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## Noah Webster and the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract:** Book of Mormon descriptions of defensive fortifications are not attributable to specific nineteenth-century sources but rather to the English vocabulary of the day.



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## NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

### Noah Webster and the Book of Mormon

Matthew Roper

"The Book of Mormon critics," wrote Hugh Nibley in 1959, "have made an art of explaining a very big whole by a very small part. The game is to look for some mysterious person or document from which Joseph Smith might have gotten a few simple and obvious ideas and then cry triumphantly, 'At last we have it! Now we know where the Book of Mormon came from!'"<sup>1</sup> Nibley's observation finds support in a recent article published by anti-Mormon writers Jerald and Sandra Tanner.<sup>2</sup> While the

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Nibley, "The Grab Bag," in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 175.

"If someone will show me how to draw a circle," cries the youthful Joseph Smith, "I will make you a fine Swiss watch!" So Joachim or Anselm or Ethan Smith or Rabelais or somebody takes a stick and draws a circle in the sand, and forthwith the adroit and wily Joseph turns out a beautiful running mechanism that tells perfect time!

This is not an exaggeration. The Book of Mormon in structure and design is every bit as complicated, involved, and ingenious as the works of a Swiss watch, and withal just as smoothly running. . . . The writer of that book brought together thousands of ideas and events and knit them together in a most marvelous unity. Yet the critics like to think they have explained the Book of Mormon completely if they can just discover where Joseph Smith *might* have got *one* of his ideas or expressions!" (Ibid.)

<sup>2</sup> Jerald and Sandra Tanner, "The Book of Mormon: Ancient or Modern," *Salt Lake City Messenger* 84 (April 1993): 5-10.

Tanners' article is largely devoid of merit, it provides an excellent illustration of Nibley's point.

After perusing the pages of James Adair's book *The History of the American Indians*,<sup>3</sup> the Tanners triumphantly announce what they describe as a "startling discovery." According to our zealous researchers, Adair's work contains a passage so similar to phrases found in Book of Mormon descriptions of Nephite fortifications "that we could not escape the conclusion that Joseph Smith either had the book in hand or a quotation from it when he was writing the Book of Mormon."<sup>4</sup> The passage as cited by the Tanners reads:

Through the whole continent, and in the remotest woods, are traces of their ancient warlike disposition. We frequently met with great mounds of earth, either of a circular, or oblong form, having a strong breast-work at a distance around them, made of the clay which had been dug up in forming the ditch on the inner side of the enclosed ground, and these were their forts of security against an enemy. . . . About 12 miles from the upper northern parts of the Choktah country, there stand . . . two oblong mounds of earth . . . in an equal direction with each other. . . . A broad deep ditch inclosed those two fortresses, and there they raised an high breast-work, to secure their houses from the invading enemy.<sup>5</sup>

The Tanners report that they were first struck by the words *their forts of security*: "These identical words are found in the book of Alma!" (Alma 49:18). In addition to this "striking parallel," these forts of security, surprisingly enough, are said to *secure* their occupants *against an enemy*. The Tanners further note parallel words and phrases such as the word *breastwork* (Alma 53:4) and a reference to *the ditch* and to mounds or banks *of earth, which had been dug* (Alma 49:18). "We find it extremely hard to believe that all of these similar word patterns

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<sup>3</sup> James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Dilly, 1775).

<sup>4</sup> Tanner and Tanner, "The Book of Mormon: Ancient or Modern," 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, emphasis in original.

could happen by chance." Since, as the Tanners argue, none of these words or phrases occur in the Bible, "The evidence seems to indicate that the source was Adair's book."<sup>6</sup>

In regard to the above comparison, several observations are in order. First, Adair's description is limited to one short paragraph, while the Book of Mormon references are spread out over four different chapters. Second, when one compares the two texts with each other it is obvious that the words do not appear in the same order—plagiarism might have been more plausible if the words had appeared in the same order. Some phrases are linked in Adair and yet divided up in a disjointed fashion in the Book of Mormon text and vice versa. Third, even where parallel words occur in the two texts they are not necessarily being used in the same way. Adair, for instance, uses the word *equal* to refer to distance, while the Book of Mormon passage uses *equal* in reference to opportunity. While the word *breastwork* is used in both passages, the Adair passage refers to a breastwork of clay while the Book of Mormon describes a "breastwork of timbers" against which earth was banked. There is no mention of "timbers" in the Adair passage.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, both Adair's description and Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon are describing fortifications for warfare and would be expected to use similar English language to describe them. This can be rather easily demonstrated by examining the definitions of words associated with the concept of fortification. To illustrate this point we will list several words that appear in Adair's account with their definitions from Noah Webster's 1828 English dictionary:

**FORT**, n. . . . 1. A fortified place; . . . a place surrounded with a *ditch*, rampart, and parapet, or with palisades, stockades, or other means of defense; also, any building or place *fortified for security against an enemy*.<sup>7</sup>

**FORTIFICATION**, n. . . . 2. The art or science of fortifying places to defend them *against an enemy*, by

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (New York: Converse, 1828), s.v. "fort."

means of moats, ramparts, parapets and other bulwarks. 3. Works erected to defend a place against attack. 4. A fortified place.<sup>8</sup>

**FORTIFY**, v.t. . . . 1. To surround with a wall, *ditch*, palisades or other works, with a view to defend *against* the attacks of *an enemy*; to strengthen and *secure* by *forts*, batteries and other works of art; as to *fortify* a city, town, or harbor. 2. To strengthen against any attack.<sup>9</sup>

**BREAST-WORK**, n. . . . In *fortification*, a work thrown up for defense; a parapet.<sup>10</sup>

**BANK**, n. . . . 1. A mound, pile or ridge *of earth*, raised above the surrounding plain, either as a defense or for other purposes.<sup>11</sup>

**DITCH**, n. . . . The primary sense is a digging or place *dug*. . . . 1. A trench in the earth made by digging . . . for making a fence to guard enclosures or for preventing an enemy from approaching a town or fortress.<sup>12</sup>

**SECURE**, v.t. To guard effectually from danger; to make safe. Fortifications may *secure* a city.<sup>13</sup>

How are we to explain such “striking” similarities between the fortification vocabulary found in Adair’s work, certain passages in the Book of Mormon, and those definitions found in Webster? Did Joseph Smith have both volumes of Webster’s 1828 English dictionary “book in hand” while he dictated that text to his scribe? After all, with the exception of proper names, nearly every word found in the Book of Mormon can also be found in Webster. Must we now acknowledge Webster’s dictionary as a

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8 Ibid., s.v. “fortification.”

9 Ibid., s.v. “fortify.”

10 Ibid., s.v. “breast-work.”

11 Ibid., s.v. “bank.”

12 Ibid., s.v. “ditch.”

13 Ibid., s.v. “secure.”

primary source for the Book of Mormon narrative? Few critics of the Book of Mormon would take such a proposition seriously.

Given the fact that the Book of Mormon is describing fortifications of warfare it should not surprise us that Joseph Smith, an early nineteenth-century translator, should use such words and phrases to describe defensive fortifications of an ancient American group. This example aptly illustrates one of the pitfalls faced by those seeking to identify nineteenth-century sources for the Book of Mormon. Many nineteenth-century parallels touted by critics as examples of Book of Mormon borrowings are, in fact, nothing of the kind, but are simply part of the English vocabulary of the translator's day.