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THE SACRED AND THE HOLY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

by

Kim Claussen

Pocatello, Idaho

One day I looked up the word 'sacred' in a dictionary. The definition it gave was "holy." When I looked up 'holy,' that was defined as "sacred." My dissatisfaction motivated an experiment. I went through the Book of Mormon and made two lists. One was a list of each instance of the word 'sacred' and what it modified or referred to. Then I did the same for the word 'holy.' When I looked over my lists, I was surprised to see that they were mutually exclusive. In the Book of Mormon only a few specific things are called "sacred," while many other things are called "holy."1

By contrast, the word 'sacred' does not appear at all in the King James Version of the Holy Bible.2 The King James Version was published in England in 1611. The Book of Mormon was translated from ancient metal plates by Joseph Smith in Pennsylvania and New York in 1828 and 1829 and published in 1830.

The word 'sacred' is used in the Book of Mormon primarily in the context of engraving the plates with the scriptures and transferring the plates and their associated revelatory instruments, the pair of stones called the interpreters3 and the ball or director called the Liahona4, from a prophet to his successor.

The first appearance of the term is in the First Book of Nephi. Nephi explains that he was commanded to "make plates of ore that I might engraven upon them the record of my people." 1 Ne.19:1. Later he is commanded to make other plates, the "small plates," "that the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them, should be written upon these plates; and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people ... and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord." 1 Ne.19:3,5

Nephi continues, "I proceed according to that which I have spoken: and this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people. Nevertheless, I do not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred." 1 Ne.19:5-6.

After Nephi's death, his brother Jacob writes that Nephi instructed him "that I should preserve these plates and hand them down unto my seed, from generation to generation. And if there was preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying, that I should engraven the heads of them upon these plates." Jacob 1:4.

1
The next instance of the word 'sacred' is also connected with the transfer of the plates from a prophet to his successor. Alma "the younger" tells his son Helaman to take the records which have been entrusted with me; And I also command you that ye keep a record of this people, according as I have done, upon the plates of Nephi, and keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them; for it is for a wise purpose that they are kept. Alma 37:1-2.

In the same conversation Alma explains, "remember, my son, that God has entrusted you with these things, which are sacred, which he has kept sacred, and also which he will keep and preserve for a wise purpose in him, that he may show forth his power unto future generations." Alma 37:14. Alma warns Helaman that "if ye transgress the commandments of God, behold, these things which are sacred, shall be taken away from you by the power of God." Alma 37:15. On the other hand, if ye keep the commandments of God, and do with these things which are sacred according to that which the Lord doth command you, (for you must appeal unto the Lord for all things whatsoever ye must do with them) behold, no power of earth or hell can take them from you, for God is powerful to the fulfilling of all his words. Alma 37:16.

After discoursing on the interpreters and the Liahona, which he also transferred to Helaman, Alma entreats, "And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things." Alma 37:47.

In one of the prophet Mormon's references to the transfer between Alma and Helaman, he points out that Nephihah, the second chief judge, "had refused Alma to take possession of those records and those things which were esteemed by Alma and his fathers to be most sacred; therefore Alma conferred them upon his son, Helaman." Alma 50:38.

Later Mormon records that "Shiblon took possession of those sacred things which had been delivered unto Helaman by Alma." Alma 63:1. Three years later "it became expedient for Shiblon to confer those sacred things, before his death, upon the son of Helaman, who was [also] called Helaman." Alma 63:11.

[All those engravings which were in the possession of Helaman were written and sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land, save it were those parts which had been commanded by Alma should not go forth. Nevertheless, these things were to be kept sacred, and handed down from one generation to another. Alma 63:12-13.
Fifty years later

Nephi, the son of Helaman, had departed out of the land of Zarahemla, giving charge unto his son Nephi, who was his eldest son, concerning the plates of brass, and all the records which had been kept, and all those things which had been kept sacred from the departure of Lehi out of Jerusalem. 3 Ne.1:2

The prophet Mormon describes his own predecessor's actions in these words: "Ammaron, being constrained by the Holy Ghost, did hide up the records which were sacred -- yea, even all the sacred records which had been handed down from generation to generation, which were sacred." 4 Ne.1:48. When Mormon was ten years old Ammaron told him, "when ye are about twenty and four years old ... go to the land Antum, unto a hill which shall be called Shim; and there have I deposited unto the Lord all the sacred engravings concerning this people." Mormon 1:3.

The word 'sacred' is used again when Mormon describes his own transfer of the plates to his son Moroni. He writes,

I, Mormon, began to be old; ... and having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites, (for the Lamanites would destroy them) therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, save it were these few plates which I have unto my son Moroni. Mormon 6:6

Mormon writes to Moroni that "I have sacred records that I would deliver up unto thee." Moroni 9:24

Moroni, in abridging the Jaredite plates, refers to a hill named Ramah as "that same hill where my father Mormon did hide up the records unto the Lord, which were sacred." Ether 15:11.

The word 'sacred' in Helaman 4:12 is not unambiguously used in the context of the plates, but it may refer to them. In that verse, in a series of parallel participial phrases, Mormon lists the character defects of the Nephites, which include "making a mock of that which was sacred, denying the spirit of prophecy and of revelation." Prophecy and revelation are connected with the word 'sacred' and with the plates in Nephi's instruction to Jacob that "if there were preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying," he was to "engraven the heads of them upon these plates." Jacob 1:4.

We now consider the remaining few instances of the word 'sacred' which occur in contexts other than those involving the plates.
At the end of a bloody battle Moroni, the chief commander over the armies of the Nephites, shouts to his opponent.

Zarahemnah. I command you, in the name of that all-powerful God who has strengthened our arms that we have gained power over you, by our faith, by our religion, and by our rites of worship, and by our church, and by the sacred support which we owe to our wives and our children, by that liberty which binds us to our lands and our country; yea, and also by the maintenance of the sacred word of God, to which we owe all our happiness; and by all that is most dear unto us -- Yea, and this is not all; I command you by all the desires which ye have for life, that ye deliver up your weapons of war unto us, and we will seek not your blood, but we will spare your lives, if ye will go your way and come not again to war against us. Alma 44:5-6.

The "sacred word of God" is engraved upon the plates.

Mormon writes that Pahoran "was appointed chief judge and governor over the people, with an oath and sacred ordinance to judge righteously, and to keep the peace and the freedom of the people, and to grant unto them their sacred privileges to worship the Lord their God." Alma 50:39-7

In another list of condemned practices, Mormon records that at the beginning of the third century after Christ's visit to the American continent, "many churches ... did administer that which was sacred unto him to whom it had been forbidden because of unworthiness." 4 Ne.1:27. This apparently is a reference to the ordinance of the sacrament of the Lord's supper involving the ritual partaking of sanctified bread and wine.8

In the Book of Mormon there are 27 instances of the word 'sacred.' Twenty-one of those instances (78%) are in the context of the plates and associated revelatory instruments, 1 instance modifies "word of God," and 1 appears to refer to "prophecy and revelation," both of which are metonymically related to the plates. Two of the remaining instances of the word 'sacred' refer to ordinances: the ordinance of appointment of the chief judge and the ordinance of the sacrament of the Lord's supper. The reference to "sacred privileges to worship" may be related to ordinances, especially considering Moroni's reference to "our rites of worship" in the same speech. Finally, there is the reference to the support of wives and children.

Note the kinds of things described as "sacred": the word of God, plates containing the word of God, preaching, prophesying, revelations, revelatory instruments, ordinances, privileges, and obligations. Not persons. Not *sacred prophets, *sacred men, or *sacred God. Not places. Not *sacred city, or *sacred hill.
In contrast to 'sacred,' the word 'holy' is used to describe persons, places, and a wide variety of things, but not the same things as 'sacred.' There are 297 instances of 'holy' in the Book of Mormon, 11 times as many as 'sacred.' The following table outlines the instances of 'holy' in the Book of Mormon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Modified</th>
<th>Number of Instances</th>
<th>% of Total Instances</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ghost</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38 on small plates, 1 Jesus quoting Isaiah in 3 Ne. 22:5</td>
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<tr>
<td>One of Israel</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>prophet(s)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>order</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>none on small plates</td>
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<tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>all on small plates</td>
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<tr>
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<td>all on small plates</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>name</td>
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<td>Alma</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Alma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>land</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>small plates</td>
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<tr>
<td>One of Jacob</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>small plates</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>small plates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>small plates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanctuary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>small plates</td>
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<tr>
<td>seed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 Ne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that which is</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3 Ne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they (Israelites)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>small plates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they (3 Nephiite disciples)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 Ne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Moroni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word of God⁹</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writ</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grammatical Observations

'Sacred' and 'holy' are used as adjectives in three syntactic constructions.

[article] + 'sacred' + [noun]
'holy'

the sacred records
the more sacred things
the holy prophets
a holy man

[noun] + 'be' + 'sacred'

things which are sacred
records ... esteemed to be most sacred
thou art holy

'keep' + [noun] + 'sacred' OR [noun] + 'kept' + 'sacred'
'holy'

keep all these things sacred
which he has kept sacred
observe the sabbath day, and keep it holy

Semantic Observations

The differences in the uses of 'sacred' and 'holy' in the Book of Mormon suggest connotations which we may not feel in standard English today or even in current LDS usage.

'Holy' suggests well-being, integrity, blessedness, as a sign of divine grace. A holy person is one blessed by God, perhaps even "charged with the divine presence." This word has a much broader range of application than does 'sacred' and is particularly (perhaps made more apparent in constrast to 'sacred') appropriate as a personal epithet.

'Sacred' has an ambivalent character which suggests consecrated to God and associated with terrible penalties, "august and accursed, worthy of veneration and evoking" fear. The things referred to as "sacred" in the Book of Mormon have awful qualities as well as sublime ones. Alma's warnings to his son Helaman about his obligations while in possession of the plates and related things and the awful consequences of his disobedience sound a lot like Moroni's warnings to Joseph Smith when he was given the plates and related things. Both were told that they must keep the plates and related items away from the world, they must "keep them sacred," so that "the sacred word of God" written upon them could be preserved for God's purposes.
The sacred revelatory instruments included the interpreters and the Liahona. Like the plates, both of these items served as transmitters of the word of God. Perhaps these could be characterized as dynamic transmitters of God's word as opposed to the static word of God engraved upon the plates. Both sets of transmitters have a direct, close connection with God, are vehicles of direct communication from God. They are sacred because they transmit "that which cometh from above," which is sacred. And they belong to God. They are not of this world in the sense of being in regular circulation in the world.

The sacred ordinance, their sacred privileges to worship God, the sacred sacrament, the sacred spirit of prophecy and of revelation are all things God gave to the people to put them in contact with God. The sacred support which they owed to their wives and their children was an opportunity with an obligation put on them by God with awful consequences for its disregard.

'Sacred' is not applied to persons in the Book of Mormon. God's prophets sent to the people to speak the word of God are never called "sacred." Holy yes. Not sacred. Sacred when applied to a person would probably mean dead. Cut off from this world. The victim in the sacrifice is made sacred by being cut off from this world to cross the veil into the other world and make contact with God on behalf of the worshippers or devotees that sacrificed it.

On a rather abstract level, one dimension of the differences between 'sacred' and 'holy' in the Book of Mormon can be described as 'sacred' involves contiguity to God, while 'holy' suggests similarity to God. 'Sacred' is metonymic, 'holy' is metaphoric.

Conclusion

'Sacred' and 'holy' are used in markedly different contexts in the Book of Mormon. Three-fourths of the instances of 'sacred' occur in the context of the plates, while the rest refer to non-personal entities like ordinances, privileges, and obligations that constitute connections between people and God. In the Book of Mormon 'sacred' suggests contiguity with God, radical separation from this world. 'Holy' occurs 11 times as often as 'sacred' and is used to describe persons, places, and things that enjoy or manifest God's grace or blessing.

A somewhat similar pattern exists in the Doctrine and Covenants, where 16 of the 21 instances of 'sacred' (76%) are in the context of plates or the translation or publication of the scriptures.15 'Holy' occurs 163 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, 7 times as often as 'sacred.'16 They are joined in "sacred and holy purposes" and in "holy and sacred writings." D&C 104:65, 68. 'Sacred' does not occur in the Pearl of Great Price.17
A preliminary study of Joseph Smith's noncanonical writings and orations shows that he used 'holy' about 9 times as often as 'sacred.' Only about a quarter of the instances of 'sacred' were in the context of the scriptures. His uses of 'sacred' often describe remembrance, burial, and blood of Revolutionary heroes. Joseph Smith's uses of 'holy' and 'sacred' are certainly a fruitful object of further study.

Another interesting subject for study is contemporary LDS usage of 'holy' and 'sacred.' While I have not begun to even preliminarily study this phenomenon, my own surprise at the Book of Mormon pattern of usage of 'holy' and 'sacred' suggests that contemporary LDS usage is quite different from that found in the Book of Mormon, where sacred is more sacred than holy.

Footnotes

1Shapiro 1973:453-55, 822-23. 'Profane' is only in Jarom 1:5: "[T]hey profaned not; neither did they blaspheme." Four of the 5 instances of 'unholy' are in the expression "dwelleth not in unholy temples." Mos.2:37; Alma 7:21, 34:36; Hel. 4:24. One other contrasts "we, being unholy," with "the Lamb of God, he being holy." 2 Ne. 31:5. 'Unholy' is in the Doctrine and Covenants (hereafter "D&C") only thrice, 74:4,6, 97:17, and 'profane' not at all. Shapiro 1973:767,1002. 'Unholy' and 'profane' are rare in Joseph Smith's noncanonical writings. He used 'profane' only to describe language. Madsen 1985:318,426.

2Cruden 1953; Strong 1890. But see Gileadi 1982:145 (Isaiah 57:15) where the name of the Lord is "sacred." 'Sacred' is in the Douay Bible, published about the same time as King James. Thompson & Stock 1945. Ex. 13:5, 31:10, 39:29, & 2 Ma 4:48 are translations of Vulgate 'sacer' and Num 27:11 of 'sanctus'.

3Also called "directors" in Alma 37:21,24 in original and printer's manuscripts and in published editions of the Book of Mormon from 1830 through 1911, changed to "interpreters" in 1920 and 1981. FARMS 1986:674,n.622,675,n.625. Also called "Urim and Thummim" by Joseph Smith, e.g., Pearl of Great Price (hereafter "POGP"), JS-H 1:35,42,52,59,62.

4See 1 Ne.16:10,26-30; Alma 37:38. Also called a "compass" in 1 Ne.18:12,21; 2 Ne.5:12.

5See also Words of Mormon 1:3-11; D&C 10:9("sacred"),38-45.

6Compare the warnings of Moroni to Joseph Smith concerning his possession and use of the plates and interpreters, e.g., in POGP, JS-H 1:42,46,59-60.

7Compare D&C 134:5 in connection with 134:2,4,6 & POGP, Article of Faith 11.
The one thing that is called both "holy" and "sacred."


For an interesting study of 'holy,' 'sacer,' 'sanctus,' and other items of Indo-European religious vocabulary, see Benveniste 1973:445-528.

Alma 37:2, 44:5; POGP, JS-H 1:42,46,59-60. Although 'sacred' is not found in the JS-H 1 description of his conversations with Moroni. Joseph Smith did use that word in a diary entry on the subject: "he told me of a sacred record which was written on plates of gold." Jessee 1984:76.

D&C 6:10, 63:64.


Shapiro 1977:456,823. The portions of D&C & POGP considered in this study record revelations and writings of Joseph Smith between 1828 and 1843.

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