
POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS

“your envyings, and your strifes” (3 Nephi 30:2)

In English, when a list of nouns is preceded by a personal possessive pronoun (such as *her, his, my, our, thy, your, their*), general practice is to use the pronoun only once. For example, we might say, in paraphrasing from Exodus 20:10, “Thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor *thy* son, daughter, manservant, maidservant, cattle, nor stranger.” Biblical Hebrew, however, regularly repeats those pronouns in such a list.¹ Here is that same passage from the King James Version, which accurately represents the original Hebrew: “Thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor *thy* son, nor *thy* daughter, *thy* manservant, nor *thy* maidservant, nor *thy* cattle, nor *thy* stranger.”

There are scores of instances of this Hebrew usage in the Old Testament. Consider these additional examples:

“after *their* families, after *their* tongues, in *their* countries, and in *their* nations” (Genesis 10:20; see also verse 31)

“*my* charge, *my* commandments, *my* statutes, and *my* laws” (Genesis 26:5)

“*thy* weapons, *thy* quiver and *thy* bow” (Genesis 27:3)

“*his* wives, and *his* sons, and *his* daughters, and all the persons of *his* house, and *his* cattle, and all *his* beasts, and all *his* substance” (Genesis 36:6)

“and *thy* children, and *thy* children’s children, and *thy* flocks, and *thy* herds” (Genesis 45:10)

“upon *their* streams, upon *their* rivers, and upon *their* ponds, and upon all *their* pools of water” (Exodus 7:19)

“We will go with *our* young and with *our* old, with *our* sons and with *our* daughters, with *our* flocks and with *our* herds.” (Exodus 10:9)

“upon all *his* host, upon *his* chariots, and upon *his* horsemen” (Exodus 14:17)

“nor *his* manservant, nor *his* maidservant, nor *his* ox, nor *his* ass” (Exodus 20:17)

“*his* shaft, and *his* branches, *his* bowls, *his* knops, and *his* flowers” (Exodus 25:31)

“*his* ashes, and *his* shovels, and *his* basins, and *his* fleshhooks, and *his* firepans” (Exodus 27:3)

“one shall burn the heifer in his sight; *her* skin, and *her* flesh, and *her* blood, with *her* dung” (Numbers 19:5)

“ye will save alive *my* father, and *my* mother, and *my* brethren, and *my* sisters” (Joshua 2:13)

“The Lord is *my* rock, and *my* fortress, and *my* deliverer; . . . *my* shield, . . . *my* high tower, and *my* refuge, *my* saviour.” (2 Samuel 22:2–3)

“on *our* kings, on *our* princes, and on *our* priests, and on *our* prophets, and on *our* fathers” (Nehemiah 9:32)

Inasmuch as Lehi and his family came from a Hebrew linguistic tradition, we would expect to find this same pattern in the Book of Mormon. And it is indeed found in many places. An exceptional case is found in 3 Nephi 30:2, where *your* is repeated twelve times:

Turn, all ye Gentiles, from *your* wicked ways; and repent of *your* evil doings, of *your* lyings and deceivings, and of *your* whoredoms, and of *your* secret abominations, and *your* idolatries, and of *your* murders, and *your* priestcrafts, and *your* envyings, and *your* strifes, and from all *your* wickedness and abominations, and come unto me, and be baptized in my name, that ye may receive a remission of *your* sins, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Helaman 3:14 gives us another impressive example, where *their* is used twelve times:

But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, yea, the account of the Lamanites and of the Nephites, and *their* wars, and contentions, and dissensions, and *their* preaching, and *their* prophecies, and *their* shipping and *their* building of ships, and *their* building of temples, and of synagogues and *their* sanctuaries, and *their* righteousness, and *their* wickedness, and *their* murders, and *their* robbings, and *their* plundering, and all manner of abominations and whoredoms, cannot be contained in this work.

The Book of Mormon contains many other instances of the repeated possessive pronoun. Here is a sampling:

“*My* friends and *my* brethren, *my* kindred and *my* people” (Mosiah 4:4)

“the goodness of God, and *his* matchless power, and *his* wisdom, and *his* patience, and *his* long-suffering” (Mosiah 4:6)

“and *your* thoughts, and *your* words, and *your* deeds” (Mosiah 4:30)

“fifth part of *their* gold and of *their* silver, and a fifth part of *their* ziff, and of *their* copper, and of *their* brass and *their* iron; and a fifth part of *their* fatlings; and also a fifth part of all *their* grain” (Mosiah 11:3)

“if it had not been for *his* matchless power, and *his* mercy, and *his* long-suffering towards us” (Alma 9:11)

“and took *their* swords, and *their* spears, and *their* bows, and *their* arrows, and *their* slings” (Alma 17:7)

SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT: JOHN GEE



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“for this is *my* life and *my* light, *my* joy and *my* salvation, and *my* redemption from everlasting wo” (Alma 26:36)

“by *their* traditions and *their* dreams and *their* whims and *their* visions and *their* pretended mysteries” (Alma 30:28)

“*their* costly apparel, and *their* ringlets, and *their* bracelets, and *their* ornaments of gold, and all *their* precious things” (Alma 31:28)

“*their* oaths, and *their* covenants, and *their* agreements in *their* secret abominations; yea, and all *their* signs and *their* wonders” (Alma 37:27)

“*thy* faithfulness and *thy* diligence, and *thy* patience and *thy* long-suffering” (Alma 38:3)

“by *our* faith, by *our* religion, and by *our* rites of worship, and by *our* church” (Alma 44:5)

“*his* sword and *his* cimeter, and *his* bow” (Alma 44:8)

“*their* houses, yea, *their* cities, and *their* temples, and *their* synagogues, and *their* sanctuaries, and all manner of *their* buildings” (Helaman 3:9)

“to keep *his* commandments and *his* statutes and *his* judgments” (Helaman 15:5)

“with *his* family, *his* flocks and *his* herds, *his* horses and *his* cattle” (3 Nephi 6:1)

This topic is important enough that additional research is required so we can fully comprehend the use of repeated possessive pronouns in both ancient Hebrew and in the Book of Mormon. And a final note: John Tvedtnes correctly observed that repetition of the personal possessive pronouns in English would be considered by some to be a waste of space, especially on precious writing materials such as metals or leather parchment.² But the possessive pronouns in Hebrew are affixed to the nouns

they modify, thus taking up much less space than pronouns in English. Note how the English translation of Genesis 10:20 (King James Version) takes up much more space than the Hebrew rendering (both are in 10 point font):

These are the sons of Ham, after their families, after their
tongues, in their countries, and in their nations.

אלה בני חם למשפחתם ללשנתם בארצם בגויהם

Notes

1. For discussions of this grammatical convention, see Gesenius, *Hebrew Grammar*, 439; and Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language*, 234. See also Tvedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Survey,” 53–55; and Parry, “Hebraisms and Other Ancient Peculiarities,” 179–80.
2. See Tvedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Survey,” 53.