

THE HEBREW TEXT

DETERMINING THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE of the brass plates presents a tantalizing riddle, one that has defied numerous attempts to solve it. This riddle contains several relevant clues, each suggesting a certain linguistic background for the plates of brass. Two of the most important clues occur in Mosiah 1:2–4 and Mormon 9:32–33. A third clue derives from modern attempts to understand how the block quotations from Isaiah and Malachi fit linguistically in the Book of Mormon record. While these three pieces of the larger puzzle can be arranged and rearranged to achieve various solutions to this riddle, there is one piece of

evidence that has yet to be considered in detail. The Book of Mormon is replete with echoes of, allusions to, and direct quotations of scripture—a veritable treasure trove for the text critic.¹ One such brief scriptural echo, which upon closer examination turns out to be a direct quotation, provides compelling information that in turn suggests a Hebrew origin for at least a portion of the brass plates. This biblical tie is found in Alma 7:11, which is a direct quotation of Isaiah 53:4.

In discussing the value of the brass plates to his posterity, King Benjamin left us an important clue about the language of the plates. To his three

And he shall be born of a virgin at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers and being a virgin a precious and chosen vessel who shall be born shadowed and conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost and bring forth a son even the son of God and he shall go forth suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people and he will take upon him death that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people, and he will take upon him their infirmities that his bowels may be filled with mercy according to the flesh that he may know according to the flesh how to suffer his people according to their infirmities, nor the spirit knoweth all things nevertheless the son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people that he might blot out their transgressions and bring to the father of his deliverance and now behold this is the testimony which it is in me, and I say unto you that ye must repent and be born again or the spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the Kingdom of Heaven therefore come and be baptized unto repentance that ye may have your sins forgiven your sins that ye may have faith in the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world which is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness; ye shall say unto your come and far not and lay aside every thing which doth vex the heart ye shall seek ye down to destruction ye shall come and go forth and show unto your people that ye are willing to repent of your sins and enter into a covenant with him to keep his commandments and when it is written in this day by going into the waters of baptism and showing our death thro' and baptizing the same commandments of God from thenceforth the same will remember that I say unto him ye shall remember that I have said unto him he shall have eternal life according to the testimony of the holy spirit which beareth in me and now my beloved brethren as you believe these things, behold I say unto you ye shall know that you believe them and the way that I know that ye believe them is by the manifestations of the spirit which is in me and now because your faith is strong concerning that, ye concerning that this



Left: Portion of the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Photograph courtesy of the Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri. Right: Alma the Younger, by Scott Snow. ©1992 Intellectual Reserve Inc.

OF ALMA 7:11

THOMAS A. WAYMENT

sons he said, “It were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates; for he having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings” (Mosiah 1:4). Initially, we might conjecture that the brass plates were written entirely in Egyptian, but the following verse reveals a clue that might suggest otherwise. Perhaps clarifying which portions Lehi might have had access to through his knowledge of Egyptian, King Benjamin mentions “[God’s] mysteries, and . . . his commandments” (Mosiah 1:5). The terms *mysteries* and *com-*

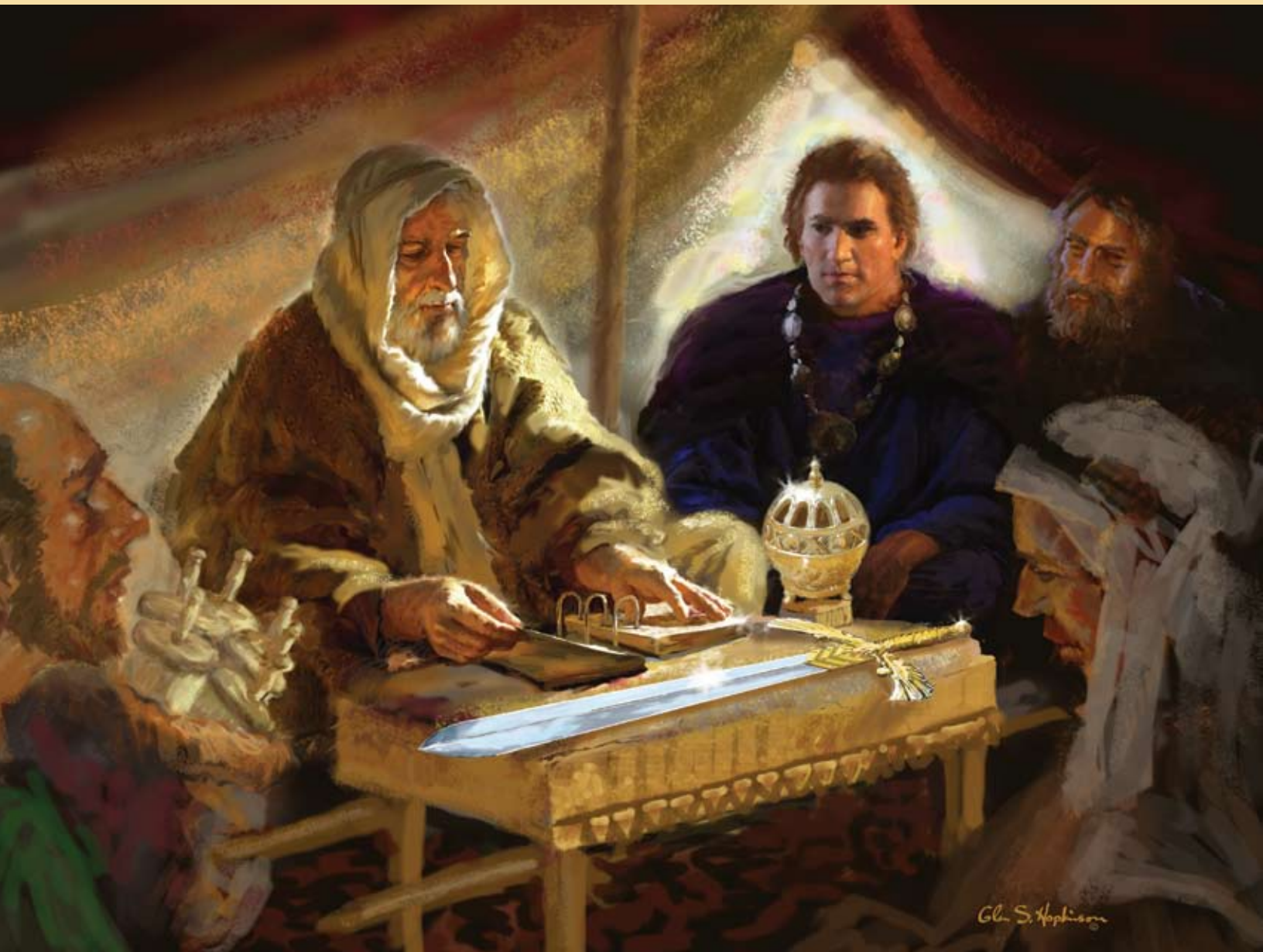
mandments may not have been a reference to the Old Testament text of our day, which contains history, psalms, poetry, prophetic discourses, and the five books of Moses; instead, Benjamin may have made reference primarily to that portion of the Old Testament in which the commandments are found, namely, the five books of Moses.² From the children of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, we might expect the writings of that period to reflect that cultural setting. However, it is difficult to imagine that the words of the prophets, which were delivered in Hebrew, would have been immediately translated into Egyptian. We can only imagine that there was an

elitist faction of Israelites, of whom perhaps Laban was a part, who recorded the words of the prophets in a language other than their native tongue. But there is no evidence from any ancient source for such a group.

A second piece of evidence comes from Mormon 9:32–33, where Moroni effectively ended the Book of Mormon for the first time, not knowing how much longer he would be around, and made a brief comment on the language of the Book of Mormon record. Moroni clearly stated that the Book of Mormon had been compiled in the language known among them as “reformed Egyptian” and that this language had been altered by the Nephites according to their manner of speech (see Mormon 9:32). Here we learn that reformed Egyptian, whatever it may have been, was directly linked to the popular language spoken by the Nephites. It is likely that Moroni meant that their speech patterns had

brought about alterations in their grammar and that it therefore subsequently forced changes in the more literarily useful reformed Egyptian. The following verse contains a fascinating clue concerning the role of Hebrew among the Nephites. Moroni clearly states, “If we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:33). From a linguist’s viewpoint, Moroni is obviously more comfortable with his abilities to compose in Hebrew than he is writing in reformed Egyptian.³ This piece of evidence thus suggests that an altered form of Hebrew was in continual use as a spoken tongue throughout the Nephites’ tenure in the Americas.

Like Lehi, whose reliance on the plates of brass helped him continually remember the commandments of the Lord, and unlike the Mulekites, whose language became corrupted because they had no texts with them (see Omni 1:17), the Nephites must



have had some textual basis to help preserve the purity of their language. They may have composed those records themselves while the language was still pure and fresh in their minds. It is also possible that the plates of brass, or at least a portion of them, were composed in Hebrew and that these records helped establish the dual linguistic heritage of the Nephites. Moroni was acutely aware that his people had “altered” the Hebrew, a suggestion that there was an earlier form of Hebrew to which he had access but that differed from his own Hebrew tongue (see Mormon 9:32).

Although the mystery of the language of the plates of brass remains unresolved, another piece of evidence convincingly points to a Hebrew section of the plates. The incorporation of biblical allusions, echoes, paraphrases, and direct quotations in the Book of Mormon has provided a moment of pause for those who desire to ascertain precisely the language of the brass plates. Many have supposed that Joseph Smith simply used the King James Version of the Bible (hereafter KJV) available to him while he translated the Book of Mormon and that when he came to longer block quotations from the prophets, he simply copied out the relevant sections.⁴ According to this way of thinking, Joseph would have made changes to the KJV text only when there were differences between the Book of Mormon quotation of that passage and the rendering of the KJV translators. This approach works rather well for explaining the larger block quotations and places where there is explicit mention made of the quoted source. But this hypothesis falls short in explaining numerous other biblical echoes in the Book of Mormon. It is incredible to believe that Joseph, or any other man, would have recognized these numerous allusions to the biblical text and then been able to locate them quickly in his Bible. One important quotation of Isaiah by Alma the Younger calls into question not only the assumption that the plates of brass were written entirely in a form of Egyptian but also the proposed method by which Joseph included biblical quotations in the Book of Mormon.

While we may never know Joseph’s exact method for translating the longer block quotations that are found in the Book of Mormon, some evidence supports the thesis that the plates of brass contained Hebrew writings. This piece of evidence is a direct quotation of Isaiah 53:4 by Alma the Younger in his sermon to the inhabitants of Gideon,

which we are informed derived directly from Alma’s personal account.⁵ Therefore this quotation had not undergone any known revision by Mormon, the editor of the Book of Mormon, but instead appears to have been taken by Mormon directly from Alma, who in turn had taken his quotation directly from the plates of brass. Alma introduced this brief quotation using the introductory formula “and this that *the word* might be fulfilled *which saith*” (Alma 7:11). This formulaic introduction of a biblical quotation is a common feature among Book of Mormon and New Testament authors and others who were quoting sacred materials, and it indicates that the speaker, in this case Alma, wanted to draw the audience’s attention to a text with which they were familiar.⁶ In this instance, we are fortunate to recognize the underlying text quoted by Alma as Isaiah 53:4. The version of the text quoted by Alma is quite similar to the Hebrew text that has been passed down to us (known also as the Masoretic Text) but is unlike the English translation provided in the KJV.

What is even more striking is that Matthew 8:17 also quotes Isaiah 53:4. There the Isaiah quotation is set off by the introductory formula “which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying . . .” Matthew explicitly mentioned the origin of the biblical quotation, whereas Alma referred only to the word that had been spoken previously.⁷ We can easily discern that Matthew’s “Esaias” is really the Isaiah of the Old Testament, and with the use of footnotes or lexical aides, the quotation can be identified as Isaiah 53:4. Also interesting is the fact that, even though Matthew explicitly states the source of his quotation, the KJV translators chose to retranslate the passage in Matthew instead of relying on the translation already given in Isaiah 53:4. Therefore the KJV exhibits two different translations of the same passage.

What we have for the Alma, KJV Matthew, and KJV Isaiah versions of Isaiah 53:4 are three different renderings of the Hebrew text. A fourth rendering of the Hebrew Isaiah passage is found in the second-century-BC Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, or LXX.

Enough dissimilarity exists in the English translations to posit that Joseph Smith did not rely on the KJV’s English translation of Isaiah 53:4 or Matthew 8:17 but that his translation of Alma 7:11 is entirely independent of any known translation. The

fascinating discovery comes when the four different renderings—Alma, KJV Matthew, KJV Isaiah, and the Septuagint—are compared to the Hebrew text. Perhaps surprisingly, Alma’s rendering is superior and is far closer to the Hebrew text than any of the other three renderings.

Masoretic Hebrew: Surely he has borne our pains and sicknesses (MT *’ākēn ḥôlāyēnû hū’ nāšā’ ūmak’ōbēnû sebālām*)

LXX: Thus he bears our sins and our pains (LXX *outōs tas amartias ēmōn ferei kai peri ēmōn odunatai*)

Isaiah 53:4 KJV: Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows

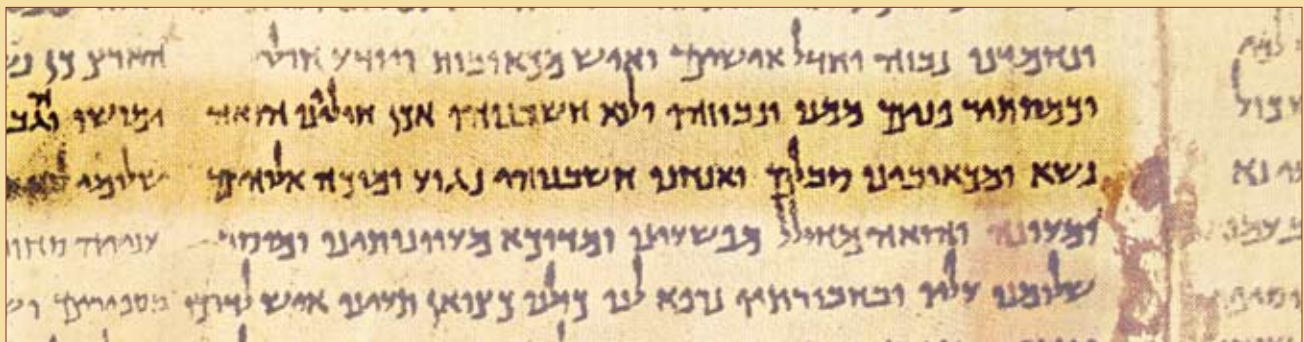
Alma 7:11⁸: he will take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people

Matthew 8:17 KJV: Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses (*autos tas astheneias ēmōn elaben kai tas nosous ebastasen*)

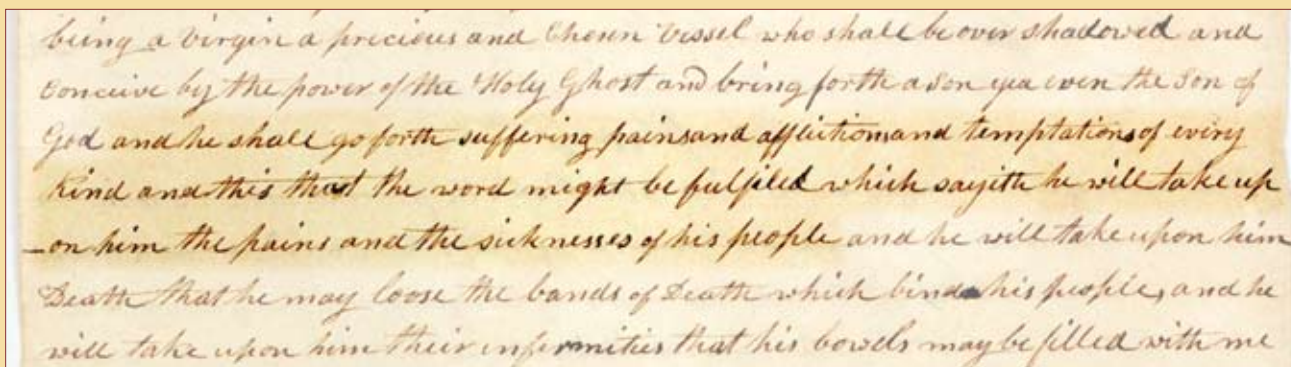
A comparison of these various renderings of Isaiah 53:4 reveals an obvious linguistic parallel between the KJV Matthew and Alma 7:11, although it is not substantial enough to suggest direct borrowing or copying. Both the KJV Matthew and Alma 7 include the noun *sicknesses*, but they also vary slightly from each other with their inclusion of the nouns *infirmities* and *pains*.⁹ Upon comparison with a literal translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Text, it is clear that Alma’s rendering is closest to the Hebrew, followed by Matthew’s rendering. Interestingly, the KJV Isaiah is the most distant translation of the three, and had Alma’s text agreed with it in wording, we would have substantial evidence that Joseph was indeed using the KJV while he translated the Book of Mormon. The KJV’s “our griefs

and our sorrows” is not a literal translation of the Hebrew adjectives *ḥôlāyēnû* and *mak’ōbēnû*, which would be better translated respectively as “sickness” and “pain.”¹⁰

In the KJV Isaiah text, the translators have made a causal connection between the more literal terms given in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, *sickness* and *pain*, by making *sickness* an equivalent for “grief” and *pain* an equivalent for “sorrow.” This roughly equivalent terminology reveals how the KJV translators attempted to understand the original intent of the Isaiah passage. Literal, word-for-word translations are not always the most accurate translations since the literal terms may have very different meanings in the language in which they are being translated. For example, *justice* to an ancient Israelite meant something very different from what it means to a modern-day American. A more theologically loaded term like *resurrection* carries very different meanings among Christian believers today; a translation may therefore attempt to convey this nuance by explaining the meaning of the term with the inclusion of adjectives, giving us such phrases as *bodily resurrection* or *material resurrection* as distinct from *spiritual resurrection* or *resuscitation of the spirit*. For the passage in question, an ancient Greek translation of the same passage by the translators of the Septuagint likewise attempted to understand the meaning of the terms *ḥôlāyēnû* and *mak’ōbēnû* by interpreting them as “sins” and “pain.” Of these texts, the KJV Matthew rendering is quite accurate for its base meaning, but the addition of the very suggestive *infirmities* as an equivalent for “pain” indicates that they understood the pain to be physical, probably in light of their understanding of the atonement. Both *infirmities*



The Great Isaiah Scroll at Isaiah 53:4 (highlighted), which describes the Messiah as having borne the “pains and sicknesses” of mankind.



A portion of the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon with Alma 7:11, a quotation of Isaiah 53:4 that accords perfectly with the Hebrew Masoretic Text, highlighted. Photograph courtesy of the Community of Christ Archives, Independence, Missouri.

and *sicknesses* in Matthew suggest physical ailment or malady.¹¹ Of the three English texts, Alma's is the most accurate in reflecting the exact lexical equivalents of the Hebrew text. For instance, both Alma and Matthew reflect correctly the plurals of the original Hebrew. Matthew more accurately includes *our* while Alma appears to have understood the Hebrew possessive as "his people." But it is Alma's rendering alone that preserves the original ambiguity inherent in the terms *pains* and *sickness*, and he offers to his audience an exact parallel to our modern Hebrew text both in content and without interpolation.

Several conclusions can be reached from these considerations. It is obvious that no author has relied on another at the level of the English text; Joseph Smith did not rely on KJV Isaiah or Matthew for this passage. Of any author, Alma appears to rely most directly on the textual ancestor of the Hebrew Masoretic Text. In fact, the reliance is so direct as to lead one to suppose that he knowingly copied from it, which can be used as an argument to support the thesis that a portion of the plates of brass was composed in Hebrew. It is also clear that the Gospel of Matthew is not dependent upon the Septuagint in this passage and that those two texts (Matthew and the Septuagint) bear only a very weak resemblance to each other.¹² Alma and Matthew are more alike than either of them is individually to the KJV Isaiah translation. This suggests that the two authors, entirely independent of one another, translated the very same text in nearly identical ways, with the author of the Gospel of Matthew offering a more interpretive translation. Finally, the Matthew and Alma renderings may be part of a larger

Christian understanding of this passage. It should be noted that the Alma and the Septuagint translations were made before the mortal ministry of Jesus Christ, while Matthew's was made after Christ's mortal ministry and in the context of trying to understand Christ's atonement. The temporal setting of each rendering of the Isaiah passage may explain the usage of the future and past tenses in the quotations. The setting may have led these ancient authors and translators to consider closely what Isaiah had in mind as they realized that he was speaking messianically.¹³

In summary, Alma's fortuitous inclusion of Isaiah 53:4 in his sermon to the people of Gideon allows us to see that Book of Mormon authors did indeed have recourse to a text very similar to our Hebrew Masoretic Text, at least in some ways. In this particular instance, a Book of Mormon author's rendering of Isaiah 53:4, as translated into English by Joseph Smith, is much more accurate than our modern English translations. It is also unimaginable that the Prophet Joseph Smith, without inspiration, could have translated such a passage into English so that it would be more reflective of our Hebrew text than the already well-established English KJV tradition, which contained significantly different wording. Most translators tend to gravitate toward established and authoritative translations of important texts. In this instance it would be natural to assume that Joseph would have translated the Isaiah passage using the wording of his KJV Bible, but instead he translated it literally, being unaware that it was an Isaiah quotation included by an ancient Book of Mormon author. ■