination of rhetoric.

Six figures of embellishment and three figures of emphasis were analyzed in the Book of Mormon and their uses compared. Style differences were again readily recognized when the quality of some writer’s figures were found to exceed the quality of others and the use of certain figures by some was contrasted by a complete lack of them in the work of other writers.

Metaphor.—Metaphor livens a statement as “he fought diligently” into the more imaginative “he was a tiger in the fight.” The Bible and Book of Mormon would lose much of their color without their metaphors.

The writings of Jacob excelled in original metaphors such as: “. . . the word that healeth the wounded soul.” (Jacob 2:8.) “. . . and those . . . have daggers placed to pierce their souls and wound their delicate minds.” (*Ibid.*, 2:9.) “. . . awake from the slumber of death; and loose yourselves from the pains of hell . . .” (*Ibid.*, 3:11), and many others. Jacob used the metaphor “piercing eye of the Lord” which would seem to set the stage for its use throughout the Book of Mormon. It is interesting that the author of Nephi never used this metaphor. One is found in 2 Nephi 9:44, but that chapter is actually a discourse of Jacob quoted by Nephi.

The metaphors in Nephi were numerous and of good quality. But with Mormon, a contrast in style became very evident. The majority of metaphors were borrowed or at least similar to those used by others and consisted of the usual “. . . seed of Joseph and house of Jacob,” “. . . remnant of the seed . . .,” “. . . have

Christ for their shepherd,” “. . . before the judgment seat of Christ,” and “. . . raised to stand before his judgment seat.” In the discourses and history of Mormon only three metaphors could be called original (not used before in the Book of Mormon nor in the Bible). The term “original metaphors” refers to metaphors that are not found elsewhere in the Book of Mormon or Bible.

MYSTERY OF THE SEA

BY J. ALLAN CROCKETT

*I cast my net into the sea
To search the depths of mystery
Of reason bare and logic cold.
Its length 'neath dark blue waves
unrolled*

*I drew it in expectantly.
Its folds examined anxiously.
But no reward discovered there.
Reason and logic left it bare.*

*Urged on the answer yet to find
I cast a net of another kind
Fashioned of love and intuition,
Of faith and of my heart's contrition.*

*When it returned, before my eyes
Lay flora and fauna of every size,
Pearls and jewels of magnificent
luster,
Shells and sponges, anemones cluster,*

*Myriad beauties of every kind,
Wondrous and varied to astound the
mind,
Came from the sea to tell life's
story.
They each and all proclaimed God's
glory.*

*Such were the treasures brought to
me
By faith and love from the depths of
the sea.*

*Author's note:
Idea from a poem in Spanish
by Amado Nervo*

The metaphors in the writings of Moroni were mostly unoriginal but of excellent quality.

Simile.—The author of Mormon used simile (likening something to something else) about fifteen times more per 100 sentences than the other writers. Striking similes as the following were found frequently in the writings of Mormon: “. . . they are driven about as chaff before

the wind” (Mormon 5:16), “. . . or as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves, without sail or anchor or without anything wherewith to steer her” (*Ibid.*, 5:18), and “. . . the earth shall be rolled together as a scroll.” (*Ibid.*, 5:23.)

(To be concluded)

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