

## Chapter XIV

# Does the Book of Mormon Quote Shakespeare?

Joseph Smith has been charged by many of his critics as being an impostor and an ignoramus, but strange to say, some of them, such as Alexander Campbell, John Hyde, M. T. Lamb, W. A. Linn, and others, claim that he quotes words of Shakespeare in a passage of the Book of Mormon which we know is credited to Father Lehi. And, indeed, it would seem a bit strange to learn that Lehi could quote Will Shakespeare about 2140 years before the Bard of Avon was born!

The passage from the Book of Mormon in which Lehi is alleged to quote Shakespeare is the following:

Awake! and arise from the dust, and hear the words of a trembling parent, whose limbs ye must soon lay down in the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return; a few more days and I go the way of all the earth. (2 Nephi 1:14)

Some words in this verse will, of course, remind students of Shakespeare of lines 79 and 80 in Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1:

The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns.

Lehi's "hear the words of a trembling parent, whose limbs you must soon lay down in the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return" caused Linn to quip that "Shakespeare is proved a plagiarist by comparing his words with those of the second Nephi."<sup>1</sup> It is strange that a supposed scholar like Linn could find only one alleged quotation from Shakespeare in the Book of Mormon and

then make such a caustic comment without giving the problem due consideration. But then the writer has discovered other statements by Linn respecting the text of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon which show that he did not make a fair and accurate investigation of what he was writing about. The Mormon people have no objections to scholars finding parallels to Shakespeare in the Book of Mormon if such parallels are fairly used. We hold that Joseph Smith translated the Nephite text of the Book of Mormon and that he used the best vocabulary at his command. If such a vocabulary demonstrated a knowledge of works of Shakespeare, so much the better. But we suggest that it would be very difficult to prove that Joseph Smith was familiar with the works of Shakespeare; it would be especially difficult to prove that he was acquainted with the Bard's work at the time he made his translation of the Book of Mormon. To be sure, like other young people of his time, he may have heard Shakespeare quoted at times by different speakers coming into his community.

Many years ago President Brigham H. Roberts of the First Council of Seventy in his *New Witnesses for God* gave a reply to the critics who held that the Book of Mormon was quoting Shakespeare in the passage cited above.<sup>2</sup> He gave two possible explanations for the appearance of the alleged quotation in the Nephite record. In the first one, he suggested that the prophet Joseph Smith might have become acquainted with such phraseology as the alleged quotation from Shakespeare through school books extant, or through itinerant preachers. He might then have employed it where it would express some Nephite idea or thought found in the Nephite record. In his second explanation, President Roberts suggested that two passages in the Book of Job (10:20-21; 16:22) could have furnished the complete thought and even largely the phraseology to both Lehi and Shakespeare. Said he:

It will be observed that the passage from the Book of

Mormon follows Job more closely than it does Shakespeare, both in thought and diction; and this for the reason, doubtless, that Lehi had been impressed with Job's idea of going to a land whence he would not return; and Joseph Smith being familiar with Job, and very likely not familiar with Shakespeare, when he came to Lehi's thought he expressed it nearly in Job's phraseology; and undoubtedly Shakespeare paraphrased his now celebrated passage from Job.

President Roberts' explanations deserve thoughtful consideration. However, there are some facets of the problems involved to which he made no reference. In the first place, his quotations from Job are taken from the Authorized Version (probably because Joseph Smith used it), but *Hamlet* was published some years before the Authorized Version was issued in 1611. It is known that Shakespeare on occasions used the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishops' Bible (1568) and sometimes renderings found in the Prayer Book (1559).<sup>3</sup> And in the second place, President Roberts makes no reference to the date of the composition of the Book of Job. He assumes that the Nephites had access to the Book of Job as written on the Brass Plates which they recovered from Laban in Jerusalem. (See 1 Nephi 4:7-5: 22.) However, many Old Testament scholars date the Book of Job long after the time the Nephites left Jerusalem (c. 601 B.C.). Such scholars would therefore deny the validity of President Roberts' second explanation since, according to them, the Brass Plates could not possibly have contained the speeches of Job.

In the light of these facts, let us give the problem another examination. First, let us look at Shakespeare's lines again, so as to have them clearly before us:

But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns. (Hamlet, Act 3, lines 78-80)

In these lines, death, as with Father Lehi in the Book of Mormon passage, is uppermost in the writer's mind. Now, the question arises, was Shakespeare clearly dependent upon Job for the essence of his thoughts here or upon some other source? All Shakespearean scholars are, of course, aware of the parallels in Job 10:21-22; 16:22 to Shakespeare's lines. Richard Noble thinks that the Geneva Bible version of Job 10:21 is the nearer to Hamlet's lines.<sup>4</sup>

Before I goe and shall not return, euen to the land of darknesse, and shadow of death: Into a land, I say, dark as darknesse it selfe, and into the shadow of death, where is none order, but the light there as darkness.

Noble also quotes the Bishop's Bible as follows:

"Before I goe (thither from whence) I shall not turne againe, euen to the lance of darknesse and shadowe of death: Yea a land as dark as darknesse it selfe, and into the shadowe of death where is none order, but the light (is there) as darknesse." Job xvi. 22: "the way that I must goe is at hand, from whence I shal not turne againe." .... Also see Wisd. ii.1: "in the death of a man there is no remedy, neither is there any man known to haue returned from the graue."<sup>5</sup>

In view of Shakespeare's unusual dependence on the Bible, one would almost feel compelled to believe that the Bard had Job's words in mind when he wrote his lines in *Hamlet*. However, some scholars have called attention to certain lines of the first century B. C. Roman poet Catullus as sources upon which Shakespeare may have drawn. Let us look at two lines from each of three versions of Catullus' "Elegy on a Sparrow."<sup>6</sup>

*The Elegy on Lesbia's Sparrow*

Now to that dreary bourn  
Whence none can e'er return.  
Tr. James Cranstoun

*The Dead Sparrow*

Now having passed the gloomy bourne  
From whence he never can return.

Tr. Lord Byron

*Lesbia's Sparrow*

The wee thing's gene the shadowy road  
That's never travelled back by ony.

Tr. G. S. Davies

These lines from Catullus are very striking, to say the least--and they remind us of Job's words, not to mention Lehi's. Did Shakespeare use them? Our vote would be against his use of them. In the first place, as far as we are aware, there was no English translation of Catullus available when he wrote *Hamlet* and, secondly, it is very doubtful that he was exposed to the Latin text of the Roman poet. If so, we are forced to the conclusion that Shakespeare was dependent upon Job's words when he wrote the lines in *Hamlet* with which we are concerned. This dependence is conceded or suggested by many Shakespearean scholars.

If, now, it be conceded for argument's sake that Shakespeare was dependent upon Job, the problem arises as to whether Father Lehi was dependent upon him also. Did the Brass Plates (as of 600 B.C.) upon which the Nephites depended for their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures contain the text of Job? If they did, then it may be considered reasonable to assume that President Roberts' second explanation, which we have cited above, is substantially correct. But as we have already pointed out, some Old Testament scholars have held that the Book of Job was written late, that is, long after 600 B.C. If so, Lehi could not have been acquainted with Job's writings. On the other hand, we hasten to point out that many Old Testament scholars have held that Job was written prior to 600 B.C. The Roman Catholic scholar, John E. Steinmueller, says:

The date of composition cannot be determined with certainty from the contents of the book. Dates ranging from the pre-Mosaic period to the Hellenic era have been suggested. Neither the pre-Mosaic nor the Mosaic period can be established as the time of composition. Many scholars have suggested the time of Solomon, for during his reign Hebrew literature received its greatest development. However, the golden age of Hebrew letters cannot be restricted to his period, as is evident from the Book of Isaias [Isaiah].<sup>7</sup>

Steinmueller himself seems to prefer a date "before the period of the Babylonian Exile" but during the period of the Prophet Jeremiah.<sup>8</sup> The sharpest critics of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon will have to concede that differences among Old Testament scholars disclose the real possibility that the Book of Mormon is consistent with itself, and that its "Brass Plates" contained the text of Job. That being so, President Roberts' explanation is very reasonable. Lehi did not necessarily quote Shakespeare's words. He simply used Job in much the same way as the Bard of Avon.

In fairness to critics, and in anticipation of future discussions of the problem, we wish to call attention to a particular word used in the quotations by both Lehi and Shakespeare. Let us quote it in the phrases in which it occurs side by side.

*Lehi*

From whence no traveller  
can return.

*Shakespeare*

From whose bourn no trav-  
eller returns.

The word we have in mind is "traveller." It stands out like a sore thumb as far as Lehi is concerned. Granted that both Lehi and Shakespeare were dependent upon Job for much of the thought and phraseology in the lines we have discussed in this chapter, it is probable, however, that the word does not occur in the Book of Job at all. If Lehi was alluding to Job 10:21; 16:22 as President Roberts sus-

pected, one wonders whether the text on the Brass Plates used the Hebrew word for "traveller" anywhere in or near those passages. There would seem to be no need for it, judging from our present Hebrew text. It is true that the Authorized and Revised Versions use the word "traveller" in Job 31:32, but there it is a translation of a Hebrew word whose fundamental meanings are "way" or "path." Only by metonymy can "traveller" or "wayfarer" be made of it. The Jewish Publication Society of America, in its English text of the verse, has this translation:

The stranger did not lodge in the street;  
My doors I opened to the roadside.

We are led to the conclusion that the only word that Joseph Smith might have put into Lehi's mouth from Shakespeare, assuming he was exposed to the lines from *Hamlet*, is "traveller." Shakespeare was doubtless using poetic license when he made use of the word, but who is to say that Lehi was not doing the same? Two or more persons can have much the same ideas, as witness Lehi, Shakespeare and Catullus. It is possible, if Shakespeare was exposed to the Latin text of Catullus' "Lesbia's Sparrow" (see tr. above by G. S. Davies), that he got the idea of "traveller" from that source. But one will have to admit that the literary problem involved is very difficult and uncertain.

My fine colleague, Professor Ralph A. Britsch of the English Department of Brigham Young University, has been kind enough to comment on our problem in these words:

It seems to me that there is a much simpler explanation, one which is somewhat implicit in your last paragraph: In the course of a lifetime of reading the literatures of the Western world, whether in the originals or in translations, I have come across dozens of instances in which authors who were far apart in time

and circumstances have used essentially the same figurative language, without any real possibility of derivation from each other or from a mutual source. For instance, I don't know of anyone who would argue that Aeschylus made use of the Old Testament, in spite of certain striking similarities in thought and language.

I have long felt that too many men in my profession spend their time looking for "sources" or "influences" where none need to exist. It takes no unique creative imagination to think of the hereafter as a strange or far-away land and of us humans as travelers (or journeyers or wayfarers or whatever else) to that land. I would guess that an exhaustive search would uncover hundreds of similar figures in the sacred or secular literatures of the world, none of which owe any real debt to any others, except as part of our human heritage of thought and imagination.

I suppose any thinking person has had the experience of coming up with an idea (whether in figurative or literal language) which has seemed to him unique, only to run onto it later--sometimes rather frequently--in the writings of those who have gone before him.

Notes:

1. *Story of the Mormons*, p. 96.
2. III, 442-445. *The Deseret News*, 1909.
3. Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, p. 58.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 203. Wisdom is one of the apocryphal books.
6. See Quinagh and Dorjahn, *Latin Literature in Translation*, Second Edition, pp. 284-285.
7. *A Companion to Scripture Studies*. Vol. II. *Special Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 165.
8. *Ibid.*