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Textual Consistency

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1 Nephi 1:8 "He saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God."

The general mode of translation used by Joseph Smith in bringing forth the Book of Mormon is well known. He dictated the text to a scribe as he translated the record, going through the text only a single time. People do not often stop to think, however, about the implications and challenges of this unusual and formidable manner of writing.

For one thing, dictating a final copy of a letter, let alone a book, the first time through is extremely difficult. Yet the Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon is remarkably clean. There are few strikeovers, and only minor changes were made as the book went to publication. The vast majority of those changes involved spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and grammar.

Even more remarkable are the extensive, intricate consistencies within the Book of Mormon. Passages tie together precisely and accurately though separated from each other by hundreds of pages of text and dictated weeks apart. Here are four striking examples:

1. In Alma 36, Alma recounts the story of his conversion. In describing the joy he experienced and the desire that his soul then felt to be with God, Alma thought of Lehi's experience: "Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, *God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God*" (Alma 36:22). These words in Alma 36 are not merely a loose recollection of the

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scriptural record of Lehi's vision. There are twenty-one words here that are quoted verbatim from 1 Nephi 1, which states that Lehi "thought he *saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God*" (1 Nephi 1:8). Obviously, Alma is directly quoting from the record of Lehi's vision in which he learned of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. It makes sense that Alma would have known these words, since he had charge of the Small Plates of Nephi (see Alma 37:2), which contained this sentence.

The impressive thing about these two passages (separated by hundreds of pages) is that they were translated independently by Joseph Smith. It is highly unlikely that Joseph Smith asked Oliver Cowdery to read back to him what he had translated earlier so that he could get the quote exactly the same. If that had happened, Oliver Cowdery would undoubtedly have questioned him and lost faith in the translation.

2. Another example comes from Helaman 14:12. There Samuel the Lamanite spoke of the coming of Christ, so that the people in the city of Zarahemla "might know of the coming of *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning.*" The twenty-one words in italic appear to be standard Nephite religious terminology derived from the words given to Benjamin by an angel from God: "He shall be called *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning*" (Mosiah 3:8).

These sacred words identifying the Savior evidently became important in Nephite worship after they were revealed through Benjamin. Samuel the Lamanite would have had the opportunity to learn these words through the ministry of Nephi and Lehi among the Lamanites (see Helaman 5:50), for the words of Benjamin were especially important to Lehi and Nephi. Their father, Helaman, had charged them in particular to "remember, remember, my sons, the words which King Benjamin spake unto his people" (Helaman 5:9). Nephi and Lehi likely used the precise words of King Benjamin in their preaching, just as their father

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had quoted to them some of the words of Benjamin: “Remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ” (Helaman 5:9; compare Mosiah 3:18; 4:8).

3. Another example is found in the account of the destructions in 3 Nephi 8:6–23, fulfilling the prophecy of Zenos preserved in 1 Nephi 19:11–12. The ancient prophet foretold that there would be thunderings and lightnings, tempests, fire and smoke, a vapor of darkness, the earth opening, mountains being carried up, rocks rending, and the earth groaning. The fulfillment of his prophecy is recorded hundreds of years (and pages) later. Third Nephi 8 expressly speaks of the same list: tempests, thunderings and lightnings, fire, earth being carried up to become a mountain, whirlwinds, the earth quaking and breaking up, rocks being rent, a vapor of darkness, and the people groaning. Apparently, one of the reasons that Mormon gave such a full account was to document the complete fulfillment of that prophecy of Zenos.

4. Early in Book of Mormon history, King Benjamin set forth a five-part legal series prohibiting (1) murder, (2) plunder, (3) theft, (4) adultery, and (5) any manner of wickedness. This five-part list, which first appears in Mosiah 2:13, uniformly reappears seven other times in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 29:36; Alma 23:3; 30:10; Helaman 3:14; 6:23; 7:21; and Ether 8:16). Apparently the Nephites viewed Benjamin’s set of laws as setting a formulaic precedent.

Other cases and kinds of extensive internal textual consistency occur within the Book of Mormon. In these and in many other ways, the Book of Mormon manifests a high degree of precision—both as to its underlying ancient texts and in Joseph Smith’s translation. Given the fact that Joseph dictated as he went, the record’s consistency points to an inspired source for the translation’s accuracy. After all, can you quote the twenty-one words of Lehi or the twenty words of Benjamin without looking?

Based on research by John W. Welch, October 1987.