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Missing the Mark

Paul Y. Hoskisson

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account, whether it's my son giving me graduation reminiscences, today, or whether you think back to something significant that happened on your wedding day, when have you sat down and written the whole story? It's going to be a part of the story no matter what. And that's the intrinsic problem with the testimonies of Joseph and the first vision."

But Anderson said we should ask What's the point? "The point is that the Father introduced the Son, the Son gave the message, and that meshes with the other accounts. The First Vision is a beautiful and marvelous experience."

Missing the Mark

In teaching Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University over the past quarter century, I have rarely found a student, whether true freshman or returned missionary, who knows what the word *mark* means in Jacob 4:14.¹ Most of them know that the mark symbolizes Christ in this verse, but they do not know what a *mark* is. That is, if a *mark* symbolizes Christ, then *mark* must be something in real life other than Christ. In fact, most Book of Mormon readers justifiably feel satisfied and uplifted by relying on what they think *mark* means in this verse. While it is true that great lessons can be learned from this verse by relying simply on the symbolic meaning of *mark*, when the meaning of *mark* as it fell from the Prophet's lips while translating becomes clear, whole new, additional dimensions of understandings of Jacob's warning begin to unfold.

The reason most people today do not know what *mark* meant in Joseph Smith's day is that with time the meanings of many words shift. This is particularly true when reading older books, such as the Book of Mormon or the even much older King James Version of the Bible. In the 19th century the word *mark* was beginning to be replaced in the English language by a newer word. As the newer word rose to dominance, the older word, *mark*, gradually began to lose its original meaning. Such was the case with the meaning of *mark* vis-a-vis *target* at the time the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830.

When the King James Version of the Bible was translated, the word *mark* meant something to aim

The same touchstone could be applied to the many interviews of those who knew the Prophet. "See what are the core thoughts and the main issues that [Joseph is] talking about, you get the message."

Anderson concluded his remarks by saying that "the systems that I know of thinking in history and reconstruction of the past, they work as I apply them to Joseph Smith and the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. . . . I could say to you that I have given my life to constant study of ancient and modern religions and by every rule of evidence that I know, Christ and Joseph Smith are who and what they claim to be." ♦

at, what we today would call a target. On the other hand, the word *target* in King James English did not mean a target, but rather it meant a round shield.² Thus, the King James Bible states in 1 Samuel 17:6 that Goliath had "a target of brass between his shoulders." That is, Goliath was wearing a round piece of brass armor covering part of his upper body.³ He was not wearing a bull's-eye on his chest, as a casual reading today might suggest. That *mark* meant *target* in King James English can be seen from several passages in the King James Bible. For example, in 1 Samuel 20:20 Jonathan agreed to give David a secret signal by shooting arrows "as though [he] shot at a mark."⁴

With time, however, *target* came to mean something to aim at, possibly from using a round shield hung on a wall for "target practice."⁵ As *target* began to take on the meaning of something to shoot at, the older word for something to shoot at in practice, namely, *mark*, began to lose this meaning, but retained something of its previous life in frozen phrases such as "he is a marked man," "marksman," and "mark your target."

At the time the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, *mark* still meant something to aim at and would have been easily understood by 19th-century readers, though *target* was beginning to be used. Thus, throughout 19th-century Latter-day Saint writings *mark* is still used for target.⁶ For example, W. W. Phelps wrote the following, as published in the early Latter-day Saint periodical *Evening and Morning Star*, "Or like as when an arrow is shot at a mark, it parteth the air, which immediately cometh together again, so that a man cannot know

where it went through.”⁷ From a somewhat later LDS publication an unnamed editor, mentioning a gun rather than a bow and arrow, declaimed, “Our holy religion is the MARK upon which the gun was leveled.”⁸ There are numerous other examples of *mark* meaning *target* in Latter-day Saint literature.⁹

At this point, the question should be raised, why worry about what *mark* used to mean. “What does this have to do with my daily struggles to live the gospel?” In Jacob 4:14 Jacob said that the spiritual blindness of the Jews came by “looking beyond the mark.” When it is realized that *mark* means *target* in this verse, then the blindness of the Jews is explained: The Jews were not generally blind. They were looking beyond the target and therefore were blind only with respect to the target. If you are going to hit a target, you had better look at the target, and not beyond it. And what does the target symbolize in this verse? As most of my students can say, within the context of this chapter it is clear that the target the Jews should have been focusing on was Christ. Because they were not looking at Christ, they could not see Him and were thus blind to Him. Therefore they stumbled spiritually.

The implications of not focusing on Christ are numerous. The most obvious one is that if we focus on Christ we will not sin. Perhaps a less obvious implication, for example, is that if we focus on something good, such as paying a strict tithing, we will surely succeed. But will we see all the other good targets we should also be hitting? Will not some of them be out of focus because we are only looking at tithing? On the other hand, if we focus on Christ we will not only be strict but generous in paying our tithes, and we won’t leave all the other worthy things undone.¹⁰ There are lessons here for us, today’s readers of the Book of Mormon, if we understand what Jacob meant when he said that “blindness [comes] by looking beyond the mark,” who is Christ. ♦

By Paul Y. Hoskisson

Director, Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

Notes

This is an abridged version of a much longer paper, for which see Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Looking Beyond the Mark,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007), 149–64. For an electronic version see

<http://rsc.byu.edu/pubPHoskissonBeyondMark.php>.

1. I know of no Latter-day Saint commentary on the Book of Mormon that ever explains what a *mark* is.

2. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “target,” with examples and the etymology from the French. See also the entry “target.”

3. Though the King James Bible clearly intended “target/shield,” not all translations agree that the Hebrew word here behind the English text means “shield.” See the Jewish Publication Society new translation’s use of “javelin” instead of “mark” (*The Jewish Study Bible*, Tanakh Translation [Oxford: Oxford, 2004]); and the *New English Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), “dagger.”

4. For the same usage see also Lamentations 3:12. The King James Bible was first published in 1611. Two previous English translations, the Matthew Bible and the Geneva Bible, also have “mark” in 1 Samuel 20:20. The Wycliffe translation translates “signe.”

5. See meaning 3a in the *OED*.

6. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Kent P. Jackson for calling my attention to the 19th century examples from Latter-day Saint literature.

7. *Evening and Morning Star* 1/8 (January 1833): 63.

8. *Times and Seasons* 2/5 (January 1, 1841): 266, emphasis in the original.

9. See for example the following quotes: “[Joseph Smith] had on a very old hat, and was engaged shooting at a mark” (*Journal of Discourses* 7:101, Wilford Woodruff speaking in 1858); “We will keep our eyes set upon the mark, and go forward to victory” (*Journal of Discourses* 1:146, Brigham Young speaking in 1852); “There are those in this Church who calculate to be saved by the righteousness of others. They will miss their mark” (*Journal of Discourses* 2:132, Brigham Young speaking in 1853).

10. As Christ said in Matthew 23:23, “These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

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