Defending the Faith: Near Eastern languages in ancient America?

By Daniel Peterson
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Critics of the Book of Mormon often argue that no evidence exists for contact between the ancient Near East and the Americas. Accordingly, proof of such contact would demolish a principal objection to Joseph Smith's prophetic claims.

If the thesis of Brian Stubbs' "Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan" is correct, he has furnished precisely that proof.

I'll draw here from two reviews of his difficult, complex book. The first was published in BYU Studies by Dirk Elzinga, who teaches linguistics at Brigham Young University and is online at byustudies.byu.edu. Holder of a doctorate from the University of Arizona, his research focuses on Uto-Aztecan languages (specifically, Shoshone, Goshute, Paiute and Ute). The second, written by John Robertson, professor of linguistics emeritus at Brigham Young University, appeared in Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture and online at mormoninterpreter.com. Equipped with a Ph.D. from Harvard, Robertson's scholarly career has concentrated on language change, the reconstruction of proto-Mayan, and the grammar and sound system of Mayan hieroglyphs.

More than 30 years ago, Stubbs told Robertson he had found "a significant number of cognates that would link a New World language family (Uto-Aztecan) to an Old World language family (pre-exilic Hebrew and later others)." "Two words are cognate," Elzinga explains, "if it can be demonstrated that they both have a common historical source and that their sound (and meaning) differences are due to normally occurring linguistic change."

Robertson admits he was initially "suspicious" of "a wild claim." After all, "the scholarly consensus was and is that among the thousands of languages spoken in the New World prior to European contact" none had Old World connections. ("It is something of a parlor trick among linguists," observes Elzinga, "to find false cognates between any two arbitrarily chosen languages; it is surprisingly easy.")

Since then, though, based on such works as his massive 2011 book "Uto-Aztecan: A Comparative Vocabulary," Stubbs has become "a well-respected linguist" (Elzinga) and "one of the leading Uto-Aztecanists worldwide" (Robertson).

And now he's published "his crowning work" (Robertson), "his magnum opus, a compendium of lexical, phonological, and grammatical data that provides evidence for infusions of ancient Near Eastern languages in Uto-Aztecan grammar and lexicon" (Elzinga).

"Of course," Robertson points out, "it would not be difficult to dismiss the whole of his argument out of hand." For one thing, "all previous attempts to connect any New World

language to European or Middle Eastern languages have been amateurish, even laughable by credible linguistic standards," and, for another, "because Stubbs is a Mormon, his scholarship would naturally be tainted and therefore untrustworthy."

However, "It is an impressive follow-up to his earlier UA work," writes Robertson. "His 2015 publication deserves the same assessment of the data that has been given to his earlier 2011 publication — even in the face of his unusual claim."

"At first glance," writes Elzinga, the book seems to belong to "linguistic crackpottery." It's "dense, self-published, and in sore need of careful editing — none of which immediately commends it to the serious reader." But Stubbs "has … the training and experience, together with extensive accurate data, to back up his extraordinary claim."

"As a practitioner of the comparative historical method for 40-plus years," Robertson concludes, "I believe I can say what Stubbs's scholarship does and does not deserve: It does not deserve aprioristic dismissal given the extensive data he presents. It does deserve authoritative consideration because, from my point of view, I cannot find an easy way to challenge the breadth and depth of the data."

"The scholarship throughout is sound," Elzinga declares. "Stubbs has a good track record of academic publication in Uto-Aztecan studies, and he is just as careful with his treatment of the present material as he is in his more traditional Uto-Aztecan work. … It is definitely worth the trouble to work through this book."

So, has Stubbs proved the Book of Mormon true? No. But, as Elzinga perceptively observes, his data suggest that speakers of both Egyptian and a Semitic language came into contact with Uto-Aztecan speakers at roughly the same time, and that a distinct Semitic infusion occurred at a different point.

"To Latter-day Saints, a scenario immediately presents itself to explain two separate Semitic infusions, but Stubbs is careful to avoid this sort of speculation and to let the data speak for itself," Elzinga writes.

Helpfully, Stubbs has also published a shorter, simpler and expressly Mormon-oriented version of his longer work, titled "Changes in Languages: From Nephi to Now."

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