Preface to the First Edition

Put simply, this book is about how the Book of Mormon teaches us to read the Book of Mormon. Such simplicity, though, is a bit misleading because my aim here is to see, in full recognition of its complexity, how the Book of Mormon teaches us to read the Book of Mormon.

There is, moreover, a very particular kind of complexity that interests me. Hugh Nibley, in books such as *Lehi in the Desert* and *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, has shown the profoundly complex historical background that is on display in the Book of Mormon. More recently, Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* has compellingly shown the immense literary complexity of the Book of Mormon. What I am after, though, is neither historical nor literary. I am interested in the Book of Mormon’s specifically theological complexity.

By theological complexity I do not primarily mean that the ideas presented in the Book of Mormon are complex, though sometimes they are. Rather, I mean that it can be difficult to bring into focus some of the Book of Mormon’s overarching theological claims, given the book’s structural complexity.

There are two aspects of the Book of Mormon that render its theology complex. First, aspects of the book’s theology may remain obscure if readers are not attentive to how its authors arrange the ideas presented. At times these ideas are woven into the arrangement of carefully built stories; at times they depend on larger textual structures that can be difficult to see. Embedded in these larger structures, many of the Book of Mormon’s ideas draw meaning and especially nuance from their context.

Second, what the Book of Mormon has to say may be missed if readers are not attentive to the fact that the ideas it presents are woven into a real—and therefore anything but tidy—history. Anyone acquainted with the history of ideas knows how ideas change with time and circumstance.
Theological ideas in the Book of Mormon are no exception. Both of these difficulties are taken into consideration—often in great detail—in this book.

Since my aim is to look at how the Book of Mormon itself teaches us to read the Book of Mormon, I begin with an examination of Alma 36, where one Nephite prophet (Alma) reads another Nephite prophet (Lehi). There, Alma the Younger recounts his conversion experience to his son, Helaman, but he does so, importantly, by weaving his personal story into a reading of 1 Nephi 1. Alma’s weaving together of a scriptural text with his own conversion experience exemplifies how the Book of Mormon should be read.

In this same chapter, Alma even names the kind of reading he models: typology. As Alma develops it, typology is a question of how events—singular, unpredictable experiences with the divine—interrupt the natural flow of history and so allow for the past to be understood in new, redemptive ways. Put in Alma’s own words, typology is a question of allowing a new thought to rework memory, so that it becomes possible to advance in the knowledge of God.

From Alma’s own reading of Nephite scripture, I gather that the Book of Mormon should be read typologically. But it is necessary to put a finer point on typology, and for that it is necessary to look elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. There are explicit discussions of typology at several points in the Book of Mormon, but if one pays attention to the structural and historical complexities mentioned above, it becomes clear that typology is not a uniform concept in Nephite scripture. Rather, the Book of Mormon presents two distinct understandings of typology. One of these is worked out at the beginning of the Nephite tradition by Nephi, son of Lehi. The other emerges centuries later in the teachings of Abinadi, the martyred prophet.

The bulk of this book is devoted to examining the textual structures and historical entanglements that contextualize and complicate what Nephi and Abinadi have to say about typology. This interpretive work is made even more interesting by the fact that both Nephi and Abinadi develop their respective notions of typology in dialogue with Isaiah.

For Nephi, Isaiah was a prophet with a message about the house of Israel, for the house of Israel. As a result, Nephi takes Isaiah’s writings as a kind of template for making sense of Israel’s actual historical experience, wherever and whenever Israel may be. This approach to typology is what Nephi calls “likening” Isaiah’s writings. Thus, though the children of Lehi are located in a time and place that are drastically different from the time and place of Isaiah’s original prophecy, they can, according to Nephi, still assume that the writings of Isaiah provide a kind of covenant framework
for making sense of their own historical experience. Fueled by this understanding of typology, Nephi develops a near obsession with Isaiah and pays close attention even to the theologically significant internal arrangement of materials in the book of Isaiah.

According to Abinadi, on the other hand, Isaiah, along with all other prophets, was focused less on the singular history of Israel than on the event of Christ’s mortal ministry. Abinadi thus ignores, for instance, the importance of Isaiah’s internal arrangement in order to give a strictly Christological reading of Isaiah’s writings, one that sharply diverges from Nephi’s way of reading the prophet. For Abinadi, Isaiah’s prophecies are primarily about what would happen in the meridian of time. Consequently, all else Isaiah appears to say must be read in light of the coming Christ event and with an eye to the consequences of that event for each believer—even when, on his own terms, Isaiah seems clearly to be focused on eschatological or covenantal history.

Thus both Nephi and Abinadi formulate their respective approaches to typology in the course of reading Isaiah. But, because they understand the task of (Isaiah’s) prophecy so distinctively, they arrive at quite different understandings of typology. For both, typology is a question of knowing how to read scripture in a uniquely Christian way, but what is to be read typologically is different for each of them. This seems, in the end, to be a consequence of Nephi’s having discovered his understanding of typology in the complexly structured writings of Isaiah, while Abinadi apparently brought his understanding of typology to the writings of Isaiah. More explicitly, Nephi draws from Isaiah an understanding of the relationship between the Law of Moses and the Messiah that fits Isaiah’s heavy emphasis on the Israelite covenant, while Abinadi imposes on Isaiah an understanding of the relationship between the Law and the Messiah that effectively ignores Isaiah’s focus on covenantal questions.

Two models, then: one focused principally on connecting Christ to the world historical unfolding of the Israelite covenant, the other focused principally on connecting Christ to the everyday life of the individual believer. But how is one to decide between them—if indeed they are to be decided between? Two clues in the Book of Mormon point the way. First, crucially, during his visit to the Lehites in Third Nephi, Christ himself intervenes, calling for a kind of return (from Abinadi’s) to Nephi’s approach to scripture. Second and by way of confirmation, a narrative allusion to Exodus 32–34 in the middle of Abinadi’s own speech suggests that the Book of Mormon as a whole is meant to elevate Nephi’s understanding of typology to a privileged place, though without thereby disparaging Abinadi’s understanding.
In light of these indications, I draw conclusions about how the Book of Mormon—according to the Book of Mormon itself—should be read. Granted the privilege given to Nephi’s approach to scripture over that of Abinadi, and given Nephi’s deep interest in Isaiah’s emphasis on the Israelite covenant, the Book of Mormon asks us to privilege readings of it that stress the centrality of Israel and its covenant. If readers of the Book of Mormon are to read the book as the book itself suggests it should be read, they must pay close attention to what the Book of Mormon says—and enacts—regarding the ancient covenant given to Israel. Not only are readers to be converted by the Book of Mormon to the everyday life of a Christian, they are, in full fidelity to what the Book of Mormon accomplishes as an event, also typologically to convert the whole of world history so that it too is rooted in and revolves around the covenant.

Let me conclude this preface with an aside to my friends in (the justifiably secularized field of) Mormon studies, friends who are likely to feel a complex tension in this book. I recognize the real need to produce serious work on the Book of Mormon that can speak as much to non-Mormon interests as to Mormon interests, and I have produced and will continue to produce such work. This book, however, hovers somewhere between such work and what might be called more traditional (if not more conservative) Mormon scholarship. Thus while I here ask a question that is of as much interest to readers of the Book of Mormon who have no Mormon convictions as to believing Latter-day Saints, and while I believe that I ultimately provide an answer to that question that can speak to both kinds of reader, the road I travel in moving from question to answer is paved with commitments that mark my faith commitments. (I therefore consistently assume the historicity of the Book of Mormon throughout the book, occasionally speculating about authorial motives, historical circumstances behind narrated events, and the like.) I want to assure readers who approach the book from a more secular or secularized point of view that I express such commitments, always implicitly, not in order to alienate either the non-Mormon or the academic, but because I mean to speak as much to the average Latter-day Saint as to scholars, whether Mormon or not. By adding this note, I do not mean to apologize for my faith, only to make clear what the present book does and does not attempt to do. And I hope, not without some trepidation, that scholars of Mormonism generally have something to learn from a believing Mormon theologian hard at work on scripture.