Introduction

Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*—a text that is itself a book-length prayer—opens with a series of difficult questions about the nature of prayer:

“Grant me, Lord, to know and understand whether a man is first to pray to you for help [or] whether he must know you before he can call you to his aid. If he does not know you, how can he pray to you? For he may call for some other help, mistaking it for yours. Or are men to pray to you and learn to know you through their prayers? Only, how are they to call upon the Lord until they have learned to believe in him? And how are they to believe in him without a preacher to listen to?”

That Augustine raises such complex and self-aware questions about prayer as he prays is significant. Indeed, it may only be in the act of praying that one can genuinely ask whether prayer is possible. Prayer, for Augustine, makes room for a particular kind of introspection, one that can question both the nature and function of prayer and the actions and intentions of the petitioner.

The papers in this volume attempt to do something similar to what Augustine undertakes in his prayer. They ask what it means to read scripture and, crucially, they address this question through the actual work of reading scripture. In addition to the obvious role that scripture plays in the life of devotion, reading scripture can also give us room to pose questions both about the nature and function of scripture and about the relationship between the intentions of the text and the intentions of the reader.

Though scholarly in tone, the papers collected here do not reflect a “merely” academic approach to the Book of Mormon. Though they raise complex theoretical questions about what it means to read the Book of Mormon, they do so only as a by-product of their attempt to seriously engage Mormon scripture. And, by raising reflective questions about scripture within the context of reading scripture itself, they are grounded in an honest devotion to the texts. In short, while many of the questions addressed may appear academic, they are driven by pressing and practical commitments.

This volume is especially interested in asking what it means to read Mormon scripture in a Mormon context. To this end, the authors collectively selected a scriptural text that both performs and comments on what it means to read scripture. Second Nephi 26–27 is remarkable for doing precisely this. In these chapters, Nephi carefully reads the writings of Isaiah (specifically Isaiah 29) in a multifaceted process that involves copying, interpreting, contextualizing, repurposing, recontextualizing, and prophesying—often all at once. Nephi’s own rereading of Isaiah’s original text powerfully illuminates what it means to actively but faithfully engage in the difficult and unavoidably creative work of reading scripture.

Of course, this volume is hardly the first to ask about the place and function of Isaiah in Nephi’s writings. Because Isaiah is generally regarded as a difficult author and because the Book of Mormon nonetheless endorses Isaiah’s writings without reserve, there have been more books published over the years on Isaiah’s role in the Book of Mormon than on any other major aspect of this New World book of scripture. However, where most of these publications aim at “making Isaiah easier” or at helping Latter-day Saints to “get through Isaiah,” the essays in this volume arguably complicate Isaiah. These papers, rather than trying to speed things up, try to help readers slow down and get stuck in Isaiah long enough to consider what Nephi’s own reading of Isaiah can teach us about reading scripture in general.
Given the complexity of the text under discussion (2 Nephi 26–27), it was clear that the chapters demanded, first of all, a close, careful, and extended reading. The Mormon Theology Seminar (http://mormontheologyseminar.org) provided us with an ideal setting in which to do this work.

The Mormon Theology Seminar is an independent, scholarly project that fosters short-term, collaborative seminars focused on reading and reporting about specific scriptural texts. These seminars provide a setting where a group of researchers can systematically work through a text, write and present papers based on their research at a public conference, and then organize those papers, along with a summary report of the group’s findings, into a published volume.

With the support of the Mormon Theology Seminar, this seminar was organized under the title “Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah.” Over the course of three months of collaborative analysis, we worked through the entire text. (The whole of this verse-by-verse, group analysis is available as a free PDF on the Seminar website.) We then presented our findings at a conference held on April 15, 2009, at Brigham Young University. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Mormon Theology Seminar, the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding at Brigham Young University, and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. We are grateful for the support of these institutions, and we are pleased to present our findings in published form.

The contents of this volume can be categorized as follows. We begin with the Summary Report, a collaborative document designed to orient the reader to the overarching questions, themes, and conclusions that emerged from the seminar’s discussions. As do all seminars sponsored by the Mormon Theology Seminar, ours began by formulating several key questions designed to focus our dialogue and organize its eventual findings. The Summary Report contains the seminar’s tentative conclusions.

Following the Summary Report, we present the conference papers themselves. These papers, while the work of individual authors, developed out of the seminar discussions and exhibit the wide range of thought and interests provoked by the text.

Joseph Spencer’s paper addresses an important preliminary question: what drew Nephi’s attention to the writings of Isaiah in the first place? Through a detailed analysis of 2 Nephi 26:33–27:6, Spencer unearths a series of theological concerns shared by Nephi and Isaiah. Heather and Grant Hardy follow with a comprehensive overview of Nephi’s editorial methodology in 2 Nephi 26–27. Comparing Nephi’s handling of Isaiah 29 to Mozart’s handling of a musical theme, they demonstrate the close and careful style of Nephi’s interpretive work. Jenny Webb’s contribution then explores some of the philosophical and theological implications of Nephi’s interpretive methodology. Webb argues that Nephi’s surprising refusal, in 2 Nephi 26–27, to attribute to their author the words he borrows directly from Isaiah serves as a key for making theological sense of Nephi’s approach to reading scripture.

The remaining texts address in more detail the specifics of 2 Nephi 26–27. Julie Frederick takes up the image of the “seal” in the intertwined texts of Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 26–27. Asking the deceptively simple question of what Nephi has in mind with the word seal, Frederick demonstrates the effective impossibility of assuming merely physical or material referents for terms in Nephi’s prophecy. George Handley, in turn, complicates the question of “metaphoricity” in Nephi’s text and in scripture more generally. Handley examines how scriptural texts structurally “liken” themselves in a way that anticipates and invites later readers to actively do the same. Finally, Kimberly Berkey concludes the series by addressing the influence of 2 Nephi 26–27 in the larger text of the Book of
Mormon. Taking a detailed look at Helaman 5, Berkey argues that Nephi’s handling of Isaiah influenced the historiographic style of later authors and editors of the Book of Mormon.

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