THE PROJECT REPRESENTED BY An Other Testament is now a decade old.

In 2004, I wrote up the initial exegetical and theological insights that eventually became the first chapter. In 2007, I finally determined a direction for the larger book project and produced a full draft—the best parts of which became the second and third chapters of the book. In 2009, I did a major rewrite of the entire manuscript, scrapping a hundred pages and writing what would become chapters four and five from scratch. In 2011, I suffered through editing the manuscript, and in 2012, when the book was originally published by Salt Press, I felt as if I could finally be free of the project. Only two and a half years later, in 2014, I find that I am still wrestling with this book, seeing to its republication after Salt Press was acquired by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Thankfully, I will close a decade of work by adding only a new preface to the text, rather than by undertaking a complete rewriting of the book—tempted though I am by the latter possibility. Rather than attempting to fix what I now see as the flaws of the book, I will say just a few words about where this preliminary study of the Book of Mormon will take my research next.

Two questions have been posed to me most consistently about the book, both related to method. The first I will address only briefly: What is the status of the Book of Mormon’s historicity in my work and in Book of Mormon studies going forward? In many ways, I wish I had been clearer about this problem before I finished the book. In it, I presuppose the Book of Mormon’s historicity, but I do not much care about it. The result is that I have faced worries from both those who feel that the historicity of the Book of Mormon must be defended and those who feel that the historicity of the Book of Mormon must be bracketed. On the one hand, some have asked what a theological
reading of the Book of Mormon is worth if the trustworthiness of the book has not been adequately established. On the other hand, some have asked what a theological reading of the Book of Mormon is worth if its faith commitments are not universally shared. In the end, I am far more sympathetic to the second of these worries than I am to the first. To think that the Book of Mormon must establish its historical bona fides before it can be read profitably is, it seems to me, to get things exactly backwards. By my reading, the Book of Mormon both implicitly and explicitly contests modern secular notions of history, such that it does not make much sense to demand that it be defensible in secular historical terms. Hence, if I were writing the book today, I would do everything I could to make it speak to every potential reader. As it is, I worry that it will speak only to the already-believing. Whether I can find a voice in my future writings that will allow them to speak to both audiences remains to be seen.

The second question I have been asked about this book is, I think, more substantive: What makes this book a work of theology? Some readers seem to have been, as they read, waiting for textual interpretation to end and systematic theology to begin. At no point in my work do I leave texts behind in order to begin sketching a systematic exposition of theological truths, and that has made some worry that there is really very little that is theological about this sort of enterprise. I need to establish first that systematic theology is only one sort of theology, and—to be a bit frank—it is in my view the least interesting sort on offer. What I practice here and elsewhere in my work is scriptural theology. What makes it scriptural, obviously, is that it keeps itself close to canonical texts. What makes it theological is that it refuses to be satisfied with either the strictly referential meaning or even the more robust communicative sense of scripture. The scriptural theologian is convinced that the text has not been exhausted until its relevance to life has been investigated. And the good scriptural theologian is convinced that that investigation is infinite, that the text will never have been exhausted.

The point of An Other Testament is really, then, just to ask about one aspect of the life of faith—namely, concerning what it is to read scripture. Ironically, that means that the point is to ask about what it is to do scriptural theology, and I attempted to find answers to that question by undertaking to do scriptural theology—to do, that is, what I did not know how to do. That is a deliberate puzzle. If the Book of Mormon is to teach us how to read and even to teach us specifically how to read the Book of Mormon, then we have to know how to read the Book of Mormon in order to learn from it how to read the Book of Mormon. It is this theological puzzle that animates my entire project here.
What is it to read scripture well? How does reading scripture in the way scripture asks to be read help to transform the life of faith? In answering these sorts of questions, one might also stumble on ideas about the nature of God (what or who is God if he gives us scripture as a guide to reading scripture?), or about the nature of grace (what does it mean to receive scripture as an unearned gift, signal of God’s love?), or about the nature of faith (what is faith if one is to root it in scripture first, and only then, derivatively, in God?). It is, however, far from my own purposes to begin to assemble thoughts on all these sorts of questions into a systematic account of the divine. Instead, I want only to ask what it is to live believingly, and one major aspect of that sort of life is to read scripture carefully.

There is more that might be said about my method in undertaking scriptural theology. I’ve since published a more detailed explanation in a book I coedited with James E. Faulconer called *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Scriptural Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 7–29, but a few particular points deserve discussion here. In hindsight, I regret my use of the word *exegesis* throughout *An Other Testament* to describe the first stage of textual interpretation. It would have been better to speak of *structural analysis*. In the years since I finished the book, I have seen much more clearly how central textual structure is to my theological work on scripture. It is not simply that a few exegetical preliminaries have to be dealt with before one can responsibly interpret a text theologically. It is rather that the key to good theological interpretation is careful attention to textual structures.

This point perhaps deserves a bit of explanation. At any rate, providing some explanation should allow me to clarify what the road leading forward from *An Other Testament* looks like.

I think it is safe to say that life—and especially the life of faith—has a topology. I want to use that word in a technical way. There is a kind of kernel, formally determinate, at the center of religious life that remains constant despite the variety of circumstances in which such a life is lived out. I might clarify this by using the analogy of a game. Take the game of chess, for example. In chess there is a set of determinate rules—for example, how many spaces and in what directions a pawn can move, depending on its position and the position of other pieces on the board. There is also a set of constraints that do not amount to actual rules—for example, the board is only eight squares by eight squares, no more and no less. These rules and these constraints together give the game of chess a kind of texture, for which one comes to get a feel as one plays. That texture is actually formally identifiable. There are formulas and
equations that allow it to be identified in certain ways, even if most players of
chess never learn them. The topology of the game remains constant, regardless
of whether you play with different people using different strategies, and
regardless of whether you play a computerized version of chess or whether
you play with physical pieces at a park. And that topology is, moreover,
irreducible to the rules and the constraints that nonetheless determine it. To
change any one rule or any one constraint would inevitably give the game of
chess a different texture, would make of it a different game. But the texture
is nonetheless not the same thing as the rules or the constraints. Rather,
the rules and the constraints make up the structure of the game, a kind of
abstract differential network of laws that, taken as a whole, fully determines
the topological makeup of the game as it is actually played.

Something much the same could be said for life lived before God. It has
a topology, a texture. One has to develop a feel for good or right living. The
topology of the life of faith is constant, an invariant kernel at the heart of
otherwise fluctuating circumstances, the ebb and flow of history. And the
network of rules and constraints that determine that topology—what consti-
tutes, then, the structure rather than the topology of religious life—is what needs
accommodating if one is ever to begin to develop a sense for life. The wager
of my work is that it is in scripture that the structure of life before God is to
be discerned, and I take scriptural theology to be the almost formal work of
finding structure in scriptural texts and then sorting out how such structure
helps to determine quite fully the topology of religious life.

This needs more clarification, but I first want to head off a certain misin-
terpretation of what I mean. One might take me to be suggesting that the key
to living the life of faith is to follow rules and recognize constraints. That,
however, would be a mistake. To be a good chess player is not simply to learn
the rules and to recognize the constraints of the game. Nor again is it just
to memorize a few good strategies or clever moves. Rather, it is to discern,
whether in a prereflective or a fully formal way, the topology of the game. It
is to come to inhabit the game, as it were, to develop a kind of indescribable
awareness of what is potentially operative in the actual particular game one
is playing. Similarly, then, it would be a mistake to think that living the life of
faith is a matter just of learning a few rules and a few constraints, or perhaps
to memorize a few good strategies or clever moves. Obedience to the laws
of chastity and consecration are necessary conditions for the life of faith, but
it is hardly sufficient. The rules and constraints only help one to develop a
sense for what it is to live well. To think otherwise is to make the mistake
against which the apostle Paul contended in so many of his writings. The structure of chess only establishes the conditions for the possibility of playing the game; it does not play the game for you, although it does refer in a way to the topological contours of the game that needs to be played. Similarly, the structure of religious life only establishes the conditions for the possibility of living religiously; it does not live life for you, although it does refer in a way to the topological contours of the life that needs to be lived.

What I find in scripture is remarkable attention to the relationship between what I have here called structure and what I have here called topology. Scripture outlines and illustrates the rules and the constraints of the life of faith. It provides its readers with the structure of religious life. And it leaves to its readers the difficult work of seeing how that structure fully determines the topology of religious life. To be a good—and by "good" I mean something like "theological"—reader of scripture, it is necessary to begin to see the structures put on display in scripture and to develop an ability to see how those structures determine the topology of the life of faith. The place to begin to find such structures, I am convinced, is to look for what are usually called literary structures in scripture, to see where scripture bears within it certain textual structures that determine in a particularly illuminating way the shape of a life lived in God. One might look, for instance, at the complicated structure of Alma 36—its chiastic frame centered on the question of what it is to know God and its alternating instances of the words thought and memory at its narrative center—and begin to learn something about what it is to be converted. One might look at the detailed structural elements that organize Nephi's contribution to the small plates—its broad fourfold structure, its privileging of certain chapters as "more sacred," its careful deployment of Isaianic writings—and begin to learn something about what it is to read biblical prophecy. One might look at the subtle structural features of Mormon's history from Abinadi to the New World visit of Christ—the departure from and return to the interpretation of Isaiah, the repeated focus on baptism and the Godhead, the telling rival interpretations of certain biblical passages—and begin to learn something about what it is to stand either individually or collectively before God. It is, I think, in structure that scripture does its most crucial work.

If there is a determinate direction my work will go from here, drawing on the best of what I have done in An Other Testament, it will be to look more closely only at structure in scripture and to be all the more rigorous about the theological implications of all such structure. Indeed, as I have revisited the Book of Mormon texts I worked over in An Other Testament, my largest regret
is that I missed so many clearly intentional structures and that I focused on
too many flimsy hints at structure in my analyses. Perhaps I might indicate
just a couple of more recent insights into structural elements of the Book of
Mormon that would have helped me to interpret the text much better. I will
provide just one example from Nephi’s writings and just one example from
Abinadi’s sermon. Hopefully they will together suggest that there is much,
much more work to do on these texts.

Since completing An Other Testament, I have been struck by the incredibly
tight structure of First Nephi. Key to seeing this structure is paying close
attention to the original chapter breaks in the Book of Mormon, which were
dicted by Joseph Smith along with the actual Book of Mormon text. In
the original, First Nephi consisted of seven chapters (designated with roman
numerals): (I) what is now 1 Nephi 1–5, (II) what is now 1 Nephi 6–9, (III)
what is now 1 Nephi 10–14, (IV) what is now 1 Nephi 15, (V) what is now
1 Nephi 16:1–19:21, (VI) what is now 1 Nephi 19:22–21:26, and (VII) what is
now 1 Nephi 22. Moreover, in light of a few unmistakable indications in the
text (see the subtitle of First Nephi, as well as 1 Nephi 1:16–17; 10:1), it is clear
that First Nephi is divided into two halves: the abridgment of Lehi’s record
(1 Nephi 1–9, the original text’s chapter I and II) and the presentation
of Nephi’s own reign and ministry (1 Nephi 10–22, the original text’s chapters
III through VII).

The first of these two halves of First Nephi is clearly organized by structural
markers that alert the reader to a set of five distinct records: a heavenly book
brought to Lehi in a vision (discussed in the opening sequence of the original
text’s chapter I), the brass plates brought to Lehi from Jerusalem (discussed in
the closing sequence of the original text’s chapter I), the record Lehi himself
produced (discussed in the opening sequence of the original text’s chapter II),
the record Nephi first produced upon arriving in the New World (discussed
in the closing sequence of the original text’s chapter II), and the record—the
small plates—Nephi eventually produced (distinguished at every point from
the other records discussed). Each of the two narratives making up the first
half of First Nephi, moreover, tells the story of how a certain set of prophetic
resources came to Nephi’s attention. The first narrative—that of the original
text’s chapter I, today 1 Nephi 1–5—tells the story of how the brass plates
came into Nephi’s possession. The second narrative—that of the original text’s
chapter II, today 1 Nephi 6–9—tells the story of how Lehi’s crucial dream
concerning the tree of life came to Nephi’s attention. By the time Nephi comes
to the “more sacred” part of his record in 2 Nephi 6–30, it becomes fully clear that his intention is to bring these two sorts of prophecy precisely into relation: the writings of Isaiah as contained on the brass plates and the dream of Lehi as substantially expanded in his own apocalyptic experience. The first half of First Nephi is clearly meant just to provide the necessary stories of how these two sources of prophecy came into Nephi’s ambit.

The second half of First Nephi has a more complicated but closely related structure. What were originally its first two chapters (chapters III and IV of the original text of First Nephi) and what were originally its last two chapters (chapters VI and VII of the original text of First Nephi) clearly mirror one another. (Sandwiched between them is the narrative that takes his family from the Old to the New World—originally chapter V, today 1 Nephi 16:1–19:21.) In the former, Nephi experiences his own expansive version of Lehi’s dream (originally chapter III, today 1 Nephi 10–14) and then explains that dream to his brothers (originally chapter IV, today 1 Nephi 15); in the latter, Nephi reads from the brass plates Isaiah text (originally chapter VI, today 1 Nephi 19:22–21:26) and then explains that text to his brothers (originally chapter VII, today 1 Nephi 22). Here the focal points of the two narratives from the first half of First Nephi are picked up again: the brass plates retrieved in the original chapter I are the focus in the original chapters VI (where they are read) and VII (where they are interpreted), and the dream had by Lehi in the original chapter II is the focus in the original chapters III (where it is experienced by Nephi) and IV (where it is interpreted). In each case, moreover, each of the prophetic resources acquired in the first half of First Nephi is used to secure the interpretation of the other. Nephi claims in 1 Nephi 15:20 that he used the brass plates writings of Isaiah to assist in his interpretation of his father’s dream, and he cites in 1 Nephi 22:3 his own visionary experience when he goes about the task of interpreting Isaiah for his brothers. Long before the “more sacred” portion of his record, Nephi is intermingling his apocalyptic expansion of Lehi’s dream and the writings of Isaiah found on the brass plates, preparing his readers for what he will be doing in Second Nephi. From the very beginning, remarkably intricate structures set in order Nephi’s larger theological intentions and assist the reader in coming to see the significance of Nephi’s writings.

I am afraid I have assembled far too much information in the preceding paragraphs for any of it to be terribly useful. I hope nonetheless to have begun to make clear just how intensely and intentionally structured First Nephi is,
far more rigorously and securely than much of what I trace in my analyses in *An Other Testament*. This structure needs to be investigated more closely, its implications traced in detail. Its discovery, I think, requires revisions to a number of my earlier claims—concerning Nephi’s larger purposes, concerning the division between First and Second Nephi, concerning the placement of 1 Nephi 19:1–6, concerning the development of Nephi’s intentions, and so on. For the moment, however, let me leave all of these details in their rough-hewn state and turn to Abinadi.

In work I have undertaken since *An Other Testament* on Abinadi’s sermon, I have realized how much more careful Abinadi’s handling of Isaiah is than I originally saw. If one tracks Abinadi’s quotations of and allusions to Isaiah 53—which, of course, Abinadi quotes in its entirety in Mosiah 14—a clear pattern emerges, with Abinadi following the basic contours of the story told in Isaiah 53 in rather strict order. In the verses leading up to the quotation of Isaiah 53, Abinadi alludes in succession to verses 1 and 2 of Isaiah 53 (see Mosiah 13:33–34), followed by a direct quotation from verse 7 meant to summarize the poem as a whole (see Mosiah 13:35). After quoting Isaiah 53 in its entirety and then following it with his theologically complicated analysis of Christ’s roles as father and son, Abinadi alternates allusions to and quotations of Isaiah 53, first summarizing verses 3–6 (see Mosiah 15:5), then quoting verse 7 (see Mosiah 15:6), then summarizing verses 8b–10a (see Mosiah 15:7), and finally quoting directly from verses 11–12 (see Mosiah 15:8–9). This careful and apparently systematic review of the Isaianic poem is clearly meant to set up Abinadi’s more detailed analysis of the only two lines of the poem not addressed in the review: the question “Who shall declare his generation?” from verse 8a, and the affirmation that the suffering servant “shall see his seed” from verse 10b.

It seems clear that Abinadi takes “his generation” to refer to the father-son relation operative in Christ’s earthly appearance, and it is unmistakably clear that he takes “his seed” to refer to both the prophets who declare that “generation” and the faithful who receive the prophets’ declaration. Coupling generation (the intensely difficult weave of father and son in the origins of one who is fully man and fully God) and seed (the joint community of the declaring and the receiving), Abinadi provides a remarkably novel interpretation of Isaiah’s poem. Moreover, this careful extraction from Isaiah 53 allows Abinadi to distinguish between two interpretive tasks he feels he has received from Noah’s priests. Rather than interpreting all of Isaiah 52:7–10 at once, as requested by the priests, Abinadi takes as his task first to interpret Isaiah
52:7 and then, in a separate gesture, to interpret Isaiah 52:8–10. He clearly takes as his key to the interpretation of just Isaiah 52:7 the Isaianic question concerning the declaration of the Messiah’s origins. Those who bring good tidings and publish peace are, precisely, those who declare the theologically difficult generation of Christ. And then he just as clearly takes as his key to the interpretation of Isaiah 52:8–10 the Isaianic affirmation that the Messiah will see his seed. Those who will see eye to eye when the Messiah’s generation is declared are the prophets and their faithful followers, those who declare and those who receive the message concerning the Messiah’s generation.

These structural details, intricate though they are, make much clearer how attentive and virtuosic Abinadi’s interpretation of the Isaianic text really is. Rather than simply taking the textual proximity between Isaiah 52:7–10 and Isaiah 53 as a motivation for interpreting the former in a Christological way, Abinadi is presented in the text as working out a detailed and astoundingly nuanced interpretation of the text of Isaiah 53, extracting from that text two closely related thematic elements, and then using them to interpret distinct parts of Isaiah 52:7–10, but interconnected in a coherent whole. Closer attention to the structural details reveals a kind of theological intensity and interpretive genius that is far too easily missed if structure is set to one side.

Here again I worry that I have assembled far too much information in far too little space to make it accessible and useful. Again, though, I hope I have nonetheless made clear how much more detailed structural work remains to be done on the texts I address in *An Other Testament*. Again, I suspect that closer reading of these passages and closer investigation of the relevant structures would force me to alter some of my earlier claims. I would at the very least need to do away with any hints in my presentation that Abinadi was less than impressive in his handling of Isaiah’s writings than his predecessors. I would also, however, need to work over rather heavily my detailed analyses of key passages throughout Abinadi’s sermon, especially those in the last part of Mosiah 13, where Abinadi sets up his quotation of Isaiah 53.

There is, I think, a good deal more work to do on the Book of Mormon, as much at the level of the text as at the level of theological study, where I attempt to focus my own efforts. Whether that remarkable volume of scripture will receive its due soon enough I cannot predict. If my own work assists to pave the way to such work, published under my name or another’s, I will call what I have done a real success.