

Book of Moses Essays #42: Moses 1 in Its Ancient Context: “The Words of God” (Moses 1:1–7, 35, 40–42)

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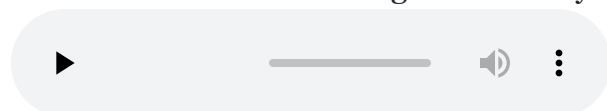
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Figure 1. Moses ascends the mount to receive the vision recounted in Moses 1.

Moses 1 constitutes a self-contained literary unit and prologue^[1] to the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, demarcated by an *inclusio*.^[2] The Latin word *inclusio* (literally, an “inclosing” or “closing-in”) serves as “a technical term for a passage of scripture in which the opening phrase or idea is repeated, paraphrased, or otherwise returned to at the close.”^[3]

Furthermore, this *inclusio* begins with an *incipit*,^[4] another Latin term meaning “it begins.” An *incipit*—or an *incipit* title—is derived from the opening word or words of a text and is typically provided in the absence of an official name or title for a work. In this case, the *incipit* is signaled by the following text: “**The words of God**, which he gave <spake> unto Moses.”^[5] While this seems to clearly mark the beginning of the *inclusio*, one can plausibly argue for a closing bracket that occurs in any one of three adjacent texts.

The first possible closing bracket occurs in Moses 1:40: “And now, **Moses**, my son, **I will speak unto thee** concerning this earth upon which thou standest; and **thou shalt write the things** [words^[6]] which I shall speak.” The second candidate for a closing bracket comprises part of the parenthetical statement in Moses 1:42: “These words were spoken unto Moses in the mount.”^[7] This option works if one counts the words in this verse as part of the vision.^[8] The third potential closing bracket is found in Moses 2:1a: “write the words which I speak.”^[9] Under any of these three scenarios, the Moses 1 (or Moses 1:1–2:1a) text with its *inclusio* establishes a dominant theme that threads its way throughout the early chapters of JST Genesis, namely the divine “word” and its efficacy.

The opening phrase “The words of God, which he spake unto Moses” looks and functions much like the *incipit* of the Book of Deuteronomy: “These be the words [Hebrew, *’ēlleh haddēbārīm*] which Moses spake unto all Israel.”^[10] In both Deuteronomy and the vision of Moses, the *incipit* title establishes a claim of divine authority for what follows. In the vision of Moses, “The words of God” claims divine authority for not only the account of Moses’ vision, but also the subsequent revelation and its inspired textual recuperations. Moreover, the *incipit* (“The words of God which he spake unto Moses”) together with the subsequent temporal clause (“at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain”) establishes a *temple* context for the vision recorded in vv. 2–9, the temptation that follows in vv. 12–23, and the second, grander vision which begins thereafter in vv. 24–41.

Additional repetition of words and phrases within Moses 1 emphasizes that the “endlessness” of God’s *works* are mirrored in the “ceaselessness” or “endlessness” of God’s *words*. This tight genetic pairing begins with the Lord’s declaration to Moses in the first vision, “And, behold, thou art my son; wherefore look, and I will show thee **the workmanship** of mine hands; but not all, **for my works are without end, and also my words, for they never cease.**”^[11] The Lord reiterates and reinforces this idea to Moses in the second vision when he states in the OT1 manuscript of Moses 1:38–39: “And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and **there is no end to my works, neither to my words.** For behold this is **my work** to my glory to the immortality & the eternal life of man.”^[12]

Thus one of the most noteworthy aspects of the divine word/language theme in the Book of Moses is that the narrative directly links the “endlessness” of God’s “works” and “words” to the notion of endless scriptural “words.”^[13] This theme directly bears on what we recognize today as the notion of an open-ended concept of scripture.^[14] The Lord commanded Moses to write the words spoken on this occasion, words with intrinsic sacral^[15] and authoritative

character: “And now, Moses, my son, **I will speak unto thee** concerning this earth upon which thou standest; and **thou shalt write the things** [words] which I shall speak.”^[16] Nevertheless, he also anticipated the human diminution of those written words during a process of textual transmission at the hands of unbelieving tradents:^[17]

A And in a day when **the children of men** shall esteem my words as naught

B **and take many of them** from the book which thou shalt write,

 | C behold, I will raise up another like unto thee;

B' and **they shall be had again**

A' among **the children of men**—among **as many as shall believe**.

As has been noted elsewhere,^[18] the Lord’s words in Moses 1:41 anticipate a future “taking [away]” or diminution of those same words similar to the diminution of the divine “word” anticipated in the Deuteronomic iterations of the so-called “canon formula.” Moses charges Israel: “Ye shall not add [*lō’ tōsipû*] unto the word which I command you, **neither shall ye diminish** ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.”^[19] This type of text has sometimes been called a “canon-formula,” because it “makes it clear that its intent is to preclude both literary and doctrinal innovation by safeguarding the textual status quo.”^[20] Some scholars also refer to it as a *Textsicherungsformel*, literally a “text-securing-formula”—something like the ancient equivalent of today’s “digital signatures” that can be used to protect the integrity of a document.

The Deuteronomic canon-formula, in turn, constitutes the source of the more famous canon-formula in Revelation 22:18–19: “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”^[21]

The Lord’s earlier statements that his “words” have “no end” and “never cease” become the basis for His promise that “they shall be had again”—in other words, re-added. By implication, human efforts “to take many of them” away from “the book which [Moses] would write” and from future repositories of divine words^[22] or otherwise limit them through a closed “canon” will ultimately fail.

In sum, the view of the written “word” presented at the outset of the Book of Moses is that the Lord’s words can be “taken” away or otherwise diminished in their human repositories by human custodians. Nevertheless, these words “shall be had again.”^[23] And, as this revelation will later emphasize, they must be fulfilled.^[24]

This article is adapted from Bowen, Matthew L. “‘By the word of my power’: The divine word in the Book of Moses,” Presented at the conference entitled “Tracing Ancient Threads of the Book of Moses” (September 18–19, 2020), Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2020.

Further Reading

Bowen, Matthew L. “‘And They Shall Be Had Again’: Onomastic Allusions to Joseph in Moses 1:41 in View of the So-called Canon Formula.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 297–304. <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/and-they-shall-be-had-again-onomastic-allusions-to-joseph-in-moses-141-in-view-of-the-so-called-canon-formula/>. (accessed July 20, 2020).

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<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/cast-not-away-therefore-your-confidence/>, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2000/03/cast-not-away-therefore-your-confidence?lang=eng>. Video dramatization:
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Figure Notes

Figure 1. From the video dramatization of J. R. Holland, "Cast Not Away Therefore Your Confidence" (BYU Devotional Address, 2 March 1999).

Endnotes

[1] See, e.g., M. J. Johnson, Lost Prologue.

[2] Ibid., pp. 156, 161.

[3] R. N. Soulen *et al.*, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, p. 85.

[4] From the Latin word, *incipit*, which means "it begins." An incipit—or an incipit title—is provided in the absence of an official name or title for a work.

[5] S. H. Faulring *et al.*, *Original Manuscripts*, Moses 1:1, OT1 Page 1, p. 83, emphasis added by the authors in all scriptural citations.

[6] Hebrew *dābār* can denote both "word" and "thing." See, e.g., P. Y. Hoskisson, *Straightening Things Out*, p. 71. The same is true of Egyptian *md.t* (later *mt.t*).

[7] D. Calabro, *Joseph Smith and the Architecture*, p. 169.

[8] Ibid., p. 169.

[9] M. J. Johnson, *Lost Prologue*, p. 156.

[10] Deuteronomy 1:1.

[11] Moses 1:4.

[12] S. H. Faulring *et al.*, *Original Manuscripts*, Moses 1:38-39, OT1 Page 2, p. 86.

[13] J. R. Holland, *Words*.

[14] A. B. Morrison, *Canon*.

[15] Cf. The Lord's words to Oliver Cowdery in Doctrine and Covenants 9:9: "you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me."

[16] Moses 1:40.

[17] Moses 1:41.

[18] M. L. Bowen, *And They Shall Be Had Again*.

[19] Deuteronomy 4:2; see also Deuteronomy 12:32 [MT 13:1]; cf. 5:22 [MT 18].

[20] B. Levinson, *You Must Not Add*, p. 7.

[21] In recent centuries, the canonical position of the book of Revelation has had the practical effect of making its canon-formula (possibly itself an addition to the text of Revelation) a *de facto* canon-formula for the entire biblical corpus, as viewed by some Protestants who also embrace the notion of *sola scriptura* (“by scripture alone”). However, as Bernard Levinson notes to the contrary: “The association [of the ‘canon-formula’] with any notion of canon ... marks a post-biblical development.” Ibid., p. 6. See, e.g., this statement (<https://zrhaydon1.wordpress.com/2011/12/26/canon-vs-scripture-are-they-different-the-same-or-complicated/>):

Stephen Chapman rightly suggests that understanding the tension between “canon” and “scripture” means understanding the “interpretive value” of these concepts in reference to Ancient Israel (87). How would these ancient communities have thought of “canon” or “scripture”? It seems anachronistic to impose something like “canon” (a closed list of books) on Ancient Israel, especially if books were still “migrating” between corpuses (like Daniel between the Prophets and the Writings). Equally extreme is to believe that “scripture” has no relationship with the constraining aspect of “canon,” as if to think “scripture” meant a free-flowing stream of religious books that moved (and continue to move) in and out of authoritative status depending on the whim of the community.

[22] See, e.g., 1 Nephi 13:26–29.

[23] Moses 1:41.

[24] Moses 4:30; 5:15, 59; 6:30.