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Stanford Carmack

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THE MORE PART OF THE BOOK OF MORMON IS EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

Stanford Carmack

Royal Skousen has done an excellent job of summarizing the use of the construction “the more part of + <NOUN PHRASE>” (and close variants) in the Book of Mormon at Helaman 6:21 in his *Analysis of Textual Variants*.¹ In this phrase, the adjective *more* conveys an obsolete meaning of ‘greater’.² My concern here is to compare Book of Mormon usage to that of the King James Bible and the textual record and to place it in its proper time.

The Oxford English Dictionary³ has about 12 instances of the phrase (and several more with the less-common variant *party*, not found in the Book of Mormon). From that source we find that John Trevisa, William Caxton, and Robert Fabyan used it before the 16th century:

1398 OED TREVISA Bartholomew’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum* vi. xiv.
199

Lawe woll that the eldest sone haue **the more parte of** therytage.

c1477 OED CAXTON *Jason* 35

The more parte of men haue no verite ne loyaulte as to the regard of loue.

1494 OED FABYAN vii. 664

He rode about **the more parte of** the lande,

1. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 parts (Provo, UT: FARMS and BYU, 2004–2009), 2976–79 (Helaman 6:21). In this study I exclude the phrase “**for** the more part”, akin to modern “for the most part”.

2. See the Oxford English Dictionary entry for **more**, *a. (n.)* and (*adv.*), definition †1c.

3. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. on CD-ROM, v.4 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).

In addition, Geoffrey Chaucer used “the more part”, “the more party of”, and “the more part . . . of” at least once each in his writings.⁴ So we learn that the usage arose no later than the late Middle English period and that it continued into the Early Modern era. Even though most OED quotations occur before the 17th century, the last-dated example in the dictionary is surprisingly late — 1871. This was a conscious, scholarly use by an Oxford historian, Edward Freeman, apparently well-versed in old historical writings such as Holinshed’s *Chronicles* — heavily used by Shakespeare — which employed many instances of “the more part (of)”.⁵

It is noteworthy that although the phraseology and the sense of *more* in “the more part (of)” are obsolete, the meaning is nevertheless transparent. Thus Freeman knew that his readership would have no trouble understanding what he meant by “the more part of them perished by falling over the rocks”. That is one way we encounter obsolete meaning in the Book of Mormon. Another is that various words persist with modern meanings and the obsolete senses are close and may not be clearly perceived. As a result, we often don’t consciously notice that we are reading obsolete language. For example, such is the case with the verb *scatter*, as used in the title page, or with *detect* at Helaman 9:17.

Besides the above 1871 outlier, the last quotation in the OED containing “the more part of” is dated 1610.⁶ This suggests that the phrase (and its congeners) was characteristic of preceding centuries. Yet this phrase-type occurs 26 times in the earliest text of the Book of Mormon, a book dictated and scribed in the late 1820s in rural America.

The 1611 Bible only employs a truncated form of the phrase — without *of*. It does so twice, and both instances are found in the book of Acts:

Acts 19:32

and **the more part** knew not wherefore they were come together.

4. Here I exclude “for the more part” (three times; see note 1).

5. Davies’ *Corpus of Historical American English* shows the use of the phrase “the more part of” only four times, in a single 1882 book, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, by an English author who was educated in the classics at Oxford and a devotee of medieval subjects and Chaucer. William Morris, similar to Freeman, would have learned the phraseology by studying earlier writings, and consciously employed it in his book. Mark Davies, *The Corpus of Historical American English: 400 million words, 1810–2009* (2010–) [<http://corpus.byu.edu/coha>].

6. There is also an example with “the more party of”, dated 1648.

Acts 27:12

And because the haven was not commodious to winter in,
the more part advised to depart thence also,

Here is how the Coverdale Bible expressed the language of Acts 27:12, seventy-six years earlier:

1535 EEBO A10349 Miles Coverdale, tr. [1488–1568] *Biblia the Byble, that is, the holy Scripture of the Olde and New Testament, faithfully translated in to Englyshe*

for somoch as the haven was not comodious to wynter in,
the more parte off them toke counsell to departe thence,

The principal data source used in this study is *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) [Chadwyck-Healey <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>>]. Many of these texts can be freely accessed by using the provided EEBO number and entering it after <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/>>. The publicly searchable portion of EEBO–TCP (Text Creation Partnership) is <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/>>. Mark Davies provided a very useful corpus and interface: *Early English Books Online, 400 million words, 1470s–1690s* (2013–). I have also derived some of the examples from a 500-million-word corpus of my own elaboration, made from several thousand publicly available EEBO–TCP texts.

We see that Miles Coverdale chose to convey the notion in this verse with the longer, explicit phrase. (Coverdale has the short form in the other verse.) Tyndale had used *many* here:

1526 William Tyndale, tr. [d.1536] *New Testament* (London, 1836)

And because the haven was nott commodius to wynter in /
many toke counsell to departe thence /

The Book of Mormon always matches Coverdale’s syntax in this case, employing the longer wording seven times:

Alma 14:2

the more part of them were desirous that they might destroy
 Alma and Amulek,

Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*
 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009).

Alma 47:2

or **the more part of them** would not

Helaman 6:1

the Lamanites had become **the more part of them** a righteous
 people,

Helaman 6:31

the more part of them had turned out of the way of righteousness

Helaman 15:5

I would that ye should behold that **the more part of them** are in the path of their duty,

Helaman 15:6

I say unto you that **the more part of them** are doing this.

Helaman 16:6

the more part of them did not believe in the words of Samuel.

The construction caught the eye of Edward Spencer in 1905, who thought that it was used too frequently. He concluded that Joseph Smith was more concerned with style than substance — while acknowledging similar biblical usage in Acts.⁷

One can reasonably argue that the King James Bible did not serve as a model for this Book of Mormon language, despite strong evidence that the phraseology was obsolete long before the 1820s. The textual record seems to indicate that Joseph Smith could have known of the old usage only from reading it in two New Testament verses. But it is unlikely that he could have derived Book of Mormon usage from these two verses for at least two reasons. First, had he learned it there, he probably would have used the short, biblical phrase “the more part” in some or all of the above passages. Indeed, in volume 4 of the *History of the Norman Conquest of England* (1871), Freeman employed the obsolete phrase a total of five times, twice using the short form, “the more part”, and twice using the long form, “the more part of them”. So Freeman, who almost certainly had encountered both types, split usage. On the other hand, Smith, who could have read or heard only the short form, consistently dictated the long form. Second, there are phrasal variants in the Book of Mormon that were rare/uncommon during the Early Modern period. We now turn to that evidence.

Significantly, there is one instance of “a more part of” in the earliest text:

Helaman 6:32

insomuch that **a more part of** it had come unto them in the sixty and seventh year

7. Edward B.T. Spencer, “Notes on the Book of Mormon”, *The Methodist Review*, ed. William V. Kelley, Vol. 87 — 5th ser., Vol. 21 (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1905), 37.

The phraseology with the indefinite article is scarcely found in the print record of English:⁸

1494 EEBO A00525 Robert Fabyan [d.1513] *Chronicle* (1533)

In revengement wherof, Cadwaladyr of new destroyed **a more parte** of the sayde provynce.

c1530 EEBO A06462 Thomas Lupset [1495?–1530] *A compendious and a very fruteful treatyse, teachynge the waye of dyenge well*

For trees and herbes haue a parte of life, and **a more parte** of life is in muskylles, oysters, and wormes:

So it was rare in both the textual record and the Book of Mormon. This effectively anchors this grammatical construction to the 16th century, since we don't find the phrase with the indefinite article in later centuries.

There are also two instances of plural “the more parts of” in the earliest text:

Helaman 6:21

Satan did stir up the hearts of **the more parts** of the Nephites,

4 Nephi 1:27

and yet they did deny **the more parts** of his gospel,

Here are three examples of this wording from the textual record:⁹

1553 EEBO A19723 John Brende, tr. | Quintus Curtius Rufus *The history of . . . the greate Alexander*

They buylded Cyties and put in them inhabiters through out **the more partes** of the worlde,

1583 EEBO A12533 Sir Thomas Smith [1513–1577] *The maner of gouernement or policie of the realme of England*

The more parts of them that be present onely maketh the consent or dissent.

8. Beyond these two 16th-century examples, Google books currently gives four false positives from the pre-1830 modern era (14 October 2015): “a more airy part of”, “till a part of”, “a more extraordinary part of”, “and a Close, part of which is”.

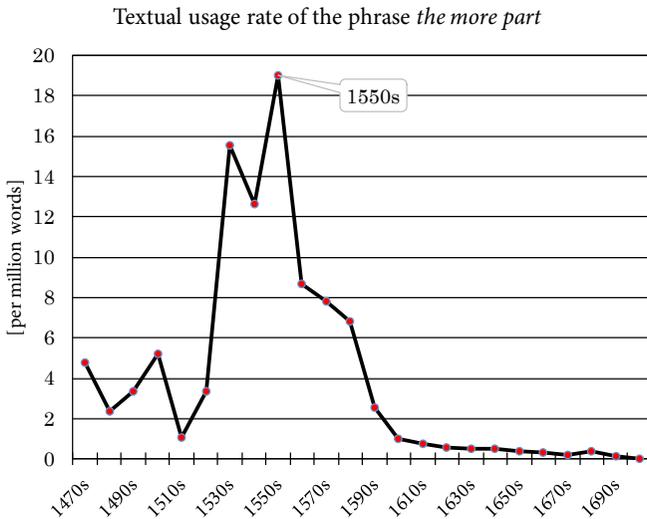
9. Here I have excluded one false positive from the 16th century found in EEBO (a transcription error from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587)).

1680 EEBO A32698 Walter Charleton [1619–1707] *Enquiries into human nature*

The narrow or slender cavity of the Gutts, wanting deep profundity, applies it self to **the more parts** of the Chyle contain'd in it at once:

This was also uncommon Early Modern English usage, and a modern English example has not yet been found.¹⁰ So again, what was uncommon in the textual record, is uncommon in the Book of Mormon. The alignment is solid: the dominant form in earlier English is the dominant form in the Book of Mormon; the least common forms in earlier English are the least common forms in the Book of Mormon.

The following chart shows that the phrase-type “the more part (of)” flourished in the 16th century. The chart represents more than 800 instances of the phrase, with and without *of*. It clearly indicates that by the time the King James Bible was first published, the usage of the phrase had dropped off dramatically. This fact explains the near absence of “the more part” from the biblical text. It had waned by that time; the phrase “(the) most of” had taken over.¹¹ By the end of the 17th century “the more part (of)” was nearly extinct.



10. Two apparent instances from Google books (accessed 20 June 2015) are semantically and syntactically distinct: “the more . . . the more” (1741) and “the more [parts of air] there are . . . the greater the . . .” (1742).

11. The phrase “(the) most of” dominated and grew during the Early Modern period, and the phrase “the majority of” emerged in the 17th century.

Google books yielded approximately 80 hits of “the more part of” in the modern period,¹² but many were duplicates, and the rest were almost all reprints of legal language from the Early Modern era (primarily the 16th century). Here are some of the more important/interesting examples found:

1569 GOOG Richard Grafton *Grafton’s Chronicle*, v.2 (1809) [4 instances]
or **the more part of** hys disloyall people,

1585 GOOG Raphael Holinshed *The Scottish Chronicle* (1805) [9 instances]
Their whole number was esteemed to be about 2000:
but **the more part of** them were commons and countriemen.

1621 GOOG Virginia. William Waller Hening *The Statutes at Large* (1823)
[5 instances]
in such order . . . as the council of that collony, or **the more part of**
them, shall sett downe and direct;
Virginia Colony legal language.

1631 GOOG Edward Wedlake Brayley, John Britton *The Beauties of England
and Wales*, p.156 (1810)
whereof **the more part of** the strangers were prisoners.

1716 GOOG William Jackson *An Account of the Many and Great Loans*,
p.53 (1802)
The choice . . . to be made by his cousins . . . or **the more part of**
them
British legal language from a will.

1782 GOOG Thomas Caldecott *Reports of Cases* (1786)
or in default thereof by the church-wardens and petty constables of
the same parish, or **the more part of** them;
A paraphrase of early 17th-century legal language: 43 *Eliz.*

1823 GOOG Great Britain. Court of King’s Bench *Reports of Cases*
and also to abide such order as the justices of the peace there
assembled, or **the more part of** them,
A paraphrase of late 16th-century legal language: 18 *Eliz.*

The latest examples were close paraphrases (or quotations) of Elizabethan legal language. There was also an instance from the early days of the Virginia Colony. The 1716 example was the last independent instance

12. The search was limited to the years 1700 to 1830 and performed on 18 June 2015.

encountered. Every example was British in origin. Google books thus verifies the obsolescence of the construction; a modern American attestation is lacking at this time.¹³ The phrase “the more part of” appears to have been virtually extinct by the year 1700, barely surviving as legal boilerplate in the British realm.

Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1577), with roughly two million words, has at least 86 instances of “the more part of”, as well as 16 of the truncated form. Of these 86 phrases, 17 are of the form “the more part of them”. Book of Mormon language is much closer to that of Holinshed’s *Chronicles* in this regard, and unlike King James English. The best fit between this Book of Mormon language and past syntax is the middle of the 16th century.

To sum up, had Joseph Smith come up with the language of the Book of Mormon himself, out of his own language, it is possible but unlikely that he would have used “the more part” in the dictation. Also, had he followed rare biblical usage (comprising less than 0.001% of the words), then he likely would have used the short biblical phrase several times, instead of “the more part of them” every time. Finally, if we suppose that Smith was the translator (in the usual sense of the term), then it is highly **unlikely** that the Book of Mormon would have “a more part of” and “the more parts of” (three times total).

Stanford Carmack has a linguistics and a law degree from Stanford University, as well as a doctorate in Hispanic Languages and Literature from the University of California, Santa Barbara, specializing in historical syntax. In the past he has had articles published on object-participle agreement in Old Catalan and Old Spanish and Georgian verb morphology. He currently researches Book of Mormon syntax as it relates to Early Modern English and contributes, by means of textual analysis, to volume 3 of Royal Skousen’s Book of Mormon critical text project.

13. See note 5.

