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### Brent Lee Metcalf, “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity”

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**Title** Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The  
Resistance to History

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**Abstract** Review of “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about  
Book of Mormon Historicity” (1993), by Brent Lee  
Metcalf.

**Brent Lee Metcalfe. "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity." *Dialogue* 26/3 (Fall 1993): 153–84.**

## **Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History**

Reviewed by Alan Goff

"Show a Russian schoolboy," he writes, "a map of the stars, which he knows nothing about, and he will return the map next day with corrections on it."

—Dostoyevski

"Recent literary theory," according to Brent Metcalfe, "focuses on the complex and attenuated relation between language and the real world" (p. 168 n. 48). For Metcalfe, literary and narrative theory undermine the historical claims of the Book of Mormon: "It is as risky for apologists to stake claims of Book of Mormon historicity on evidence from literary studies as it is on evidence from theories of geography. In fact, emphasis on literary phenomena may be even more precarious, since careful attention to literary features underscores the complicated relation between language and reality" (p. 171).

You can't hear the tone of my voice; instead, imagine the tone you hear when the pediatrician on call answers your worried page and asks you what the problem is. You tell the doctor you think your child has the measles. She asks for the symptoms, then (with only the tone of voice expressing the exasperation) implies that she wouldn't have spent all those years at the university and in medical school, if just anyone could diagnose the difference between measles and twenty other viral infections simply by

reading a few passages from a book on child-rearing and examining a few physical symptoms.

Brent Metcalfe borrows the titles of a few works on literary and narrative theory and then concludes that such theory undermines the historical claims of the Book of Mormon. This doesn't mean that Metcalfe has accurately translated that theory into his study of things Mormon.

In the eighteenth century, modernity was rapidly expanding human knowledge based on the scientific method. Even before that, the Renaissance was slowly freeing humanity from the blinders of religious belief; but throughout, an undercurrent of skepticism prevented the wholesale acceptance of the idea that the human mind is capable of apprehending the world free of all subjective contaminants: Rabelais, Shakespeare, and Montaigne represent this counter-Renaissance. But as the Enlightenment progressed, such doubts were largely dismissed under the unquestioned material and scientific improvement brought about by the new modes of thought.

Under the tutelage of Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) coined the word *positivism* to name the ultimate conception of scientific approach to human understanding. Comte thought that all knowledge went through successive stages: a religious or theological stage (with personal gods), then a metaphysical stage (with impersonal forces), and a positive stage (with laws discovered by observation and experience). Since these stages were progressive, Comte held that in his thought humanity had reached the highest achievement of understanding. After 1845, Comte did something strange with this conception of human understanding: he organized a liturgy and a church based on Catholic ritual yet absent from the traditional Catholic notions of deity (in the belief that society depended on ritual and belief in order to maintain order). His was what he called “a religion of humanity.” The human mind and the scientific method were the objects of worship in this new religion.

Later positivists were largely unaware of the founder's religious heresies or quietly discarded them. Since its inception in the late nineteenth century (it is the name only that was coined by Comte, because philosophers such as David Hume and John Locke had previously advanced many of the tenets of what we call

"positivism"), positivism went through many historical variations as it became dominant in every knowledge discipline: from history to religious studies, from sociology to political science, from economics to technical writing, from literary criticism to biblical criticism. This hegemony reigned supreme through the 1960s, when it came under such withering attack that the term *positivist* became a term of abuse.

By the 1980s even those who still adhered to some of the positivist claims vehemently denied that they were positivists. For example, positivists assert they can free themselves from what they call "subjective" contaminants, from history and ideology. Traditionally, in historiography, these claims follow stereotypical patterns: historians claim neutrality or objectivity; historians insist that history must be value-free; historians assume scientific status for their accounts through an appeal to a method which presumably frees them from the vagaries of interpretation; historians claim access to brute, uninterpreted facts (using an appeal to archival or primary sources); historians claim that membership in certain groups (religious, political) corrupts objectivity; historians claim that empirical knowledge is the only source of genuine knowledge (therefore, usually, excluding religion, poetry, and metaphysics from the possibility of generating anything except illusions).

These standard positivist claims have, of course, come under sharp attack from a number of quarters, particularly since the 1960s: Continental philosophy had always been less committed to positivism than had Anglo-American analytic philosophy. But when Anglo-American philosophy made the linguistic turn, it emphasized how inevitably our linguistic options, theories, and ideological commitments affect our descriptions of the world. Continental philosophy produced philosophers such as Gadamer, Foucault, and Derrida who stressed the fact that human perspective is ubiquitous and those who think they discard such influences as ideology and politics are deluded. In the late 1960s these and other antipositivist positions (American pragmatism, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein) began to exert broad influence, questioning and undermining the positivism that had held sway in academic disciplines for nearly a century (in various forms such as the positivism of Comte and later Logical Positivism). This postpositivist position was largely disseminated in the United

States (which had been particularly vulnerable to positivism and had carried it to extremes unknown in the rest of the world) through literary and narrative theory.

So yes, Metcalfe is right that literary and narrative theory have radically undermined the main positivist tenet that the researcher can find some way to describe reality from some position free of ideology. Unfortunately, Metcalfe is committed to several versions of that same positivism which claims that "it is only the person I disagree with who has an ideology." I will in this essay explore only two of Metcalfe's positivist claims and demonstrate how thoroughly Metcalfe distorts antipositivist literary and narrative theory so that it seems to support his essentially positivist doctrine.

Metcalfe is right to claim that literary and narrative theory "focuses on the complex and attenuated relation between language and the real world," but he never applies that claim to his own position. It is as if he himself doesn't claim that his explanation of the Book of Mormon is more faithful to reality than those he opposes. If his claim is true, that "it is as risky for apologists to stake claims of Book of Mormon historicity on evidence from literary studies as it is on evidence from theories of geography. In fact, emphasis on literary phenomena may be even more precarious, since careful attention to literary features underscores the complicated relation between language and reality," then it might also be true that narrative and literary theory undermine his own claims. At this point I'll give away the ending of my story; narrative and literary theory do not address the Book of Mormon, so Metcalfe has yet to demonstrate that they undermine its truth claims. But they do specifically undermine Metcalfe's speculations advanced in this and other essays.

Some other venue will no doubt provide the opportunity to explore other positivist claims Metcalfe makes; here I restrict myself to two: (1) Metcalfe claims that, unlike those nasty "apologists," he begins from ideologically neutral presuppositions, uses a neutral method, and moves to a neutral conclusion, that he has no ideological commitments that lead him to predetermined conclusions: "Both apologetic and critical scholars are led by prior assumptions, but they differ fundamentally. Apologists assume that the Book of Mormon is historical, and from this they develop methods to sustain authenticity. The critical

scholar's interpretation depends not on a proposition made by a text or tradition but on a methodology for exploring the broader context which structures and authorizes such claims. Ideally, within the critical mode, methods lead to conclusions instead of conclusions leading to methods" (p. 156). Instead, the overwhelmingly dominant theme of literary and narrative theory is that ideology is inevitable. Metcalfe begins from a particularly uncritical positivist ideology, selects a method to support that ideology, and concludes with the same ideological commitments.

Additionally, Metcalfe claims (2) that Book of Mormon historicity is imperiled because the book has literary patterns in it. Positivists have always made a sharp distinction between literature and history, between fact and fiction. Metcalfe believes that since an exodus motif is included in the Book of Mormon, the book is a work of fiction rather than history because to him it seems apparent that authentic history does not contain complex literary patterns:

The length of the journey (three days) seems to depend on a literary motif from Exodus. Given this dependence, one wonders how Sorenson can confidently identify the lengths of other Book of Mormon migrations, which may also be motific or symbolic rather than literal, especially when points of departure and arrival are not known. In other words, the specific details of a history are at worst compromised by, and at best are always filtered through, literary forms and conventions as well as linguistic structures. (pp. 161-62)

Metcalfe also posits that the historical nature of the Book of Mormon is endangered by literary patterns because two kings (Noah and Riplakish) are so similar that you can't be sure that they are not the product of the same mind (Joseph Smith's): "Everything we know about the Jaredite ruler bears an analogue to the corrupt Nephite king. These mirrorings suggest that one narrative may depend on the other, and that only one, or perhaps neither, represents a factual account of historical events" (p. 170). Positivist historiography is an epistemological position so it is important to reiterate Metcalfe's positivist conception of historical fact. The truth is that literary and narrative theory was the initial

vehicle of antipositivist positions in the United States. Because literary and narrative theory was so dominant, it had a broad influence over other disciplines, especially historiography. Historiography has been so narrativized and literaturized over the past thirty years that the dominant element in historiography advances the position that history *is* a form of literature. It is literary and narrative theory (combined with historiography) that has dramatically undermined Metcalfe's claims.

Metcalfe is not alone among revisionist Mormon researchers in refusing to historicize his own terminology and ideas. He is, however, unusual in referring his readers to the very sources which have overturned the positivism he denies and yet advances at the same time. Let me state the matter baldly: Metcalfe has practiced a transparent deception on the readers of *Dialogue*, a deception the editors had a responsibility to correct. Metcalfe refers his readers to fifteen sources in literary and narrative theory (p. 168 n. 48). If Metcalfe had read and understood them, he would have sensed that these sources undermine his own epistemological and historiographical claims.

Radical changes have occurred in all disciplines over the past thirty years. The broad impact of literary and narrative theory in a range of disciplines is foremost among those changes. Metcalfe is alone among revisionist historians and dilettantes in referring to the very sources that disable his position. Mormon historians make few if any references to the historiographical debate going on in professional journals about history and literature, history and objectivity. The positivist claims of certain revisionist Mormon historians have long been abandoned in historiographical circles. But Metcalfe is the first of these writers in attempting to align a narrative and literary theory that undermines his claims with his own position, simplistically implying that it supports rather than destroys that position. So a brief introduction to literary and narrative theory is in order.

### **Positivism and Ideology**

Metcalfe, of course, denies that he is a positivist. Since positivism came under withering attack in the 1960s, few researchers have been willing to admit to the charge. Instead the term has lost



much of its epistemological content and is now a mere epithet. Not only does Metcalfe deny that he is a positivist, he reverses the charges and claims that his critics are the positivists: "Many hermeneutical apologists such as Midgley adopt the positivism they so readily condemn. They repudiate the possibility of historical objectivity in an empirical sense but insist on the historical objectivity of early Mormonism's truth claims in a religious or confessional sense" (p. 155 n. 7). Note here that Metcalfe doesn't charge Midgley with being a positivist by saying that Midgley makes standard positivist claims to academic neutrality, to value-free historical inquiry, to history free of all metaphysics, to history without the intrusion of literary and narrative patterns, to history without ideological preconceptions. Metcalfe turns Midgley into a positivist merely because Midgley believes that the Book of Mormon is an authentic history.

The word *positivist* did not enter the lexicon of Mormon history until Thomas G. Alexander responded to Louis Midgley's and David Bohn's claims that this revisionist history uncritically adopted a wholesale positivism. Alexander's response was that positivism is impossible in the human studies and is relegated only to the natural sciences.<sup>1</sup> This first apology for positivism does what all since have done: define the term in such a way that Mormon historians cannot be positivists while they continue to make some positivist claims. No other person uses the term *positivism* in the way Alexander does. In fact, those acquainted with the historiographical literature often note how history was durably dominated by positivism. Take the following as an example: "The positivist heritage is alive and well among American historians, narrowing their methodological debates and de-sensitizing them to some of the most interesting developments in modern historical thought."<sup>2</sup> Historiographers note that until the 1960s history was dominated by positivism and that after some improvement in moving away from positivism historical studies regressed toward it.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Alexander, "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective" *Dialogue* 19/3 (Fall 1986): 31.

<sup>2</sup> Jackson Lears, "Writing History: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books* (16 December 1982): 58.

We need to return to the level of ideas themselves—to define the content of the regression toward positivism. I have referred to it as “primitive” in order to distinguish it from the neopositivism of twentieth-century analytic philosophy, which, although of little help to historians, is at least intellectually fastidious. The sort of positivism I am speaking of harks back, rather, to the nineteenth century in its epistemological naïveté.

Early in this essay I referred to the attitude with which sophisticated historians approached their middle-level generalizations or paradigms. I suggested that they recognized what was arbitrary in their constructions and that they made no claim to possessing “the truth.” I further specified that they took account of the gap between themselves and their data, of the fact that the data almost never conveyed an unambiguous message and that even the simplest narrative carried along with it a freight of interpretation. All these postulates the positivist-minded historians of today implicitly deny.

I say “implicitly” because most of the time the epistemology of positivism is not spelled out. It is simply taken for granted. But what it amounts to is the conviction, first, that the data are “out there” somewhere and need only be located; second, that a particular historian has no right to go beyond the obvious meanings that other historians will readily recognize as valid—to transcend the conventionally apparent lies in the dangerous realm of guesswork or inference, or possibly of the imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Alexander’s mistakes in defining the term *positivism* are not my primary concern. But I want to place Metcalfe in historical context. Since Alexander, revisionists have repeatedly denied that they are positivists while making straightforward positivist claims.

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<sup>3</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, “Contemporary Historiography: Progress, Paradigms, and the Regression Toward Positivism,” in *Progress and Its Discontents*, ed. Gabriel A. Almond, Marvin Chodorow, and Roy Harvey Pearce (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 248.

Philip L. Barlow, for example, claims that only believers begin from a metaphysical point of view, while the historian eschews metaphysics, leaving that to poets, theologians and metaphysicians.<sup>4</sup> No more positivist claim exists than this one. This claim is challenged by one of Metcalfe's sources on literary and historical theory, Hayden White,<sup>5</sup> and is clearly labeled as positivism by others.<sup>6</sup> A pattern is beginning to emerge: Barlow too denies he subscribes to positivism.<sup>7</sup> Edward H. Ashment makes a number of positivist claims, while continuing to claim that he is no positivist.<sup>8</sup> He asserts that empirical knowledge is the only form of knowledge and, since religious knowledge does not measure up, it is pseudoknowledge.<sup>9</sup> He also maintains that history needs to be value-free.<sup>10</sup> Ashment also misunderstands positivism by claiming that it was a product of the nineteenth century (which is true) but didn't infect the twentieth (which is not).<sup>11</sup> What is more unusual, Ashment professes that it is a positivist position to say that historical facts can speak for themselves,<sup>12</sup> yet he makes the assertion

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<sup>4</sup> Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xvi-xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 52, 71.

<sup>6</sup> I will cite just a few of the sources, saving the opportunity of fuller analysis for another time. Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 34. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 1992), 139. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971), 80.

<sup>7</sup> Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, xvi.

<sup>8</sup> Edward H. Ashment, "Canon and the Historian," a draft of a paper presented at the Mormon History Association Meetings (1 June 1991), 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Edward H. Ashment, "Historiography of the Canon," *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1992), 301 n. 53. This is the published version of Ashment's "Canon and the Historian," cited above. Ashment here also manufactures the charge that the real positivists are those who call him a positivist: "Thus Mormon apologists plead positivistically to 'let Joseph Smith speak for himself.'" Yet Ashment

that to the historian there are facts that speak for themselves, brute facts free of all interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

Recently, Marvin S. Hill in his 1993 presidential address to the Mormon History Association also confused issues of positivism. Not content with the definition as it is used by "historians, social scientists, and philosophers," Hill has provided a new definition (actually a couple of definitions) because he found these other definitions too "complex and elaborate," too "technical."<sup>14</sup> For those who disagree with him about the historical nature of the Book of Mormon, Hill defines positivism as any appeal to empirical evidence. "I mean," he wrote, "history that is taken to be potentially verifiable."<sup>15</sup> Hill then lists a string of scholars he calls positivist, equivocates on the definition, and defines positivism quite differently for those with whom he agrees. What they do, he describes as interdisciplinary, empathetic, tentative, and therefore free of positivism.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, it is these so-called "new Mormon historians [who] were the first group of historians studying Mormon history to break with the positivistic tradition and write in a more tentative way about the Mormon past."<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, Hill is the only author I have read who defines positivism as *any* appeal to empirical evidence. If Hill were to apply this standard consistently, then he would have to call all historians positivists.

This is the historical context into which we need to place Metcalfe's claims. Certain Mormon historians have given convoluted and confused definitions of positivism in order to do two things: (1) to deny that they are positivists while (2) still making positivist epistemological claims. In Ashment, Metcalfe, and Hill we have a third objective—to charge those who question their revisionist agenda with being positivists, while they continue their own work with positivist assumptions. Even on the one occasion when a revisionist historian refers to a source for a definition of positivism

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provides no bibliographical trail so we can see such references. This is real *poiesis*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 292–93.

<sup>14</sup> Marvin S. Hill, "Positivism or Subjectivism? Some Reflections on a Mormon Historical Dilemma," *Journal of Mormon History* 20/1 (Spring 1994): 3 n. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

(Hill to Webster's *New Twentieth-Century Unabridged Dictionary*), it is a distortion of the source. The historical context into which we need to place such struggles is one in which it is bad to be called a positivist but apparently not bad to be one. Careful attention to positivism shows that Metcalfe's claim that he works from neutral presuppositions to neutral method to neutral conclusions is simply not true. Instead, his claims are ideological.

### Narrative and Ideology

This brings us to the next point. If I were to put fifteen sources together that refute Metcalfe's claim that he has no ideology, I would be hard pressed to come up with a better list than Metcalfe cites. The most insistent claim in recent literary and narrative theory (including historiography, political science, economics, sociology, and so many other disciplines) is that all positions are ideologically inscribed.

The issue of ideology points to the fact that there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and suggests that the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political: not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated.<sup>18</sup>

"Schools of historical interpretation are never politically neutral. Overall views of the past are tied in countless ways to visions of the present and future. Which is to say that they are, in a broad sense, 'ideological.' " <sup>19</sup> The answer then is not to deny ideology as a positivist would, but to expose the implications of your own ideology. Metcalfe's starting point in his reading of the Book of Mormon is no less ideological than that of his opponents; his is in fact more ideological because it denies and suppresses its own ideological foundation: "Every historical account of any

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<sup>18</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 129.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 458.



scope or profundity presupposes a specific set of ideological commitments in the very notions of 'science,' 'objectivity,' and 'explanation' which inform it."<sup>20</sup> Remember that Hayden White is one source Metcalfe refers his readers to in order to confirm the impact of literary and narrative theory on current conceptions of history and reality. "Historians of historical thought often lament the intrusion of such manifestly ideological elements into earlier historians' efforts to portray the past 'objectively.' But more often they reserve such lamentation for the assessment of the work of historians representing ideological positions different from their own."<sup>21</sup> If White had put the name "Metcalfe" across this passage it couldn't more specifically deny Metcalfe's claims.

The impact of narrative and literary theory has been to deny Metcalfe's claim that he has an inside track to reality free from ideology while those who disagree with him interpret ideologically. Hence, according to White, "Just as every ideology is attended by a specific idea of history and its processes, so too, I maintain, is every idea of history attended by specifically determinable ideological implications."<sup>22</sup> Metcalfe attempts to take credit for a position that undermines his, to assimilate it, to imply that these fifteen sources he cites actually support his position.

This new view of ideology has largely entered American academic debate through literary theory. It owes much to Althusser, who claimed that ideology grounds the interpretation that follows. You don't have an interpretation or a reading until you have an ideology. The facts then are theory- and ideology-laden.

There does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality. That is to say, simply because history is *not* a science, or is at best a protoscience with specifically determinable nonscientific elements in its constitution, the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical

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<sup>20</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 24.

knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand "the present," however this "present" is defined.<sup>23</sup>

It is absolutely essential to put Metcalfe's positivist claim that he is free of ideology into a certain historical context. "Exposing an ideology's outlines is always important. It's even more important when that ideology is working to deny ideology and history."<sup>24</sup> Revisionist historians resist the historicizing of their own claims to knowledge. That they are anti-historical in this manner doesn't mean their readers can afford to be. The word *ideology* hasn't, unfortunately, entered the lexicon of revisionist Mormon historians. The next step is to refer to the dominant discourse in literary theory and historiography to demonstrate how far the disciplinary leaders have moved beyond these positivist claims.

### Writing History, Writing Literature

I apologize for dealing with these theoretical concerns in such a cursory manner. I expect to return to them at greater length elsewhere. My intention in raising them is to demonstrate that Metcalfe in particular and revisionist Mormon historians in general are a full thirty years behind their discipline. But these are preliminary issues, since my real goal is to get to a reading of the Book of Mormon. But first I must attend to the second of Metcalfe's positivist claims.

Metcalfe asserts that history and literature are distinct entities and that any narrative which demonstrates literary patterns forfeits its claim to being authentic history. Needless to say, this claim is directly contrary to the main themes of narrative theory, literary theory, and historiography. In fact, Paul Ricoeur has labeled this claim positivist. Ricoeur notes the way "neo-positivists" conceptualize the history/fiction dichotomy: "History speaks of the real as past; stories speak of the unreal as fictional. Or to use the terminology familiar to the analytic philosophy of neo-positivistic

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>24</sup> Valentine Cunningham, "Renovating That Bible: The Absolute Text of (Post) Modernism," in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Sussex: Harvester, 1984), 24.

origins, a break concerning truth claims separates 'empirical narratives' from 'fictional narratives.' " <sup>25</sup> For Ricoeur, as for the dominant strain of narrative theory, no sharp distinction is visible between historical narrative and fictional narrative: they both use the same literary devices to make sense of human temporality:

So if we wish to demonstrate that the narrative genre as a whole refers to historicity as a whole, it is necessary to shatter the appearance of asymmetry between true narrative and fictional narrative at the level of reference. In other words, it must be shown that all narratives make, in a certain sense, a referential claim.

The argument divides into three steps. (1) It is necessary to establish that there is more *fiction in history* than the positivist conception of history admits. (2) Then it must be shown that fiction in general, and narrative fiction in particular, are more *mimetic* than the same positivism allows. (3) These two prior points being granted, I shall suggest that the references of empirical narrative and fictional narrative *cross upon* what I provisionally called historicity or the historical condition of man.<sup>26</sup>

Ricoeur represents the main line of thought in narrative theory. As narrative theory made further and further inroads into historiography in the seventies and eighties, the tightly controlled boundary between literature and fiction that Metcalfe patrols seemed less plausible. The historian also plots and emplots the narrative. The historian just doesn't find the meaning of a text in the text but establishes it in a dialectical relationship between text and the reader. But note that such claims for the sharp division between history and fiction are labeled positivistic by real theorists:

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 288-89.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.



The tendency, in contemporary English biblical studies, is to consider literary-critical and historical aspects of theological reflection as sharply distinct and to concentrate on the latter to the neglect of the former. This tendency derives from a period when positivistic conceptions of historical understanding went hand-in-hand with non-cognitive accounts of literary and poetic statement (which carried the implication that the fruit of literary-critical reflection on the biblical narratives could only be "subjective" in character). But if it has sometimes been assumed (in theology and elsewhere) that there is a "natural tension between the historian and literary critic," there is no timeless validity to this assumption.<sup>27</sup>

Lash then continues to note that Gadamer did not want to erase the line between fiction and history but to point to the ways they share narrative elements.

By now you should see that Metcalfe's conception of fiction and history is wrong-headed and underwritten by his positivist ideology. It should not surprise us to see Metcalfe find methods to support that positivist understanding. His central mistakes are to assume that historians have some brute access to historical fact, and that historians do not use literary tools to shape their narratives.

For positivism, the task of history is to uncover the facts which are, as it were, buried in documents, just like, as Leibniz would have said, the statue of Hercules was lying dormant in the veins of marble. Against the positivist conception of the historical fact, more recent epistemology emphasises the "imaginative reconstruction" which characterizes the work of the historian.<sup>28</sup>

This movement to see the similarities between literature and history has been taken up by historiographers, especially Hayden

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<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Lash, "Ideology, Metaphor, and Analogy," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 121-22.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," 289.

White, Hans Kellner, David Harlan, and Linda Orr. Notice how Ricoeur refers to some of Metcalfe's fifteen sources, but to opposite effect:

However, the decisive step was taken when categories stemming from literary criticism, and more precisely from the semiotics of the narrative, were transferred to the field of history. History could then be explicitly treated as a "literary artefact," and the writing of history began to be reinterpreted according to the categories which were variously called "semiotic," "symbolic," and "poetic." In this respect, the most influential works were Auerbach's *Mimesis*, Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*, to which we may add the critique of the visual arts in Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* and the general theory of symbolic representation in Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*. These works have given rise to a general concept of the *fictional representation of reality*, the horizon of which is sufficiently broad to encompass both the writing of history and fiction, whether the latter be literary, pictorial or plastic.

We find in the work of Hayden White a good illustration of this "poetic" approach to the writing of history. . . . It would remain to be shown that contemporary historians, whose university status makes them more concerned to present themselves as "scientific" rather than "literary," lend themselves to the same analysis. Nevertheless, what seems to me to be of general significance in White's study is his attempt to establish, initially at the level of plot, the correlation between works of fiction and works of history.<sup>29</sup>

Ricoeur is, of course, a philosopher. But historians have been more than eager to develop these narrative insights:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 290.

The silent shared conspiracy of all historians (who otherwise agree on nothing these days) is to talk about the past as though it were really "there." The whole of historical discourse is calculated to induce a sense of referential reality in a conceptual field with no external reference at all.

History is meaning imposed on time by means of language: history imposes syntax on time. As the form of writing whose central purpose is to affirm our consciousness of a shared experience over generations of one external and real world, history has a great investment in mimesis—the ability of language to imitate reality. Here, of course, is where historians balk, for, alas, the mimetic abilities of prose are common to fiction and history without distinction. Fiction's persuasive force, its "sense of reality," results from an author's ability to offer the reader a suggestive array of fictional elements that satisfy the requirements of possible reality in the shared world of writer and reader. The historian, using techniques that differ only a little from those of a novelist, has to persuade the reader not only of the *possible* reality of his array of verbal elements, but that those on display in the text are "guaranteed" by their relation (reference, logical inference) to things outside the text, and thus the result is a real mimesis.<sup>30</sup>

Historians have done the narrativizing of history in a way that must strike terror into the heart of positivist historians

The traditional argument would be to differentiate between factual and fictional narrations. Historical narration is usually defined as dealing only with facts and not with fictions. This differentiation is very problematical, and finally not convincing, because the all-important sense of history lies beyond the distinction between fiction and fact. In fact it is absolutely mis-

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<sup>30</sup> Nancy F. Partner, "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History," *Speculum* 61 (1986): 97.

leading—and arises from a good deal of hidden and suppressed positivism—to call everything in historiography fiction which is not a fact in the sense of a hard datum.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, Metcalfe's fifteen sources deal relentlessly with this distinction between literature and history. I refer the reader to White's three sources cited by Metcalfe, the collection *On Narrative* from *Critical Inquiry*, Kermode's study, Martin's book, and the two books by Alter and Sternberg. The latter two sources deal specifically with the positivist distinction between fiction and history in biblical narrative, but in a way that undermines Metcalfe's claims.

### Narrative and Repetitions

The doubling of Pharaoh's dreams means that the thing is fixed by God.

—Genesis 41:32 RSV

If we analyze readings of biblical narrative grounded on recent narrative theory, we find that Metcalfe's positivist conception of narrative relationships is attacked by the narrative theorists he cites. According to Metcalfe, "everything we know about the Jaredite ruler bears an analogue to the corrupt Nephite king. These mirrorings suggest that one narrative may depend on the other, and that only one, or perhaps neither, represents a factual account of historical events" (p. 170). From Metcalfe's view, literary elements in a story are evidence of artful, poetic writing, and for him history is anything but artful or poetic:

It is as risky for apologists to stake claims of Book of Mormon historicity on evidence from literary studies as it is on evidence from theories of geography. In fact, emphasis on literary phenomena may be even more precarious, since careful attention to literary features underscores the complicated relation between language

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 89.

and reality. Even if one could plausibly argue for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon within this context, the historicity of every Book of Mormon person and event would be suspect. Apologists must delineate why sacred fiction has greater religious merit when written by ancient prophets than a nineteenth-century prophet. (p. 171)

Here is the crux of Metcalfe's positivist narrative theory. Remember Metcalfe's claims about moving only from method to conclusion? Metcalfe begins from an ideological assumption (Joseph wrote the Book of Mormon), finds a method to support that presupposition (if two narratives are similar they must be the product of the same mind), and moves to a conclusion that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon (p. 169 n. 51). Such reasoning is directly refuted by theorists working on biblical narrative. How do exegetes analyze the relationship between similar stories? When we have grasped their thinking, we may then return to Metcalfe's interpretation.

The Book of Mormon has a considerable number of narrative analogies—stories similar to other stories in the book or to biblical stories. The normal pattern for revisionists when they come across these stories is to dismiss the book as a superficial plagiarist, either of the Bible or of itself. But literary theorists have developed sophisticated theories of intertextuality and allusion over the past three decades that need to be accounted for before Metcalfe concludes that Joseph Smith plagiarized himself.

There is no book more intertextual than the Book of Mormon, other than the Bible. Hebrew narrative, biblical narrative, relishes repetition.

It is fascinating to see what biblical critics have made of these repetitions. For 100 years, when biblical scholars came across the three wife-sister stories in Genesis (12:10–29; 20; 26), they puzzled over how three so similar stories could be in such close proximity. Did biblical scholars conclude that these three stories must be the product of the same mind because they are so similar to each other? No, the opposite happened because these biblical scholars had different ideological axes to grind. Theirs was an atomistic approach while Metcalfe's is holistic—he wants all the book to be the product of one author. So biblical scholars have

been vexed by these three stories, attributing two of the stories to the hypothetical J author and one to E. The documentary theory just doesn't have enough authors to accommodate the need, so two of the stories must go to one author. The presupposition undergirding this approach is that no writer would include three such similar stories so close to each other, so they must come from different writers. Here the interpretation is exactly the opposite of Metcalfe's approach.

What would we do with all the annunciation type-scenes the Bible produces?<sup>32</sup> Are we to assume that divine annunciations of upcoming births to Sarah (Genesis 18:9–15), Rebekah (Genesis 25:19–25), Samson's mother (Judges 13), Hannah (1 Samuel 1), and the Shunamite woman (2 Kings 4:8–17) are all written by the same mind? Even more complicated is the annunciation to Elisabeth (Luke 1:5–25). Elisabeth repeats the themes of Hannah's song to make the connection more direct. Are we to conclude that Luke also wrote the books of Genesis, Samuel, Judges, and Kings?

Clearly, what we have in Metcalfe's "literary" principle of textual relationship is an ideology posing as a method. In fact, if Metcalfe had read Alter and Sternberg, he simply could not have reached his conclusions.

Biblical criticism has recently been broadly affected by literary criticism. The old approaches to the text have largely given way to other readings. Narrative mirroring is so common in biblical literature that Robert Alter has given it the name of "type-scenes":

The two most distinctively biblical uses of repeated action are when we are given two versions of the same event when the same event, with minor variations, occurs at different junctures of the narrative, usually involving different characters or sets of characters. . . . The recurrence of the same event—the sameness being definable as a fixed sequence of narrative motifs which, however, may be presented in a variety of ways and sometimes with ingenious inventions—is what I have

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 115–30.

called "type-scene," and it constitutes a central organizing convention of biblical narrative. Here one has to watch for the minute and revelatory changes that a given type-scene undergoes as it passes from one character to another.<sup>33</sup>

Metcalf is attributing a stupidity to the writer Joseph Smith that some biblical critics have often attributed to the biblical writers. "The assumption is characteristic of biblical scholarship since the nineteenth century: the text is imagined to be driven by a compulsion to report bits and pieces of tradition, with scarcely any sense that the writer might be purposefully selecting, embedding, reshaping, and recontextualizing bits and pieces of tradition in his own artful narrative."<sup>34</sup> Other narrative theorists have followed Alter in criticizing this approach. "Repetition in general, in fact, is a feature of biblical narrative that the anachronistic and arrogantly ethnocentric reader easily qualifies as 'primitive,' a response that historical-critical scholarship tends to repeat, obscuring it under the gesture called 'separation of sources.'"<sup>35</sup>

What Metcalfe simply cannot permit, for ideological reasons, is the possibility that the Book of Mormon has such repetitions in it because the reader is supposed to see them *as* repetitions, that the meaning of the similarities is part of the message. Because Metcalfe adheres to such primitive "literary" principles, he attributes primitiveness to the text.

Not only do the two sources Metcalfe cites for biblical narrative radically attack his idea of what a repetition means, but both of them also have long discussions undermining the distinction between fiction and history so necessary to that same ideology; Alter notes that "history is far more intimately related to fiction than we have been accustomed to assume."<sup>36</sup> Sternberg specifically addresses and refutes the position Metcalfe depends upon. He devotes a long section entitled "Fiction and History" to what

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 181.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 18.

<sup>35</sup> Mieke Bal, "The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape," *Diacritics* 16 (Winter 1984): 72.

<sup>36</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24.



he labels *positivism*.<sup>37</sup> One could hardly choose more unfriendly sources to refer the reader to; there is a real danger that someone will actually take up the offer to read further.

I won't dwell here further on the new conceptions of textuality being advanced in real literary theory. Let me just note that Metcalfe's choice in characterizing the relationship between Book of Mormon doublets is not ideologically innocent. Metcalfe could have selected so many other ways to characterize the narrative. Why could he not see the text as an example of *inner-biblical exegesis*, a phrase popularized by Michael Fishbane? Why is it not one of intertextuality, of allusion, of influence, of a thousand other possibilities? Baxandall is referring to similar concepts in art, but notice his many ways of characterizing the text that Metcalfe neglects:

"Influence" is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality. It is very strange that a term with such an incongruous astral background has come to play such a role, because it is right against the real energy of the lexicon. If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse to, adapt, misunderstand, refer to, pick up, take on, engage with, react to, quote, differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to, assimilate, align oneself with, copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody, extract from, distort,

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<sup>37</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 23-35.



attend to, resist, simplify, reconstitute, elaborate on, develop, face up to, master, subvert, perpetuate, reduce, promote, respond to, transform, tackle . . .—everyone will be able to think of others. Most of these relations just cannot be stated the other way round—in terms of X acting on Y rather than Y acting on X. To think in terms of influence blunts thought by impoverishing the means of differentiation.

Worse, it is shift<sup>38</sup>.

In order to pass off his ideology, Metcalfe must first make the Book of Mormon seem a superficial text and the relationships it bears to itself and other texts superficial. Let me pose the problem: if the Book of Mormon is more sophisticated than those readers who refer to plagiarism or self-plagiarism, then one must abandon the approach in some measure. Even if you think Joseph Smith wrote the book you must explain its complexity, and then explain how Joseph Smith is a much more sophisticated reader than is Brent Metcalfe.

### The Mask of Allusion

Whatever is profound loves masks.

—Nietzsche

Ultimately, the incompetent Book of Mormon readings offered by revisionists must give way to some reasonable literary understanding of the text. But if your a priori assumption is that the text is superficial, your reading of the text will be superficial. The real test for revisionist readings will occur when revisionists begin to concede the sophistication of the text: can they simultaneously maintain its modern origin and its sophistication? I have serious doubts. What it will require is that the assumed author (in this case Joseph Smith) be an astonishingly prescient reader of the Old Testament. Let me provide one example.

Metcalfe spends a little time reading the Mosiah section of the book and explaining the relationship of the King Noah story to

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 58–59.

other stories. But he does so superficially. Let me deepen the analysis, bringing in the theoretical insights regarding biblical narrative that have become so common over the past decade. The book of Mosiah overflows with allusions and references to the Israelite experience with judges and kings, ranging from the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17 to 2 Kings. In particular, the books of Judges, 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 2 Kings are constantly on the minds of the writers and editors of Mosiah. The book of Mosiah begs the reader to connect the Nephite experience with kings with that of the Israelite experience. I can develop only a few of those intertextual relationships in this article.

Abinadi condemns Noah and his people for their sins, upon which Noah issues an arrest warrant. In language heavy with exodus symbolism, Abinadi calls the people to repentance (Mosiah 11:21–26). Noah's response recalls Pharaoh's response: "Who is Abinadi, that I and my people shall be judged of him, or who is the Lord, that shall bring upon my people such great affliction" (Mosiah 11:27). This is not just reminiscent of Pharaoh who says, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice" (Exodus 5:2), but also of the Israelite who challenges Moses' right to lead: "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" (Exodus 2:14) and Moses' response to the Lord: "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh?" (Exodus 3:11); Abinadi's vocabulary doesn't invoke just the prophet-king confrontations from the Deuteronomistic history but also that between Moses and Pharaoh.

The debate also arises over whom these people belong to, reminiscent of the Lord's command: "Let my people go" (Exodus 5:1); this is the context for Pharaoh's question, "Who is the Lord?" The Lord and Noah struggle over whom these people belong to: are they the Lord's servants or Noah's? Abinadi begins by calling them "this people" (Mosiah 11:23), but after Noah calls them "my people" (Mosiah 11:27, 28) Abinadi begins to state assertively: "Thus has the Lord commanded me, saying—Abinadi, go and prophesy unto this my people" (Mosiah 12:1), in spite of the fact that the people assert that they belong to Noah, not the Lord (Mosiah 12:13). The claim that the people are the Lord's continues throughout the Abinadi narrative.

When Abinadi returns, two years later, one small and seemingly insignificant detail is dropped that performs allusive work

worth a battalion of footnotes in understanding this confrontation between prophet and king. In the same verse in which Abinadi asserts that the people are the Lord's, not Noah's, the passage reports that Abinadi comes back *in disguise* (Mosiah 12:1). The oddity has passed seemingly unnoticed. Since the arrest warrant has been out for an Abinadi on the lam for two years, he would have good reason to be in disguise. But why blow your disguise immediately by identifying yourself? "And it came to pass that after the space of two years that Abinadi came among them in disguise, that they knew him not, and began to prophesy among them, saying: Thus has the Lord commanded me, saying—Abinadi, go and prophesy unto this my people" (Mosiah 12:1).

True enough, if you assume that any puzzling feature is an indication of deficiency, a stupidity, and if you refuse to let the text speak in its otherness, then you would just conclude that the writer was nodding. What writer would, after all, have a character immediately blow his disguise (perhaps Abinadi needs the disguise only to get this far)?

Perhaps we ought to permit the text to be so advanced that the reader needs to do considerable work to catch up to its sophistication. Since the text claims to be a product of an ancient Israelite culture, we might look to the Bible to see some meaning in this puzzling passage. We might consider that a type-scene or a typological consciousness is at work and we might look for similar type-scenes.

A few stories (mostly in the Deuteronomistic history) repeat the story of conflict between a king and someone else (usually a prophet). Someone is in disguise, the disguise is made known, and God's will is unexpectedly revealed through the act of unveiling the disguise. Because the story occurs a number of times in the work that scholars call the Deuteronomistic history, "we may suppose that a theological point is being made here."<sup>39</sup>

All of these stories of disguises have to do with kingship.<sup>40</sup> The first story is about Saul's use of the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28). Bereft of prophetic guidance and in military danger, Saul disguises (*hapas*) himself, asking the witch to raise Samuel's spirit

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Coggins, "On Kings and Disguises," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991): 55.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

from the dead (this after persecuting witches and soothsayers during his reign, at Samuel's direction). Samuel delivers a divine message to Saul from God, but a dire one. "His disguising himself had done him no good; the divine disfavour had reached its inevitable result in the death of Saul."<sup>41</sup> Saul then goes out and dies in battle.

First Kings 20 contains material from northern sources. One of the sons of the prophets asks a traveler to strike him. The prophet then covers his wound, thereby disguising (*hapas*) himself. "Along comes the king; the prophet manufactures a story about his loss of a hostage whom he had undertaken to keep. The king thinks to condemn him out of his own mouth, but at that point the prophet strips off his disguise and stands revealed as a prophet."<sup>42</sup> The prophet then condemns the king for letting his hostage—Benhadad, king of Damascus—go free. Lives will be lost over the king's not finishing the job.

These two stories contain similarities besides the prophet-king-disguise nexus. "The disguise story ends in each case with the same warning: defeat of the people in battle, and death of the king."<sup>43</sup> This sounds more and more like the Abinadi-Noah story. But a difference between the two biblical stories is that in this second one it is the prophet who attempts the disguise, not the king: "Here the 'servant of God' does the disguising, and not in any kind of attempt to trick God but to ensure that his message would be conveyed unmistakably to the king. To disguise oneself is thus not automatically a matter for condemnation; it may be a way of forwarding the divine initiative."<sup>44</sup>

In 1 Kings 22 the northern and southern kings attempt to determine whether or not to go to battle against a common foe. They consult four hundred prophets to discover God's will and receive the go-ahead. But Micaiah (not on the Israelite king's list of paid consultants and hostile to the king) prophesies a bad result. The king of Judah apparently isn't very bright, for he is willing to be the decoy for the Israelite king. "The two kings go to war against Ramoth-Gilead, and the king of Israel says 'I will

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41 Ibid., 57.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 58.

disguise myself [*hapas* hithpael once again] and go into battle, but you [the king of Judah] wear your robes.' This seems a sensible precaution when we hear in the next verse that the Aramaeans are commanded to 'Fight with neither small nor great, but only with the king of Israel.' But as we discover, it did the king of Israel no good."<sup>45</sup> The king is killed at the hands of an Aramaean archer. The disguise is ineffective.

Josiah is the favored king of the Deuteronomist. But he is viewed less favorably by the Chronicler. On his way to meet Pharaoh's army, Josiah disguises himself (*hapas*) and is killed (2 Chronicles 35:20–24). "The theme is again of the purpose of the God of Israel being worked out through the people's enemies."<sup>46</sup>

In the final episode Jeroboam's wife disguises (*sanâ* instead of *hapas*) herself at the king's request to consult the blind prophet about the fate of their sick son. Again, the disguise is followed by death, of the son (1 Kings 14) and later of the whole family of Jeroboam. "Relevant also is the unexpected way in which the disguise is shown to be ineffective. Ahijah is blind, so presumably the disguise would not in itself have made any difference; but he is given a direct word from God which tells him who his imminent visitor is, and thus both the limitations of his blindness and the trickery of the disguise are overcome."<sup>47</sup>

The Jeroboam narrative deserves more development. Jeroboam's son is sick; Jeroboam sends his wife in disguise to the blind prophet Ahijah to discover Abijah's fate. The blind prophet sees through the disguise and pronounces a curse on Jeroboam and his house. As soon as Jeroboam's wife enters the threshold of her house, Abijah dies.

Several story elements stand out. Of course, Jeroboam was the first of the Northern Israelite kings, the breakaway kingdom (all Northern kings are viewed as illegitimate by the Deuteronomist, especially Jeroboam). In order to consolidate power and prevent his subjects from continuing to participate in southern religious festivals in Jerusalem, Jeroboam sets up two shrines—one at the northern end of his kingdom and one at the southern end—to

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45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 59.

47 Ibid.

prevent religious boundary crossings from lapsing over into political border violations: "Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). This wording is reminiscent of the Israelites' words when Aaron made a gold bull calf to worship: "after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). This would, of course, be a clear sign of fictional borrowing for a positivist such as Metcalfe who worships the empirical out near the meadow as much as the Israelites worshipped the bull calf in the *bamot*. So Jeroboam's kingship is intricately wound up, in the writer's eyes, with the prototypical instance of idolatry in Israelite tradition, a bad omen for his reign.

Aaron's sons also appear to involve themselves in idolatry: "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:1-2). Aaron's two sons are named Abihu and Nadab; Jeroboam's two sons are named Abijah and Nadab—the same two names (Abijah and Abihu are versions of the same name meaning "Yahweh is father"): "In the Deuteronomistic history, Jeroboam's sin in setting up the golden calves and offering incense before them results in the deaths of his sons Nadab and Abijah. In the Priestly story in Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu are struck down after offering their 'strange fire' to God. The parallel could hardly be clearer."<sup>48</sup> Biblical textuality works fundamentally and principally through such allusive connections to other biblical stories.

Jeroboam's son who dies when his wife returns from the prophet is Abijah. Just a few verses later, we discover that Jeroboam's son Nadab succeeds his father as king (1 Kings 14:20). This Nadab dies horribly, slain and overthrown by Baasha, and the entire house of Jeroboam is destroyed just two years into

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<sup>48</sup> David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant, Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1987), 273.



his reign. Why does this happen? "Because of the sins of Jeroboam which he sinned, and which he made Israel sin, by his provocation whereby he provoked the Lord God of Israel to anger" (1 Kings 15:30). Aberbach and Smolar find thirteen parallels between Jeroboam and Aaron: "The most decisive evidence of the close connection between Aaron and Jeroboam is the fact that the two eldest sons of Aaron—Nadab and Abihu—and the two recorded sons of Jeroboam—Nadab and Abijah—bear virtually identical names. It is also remarkable that both the two eldest sons of Aaron and the two sons of Jeroboam die in the prime of their life."<sup>49</sup> Jeroboam's construction of the gold bull idols is the provocation—could there be a more clear characterization of Jeroboam as a renegade king and idolator than to compare him with Aaron? So layers of allusion are involved, although it is only the first two that Damrosch mentions that I am interested in at the moment:

Four distinct layers of history are folded into the ritual order by the story of the offering of the strange fire by Nadab and Abihu. First, the complexity of the historical moment at Sinai is encapsulated, as the brothers in effect repeat the golden calf episode and their father is brought to face the consequences of his sin. Aaron's making of the golden calf is now seen as stemming from his moral weakness in the face of the people's demand for a tangible divinity, one that would serve to prop up their own spiritual weakness. Second, the proleptic reference to the history of Jeroboam brings the action forward into the time of the monarchy, strengthening the association between priest and king already implicit in the regal paraphernalia given to Aaron as high priest (Exodus 28). In contrast to the weakness behind Aaron's misdeed, Jeroboam's making of the calves is an act of cynical power politics, as he tries to keep the people from returning to worship in

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<sup>49</sup> Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 134.

Jerusalem, where he fears that they will end up renewing their allegiance to the Davidic dynasty.<sup>50</sup>

Expertly, the writer makes Jeroboam's sins invoke the idolatry by Aaron and his sons. This is how biblical characterization operates—by allusion, by invocation, by indirection. Aberbach and Smolar raise the possibility that Metcalfe fixes his monomania on the idea that one text has been manipulated to fit the pattern established by the other narrative; but they also hold out another possibility: Jeroboam saw himself as a reviver of an ancient religious practice and acted with a typological consciousness: "Jeroboam, who like all reformers did not regard himself as an innovator but as a reviver of an ancient cult first introduced by Aaron, imitated the originator of the Israelite priesthood in every possible respect, and even went to the length of naming two of his sons, Nadab and Abijah, after Aaron's two eldest sons."<sup>51</sup>

While Jeroboam's wife is asking the prophet the fate of the child, Ahijah declares in the Lord's name that Jeroboam "hast done evil above all that were before thee: for thou hast gone and made thee other gods, and molten images to provoke me to anger" (1 Kings 14:9). Just as Jeroboam is condemned to die, Ahijah pronounces a simile curse on him similar to that pronounced by Abinadi on Noah: "The Lord shall raise him up a king over Israel, who shall cut off the house of Jeroboam that day: but what? even now. For the Lord shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water, and he shall root up Israel out of this good land, which he gave to their fathers and shall scatter them beyond the river, because they have made their groves, provoking the Lord to anger" (1 Kings 14:14–15). King Noah, too, is compared to a plant uprooted by the Lord's justice, his people driven and exiled by the Lord's decree: "He saith that thou shalt be as a stalk, even as a dry stalk of the field, which is run over by the beasts and trodden under foot. And again, he said thou shalt be as the blossoms of a thistle, which, when it is fully ripe, if the wind bloweth, it is driven forth upon the face of the land" (Mosiah 12:11–12). Strong connections are found between Noah and

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<sup>50</sup> Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*, 277.

<sup>51</sup> Aberbach and Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," 135; cf. 140.



Jeroboam, but here the Book of Mormon is just being biblical because equally strong allusive connections exist between Jeroboam and Aaron.

The Northern Israelites are to be punished for Jeroboam's sins by being driven into exile and slavery. Abinadi pronounces similar punishment on the people of Noah (Mosiah 12:2). Abinadi's punishment depicts a people "driven by men, [who] shall be slain; and the vultures of the air and the dogs, yea, and the wild beasts shall devour their flesh" (Mosiah 12:2). I will shortly develop this punishment theme more completely. But the direct parallels between Jeroboam and Noah are important to establish. Ahijah declares to Jeroboam's wife that "him that dieth of Jeroboam in the city shall the dogs eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat: for the Lord hath spoken it" (1 Kings 14:11).

Positivist analysis would have bountiful material here to call plagiarized. The Jeroboam narrative invokes the story of Aaron's fabrication of the bull idol, Aaron's idolatry, and the death of Aaron's sons. Abinadi alludes to this story, already deeply imbedded in predecession, by invoking the punishment pronounced on Jeroboam (Mosiah 12:2; 1 Kings 14:11), the sin of idolatry (Mosiah 11:6–7; 1 Kings 12:28–30), and Noah's—like Jeroboam's—instigation of his people to sin (Mosiah 11:2; 29:18; 1 Kings 12:30). Noah's dismissal of the priests appointed by his father and his appointment of the most worthless people in their stead (Mosiah 11:5–6) is similar to Jeroboam's action (1 Kings 12:31; 13:33; 2 Chronicles 13:9), and a similar simile curse is pronounced on both (Mosiah 12:10–12; 1 Kings 14:15). The Noah, Jeroboam, and Aaron stories are intertwined in ways too complicated to be done justice by a simplistic positivist claim that similarity means plagiarism. Metcalfe sees what he considers significant parallels between Noah and Riplakish. But the Noah narrative is sufficiently long that a reader must pick and choose what parallels are significant in comparison to another king. Indeed, another of Metcalfe's fifteen sources indicates that ideology is particularly strong in determining what narratives are parallel to each other: Barbara Smith asks "who is responsible for a version

being a version?"<sup>52</sup> Ideological, personal, and disciplinary assumptions go into the construction of "versions." But such discussion of versions doesn't take into account the "human purposes, perceptions, actions, or interactions." Because versionness or similarity isn't given in the text, the reader must bring other considerations into account to determine what story is a version of another story. "Among any array of narratives—tales or tellings—in the universe, there is an unlimited number of potentially perceptible *relations*. . . . Whenever these potentially perceptible relations become actually perceived, it is by virtue of some set of interests on the part of the perceiver."<sup>53</sup> Metcalfe's criteria of significance are ideological, as are mine. I think the parallels between Jeroboam and Noah are more noteworthy (and I'll throw Ahab in for good measure):

	<b>Jeroboam</b>	<b>Ahab</b>	<b>Noah</b>
1. Disguise narratives	1 Kg. 14	1 Kg. 20 1 Kg. 22	Mos. 12:1
2. Idolatry	1 Kg. 12:28–30 1 Kg. 14:9–11	1 Kg. 16:31–33 1 Kg. 21:25–26	Mos. 11:6–7
3. Sons die because of wickedness	1 Kg. 14 1 Kg. 15	2 Kg. 10:1–11	
4. People are scattered	1 Kg. 14:14–15 2 Kg. 17:22–23		Mos. 12:11–12 Mos. 12:2
5. Plant simile	1 Kg. 14:14–15		Mos. 12:11–12
6. Eaten by dogs and fowls	1 Kg. 14:10–11	1 Kg. 21:19, 24 1 Kg. 22:37–38	Mos. 12:2
7. Caused the people to sin	1 Kg. 12:30 1 Kg. 14:16 2 Kg. 17:21	1 Kg. 19:18	Mos. 11:2 Mos. 29:18
8. Dismissal of priests and appointment of new ones	1 Kg. 12:31 1 Kg. 13:33 2 Chr. 13:9 2 Chr. 11:14–15		Mos. 11:5–6

<sup>52</sup> Barbara H. Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 216.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 217–18.

9. Garment reference	1 Kg. 11:28–31 1 Kg. 14:14	1 Kg. 21:21	Mos. 12:3
10. Kings walked in the way of wickedness	1 Kg. 15:26 (Nadab walked in his father's way)	1 Kg. 16:25–26 (Omri) 1 Kg. 16:30–31 (Ahab)	Mos. 11:1
11. Killing of prophet(s)	1 Kg. 13:8–32	1 Kg. 18:4, 13 1 Kg. 19:1	Mos. 17:12–20
12. Confrontation between prophet and king's priests/prophets	1 Kg. 13:11	1 Kg. 18:17–40 1 Kg. 22:6–28	Mos. 12:17–37
13. King as builder	1 Kg. 12:25	1 Kg. 22:39	Mos. 11:8–9, 13
14. King and whoredoms		2 Chr. 21:13	Mos. 11:2, 6, 14 Mos. 12:29

The allusive character of these stories is so much a part of the meaning that any reading failing to take the allusions into account can't be considered adequate.

The common elements to the kingly disguise type-scenes are many: (1) the king is ultimately the punished/victim (Saul; two unnamed kings—although the two stories are almost certainly about Ahab as Chronicles demonstrates; Josiah; Jeroboam and his successor-son); (2) all the stories place limits on the king. God is in charge and will punish the kings: "The accounts in the Deuteronomistic History have in common the fact that it is an unacceptable line of kingship which is condemned in these disguise stories. In 1 Kings that is obvious enough; all three of the rulers there referred to are rulers of the northern kingdom, and that very fact is itself enough to ensure condemnation."<sup>54</sup> Another element (3) is that the disguise can never be taken quite seriously as a disguise—it doesn't work or is immediately dropped. "It seems that a point of fundamental theological significance is being made by the way in which this theme of disguising oneself is treated. Nothing is hidden from God's sight; he is presented as controlling the situation, often, as we have seen, in unexpected ways."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Coggins, "On Kings and Disguises," 60.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 61. Coggins refers to the story of Jacob's disguise in Genesis 27. He claims that this disguise story is much different in that the disguise is

Abinadi's disguise is not necessarily a real effort at disguise but an allusive invocation of monarchical commentary from the Deuteronomist. As Ahijah proclaims simile curses against Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:15), Abinadi says that "the life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace" (Mosiah 12:3). When the people capture Abinadi and take him before the king, the report (in typically Hebrew poetic fashion) expands the simile curse into three, whether because the first time Abinadi said it the text underreports or the people themselves are expanding the curse: "And he also prophesied evil concerning thy life, and saith that thy life shall be as a garment in a furnace of fire. And again, he saith that thou shalt be as a stalk, even as a dry stalk of the field, which is run over by the beasts and trodden under foot. And again, he saith thou shalt be as the blossom of a thistle, when it is fully ripe, if the wind bloweth, it is driven forth upon the face of the land" (Mosiah 12:10-12).

Notice the economy in just mentioning that Abinadi came in disguise. Without overtly invoking them, using the allusive style so common in biblical writers in which one narrative is used to provide subtle commentary on another, the narrative gathers these other stories of kings, prophets, and disguises to foreshadow Noah's end. The other kings or dynasties in the disguise type-scenes meet with brutal deaths, and the failure of the dynasty becomes apparent: not only does Saul die in battle the next day, but his dynasty is cut short. Ahab is surely the king involved in 1 Kings 20 and he and his seventy sons are slain (2 Kings 10); another narrative has Ahab dying in battle (1 Kings 22). Josiah dies in battle, and Jeroboam's son dies along with the king's hope for a dynasty. It isn't hard to guess what will happen to Noah: he will die in battle (actually brutally killed by his own subjects) and, although his son Limhi does become king for a little while, the dynasty ends when the people are absorbed in the larger group of Nephites.

The disguise theme is particularly apt for the Abinadi-Noah story because the blindness and deception in stories of Israelite and Judahite kings comment on the blindness of the Israelite peo-

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both good and effective, an element of the working out of God's plan, not an attempt to avoid God's power. There is also no king in Jacob's story.

ple and their kings who try to sever their own power from the God who granted that power (the portrayal of Josiah in a disguise type-scene is an exception). Particularly when Abinadi, in condemning Noah's court, invokes the suffering servant passage from Isaiah: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him" (Mosiah 14:3). The following narrative also draws on the theme of hiding, for it is a character named *Alma* who hides in the wilderness, getting no rest from a king named *Noah*. Whoever wrote the Book of Mormon text seems have had a sharp eye for detail and is far beyond any contemporary readers in subtlety and knowledge of the Bible.

Of course the Abinadi-Noah confrontation has many more allusive connections with the stories of kings and prophets in the Deuteronomistic history; I can't illuminate all of them here. But also notice that the simile curse advanced by Abinadi has to do with Noah's garments: Noah's life will be as a garment in the furnace.

Six biblical king/prophet narratives demonstrate that even kings are obligated to obey the law. In many, the garment is rent to indicate symbolically that the kingdom is taken from the unworthy king: (1) Saul disobeys God in conquering the Amalekites so when Saul tears Samuel's garment the prophet utters a simile curse against the king (1 Samuel 15:28; David also cuts or tears Saul's garment, 1 Samuel 24:3–5), (2) David is indicted by Nathan in the ewe parable (the story has no symbolic tearing/cutting), (3) Solomon follows other gods and consequently will have the kingdom torn from his son (1 Kings 11:11–12), whereupon Ahijah catches Solomon's rival, Jeroboam, by the garment and tears it into twelve pieces—giving ten to Jeroboam, symbolizing the ten tribes that will follow Jeroboam and the two that will follow Rehoboam (1 Kings 11:28–31), (4) Ahijah predicts that the kingdom will be rent from Jeroboam because of his sins (1 Kings 14:14), (5) Elijah prophesies that Ahab will be cut off (1 Kings 21:21), and (6) when Josiah hears of the discovery of the book of the law, he tears his own garment because his people have not been keeping the law (2 Kings 22:19). These stories fol-

low a pattern to demonstrate that the king must also obey the law.<sup>56</sup>

1. The king's crimes are recounted
2. The prophet indicts the king for his crimes
3. The king repents (in the Jeroboam story remorse does not occur)
4. God determines a punishment to be imposed in the next generation.

The Noah narrative follows this pattern (he, like Ahab, doesn't repent—although he attempts repentance, but his priests talk him out of releasing Abinadi).

1. Noah's crimes are recounted (Mosiah 11:1–15)
2. The prophet indicts the king for his crimes (Mosiah 11:20–28; 12:1–13:35)
3. The king repents, if only briefly and self-interestedly (Mosiah 17:11–12)
4. A punishment is imposed (Mosiah 17:18; 12:5–7).

Noah's life is to be valued as a garment in a fire (Mosiah 12:3). Perhaps in isolation, this analysis stretches Noah's garment in the fire too far in alluding to these stories of garments being cut (indicating the covenant that was cut with the kings now being torn). But taken with the preponderance of allusions to the interrogation of kingship in the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings, we ought to give some weight to the notion that Noah's garment is an invocation of these earlier kings' garments.

After all, the other elements of punishment pronounced on Noah and his people also invoke the kings' narratives: "Thus saith the Lord, it shall come to pass that this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage, and shall be smitten on the cheek; yea, and shall be driven by men, and shall be slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea, and the wild beasts shall devour their flesh" (Mosiah 12:2). You know my exegetical

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<sup>56</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Kings of Israel: A Question of Crime and Punishment," *SBL Seminar Papers* 106 (1987): 518–19.



pattern by now: look to instances in the Bible where a king and his people are judged sufficiently wicked to have dogs and fowl lick their blood and eat their flesh.

Only the most wicked monarchical characters deserve this punishment. Elijah prophesies that Jezebel will be eaten by dogs (1 Kings 21:23), and the text describes the fulfillment (2 Kings 9:8–10). Likewise, the punishment is foretold of Ahab (1 Kings 21:19, 24) and is fulfilled (1 Kings 22:37–38). The same prediction is made of Jeroboam and his house (1 Kings 14:10–11). Baasha is explicitly compared to Jeroboam and the same punishment is prescribed for Baasha and his house (1 Kings 16:1–4). The king-figure who is a stand-in for king Saul, Nabal, has a similar imprecation pronounced against him by David (1 Samuel 25:22, 34), which is also notable because Nabal is from the house of Caleb; the wordplays throughout the chapter on *Caleb* and *keleb*, “dog,” are noteworthy. The reader must connect Noah to the wicked kings of northern Israel. By invoking extensive and sophisticated allusions to the book of Kings, the text successfully characterizes Noah and foreshadows his end.

But the allusions don't just stop there. Abinadi's judgment doesn't just pertain to Noah, but to all his people. The punishment of having dogs and fowls lick the blood and eat the flesh applies not only to kings and their dynasties but their subjects also. Jeremiah foretells the punishment for Judah. They will be exiled, an exile that specifically invokes the figures of Moses and Samuel (Jeremiah 15:1). The punishment for neglecting God's law is famine, captivity, and the sword: “I will appoint over them four kinds, saith the Lord: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy” (Jeremiah 15:3). All of this is invoked because of the wicked reign of a single king of Judah: Manasseh (Jeremiah 15:4). Deuteronomy 28:26 likewise prophesies a similar end in exile if the Israelites disobey the law.

The punishment oracles of Abinadi are braided with references to the Deuteronomistic history and any adequate reading must take into account the radically intertextual character of the text.

### Thin Description, Thin Theorizing

Metcalfe's reading of the Book of Mormon is superficial because the theoretical assumptions he brings to the reading process are so impoverished. Metcalfe's reading method is to assume that the text will yield to a superficial reading, and so his expectations are rewarded.

Now I don't see how you can possibly explain the complex in terms of the simple without having your very success used as a charge against you. When you get through, all that your opponent need say is: "But you have explained the complex in terms of the simple—and the simple is precisely what the complex is not."<sup>57</sup>

That the Book of Mormon is simple is a presupposition that Metcalfe uncritically accepts. Can one demonstrate that the text is simple? I would be interested to see that. It is fairly easy to demonstrate that particular readings of a text are reductive and simplistic.

Since he has failed to demonstrate any sustained and accurate knowledge of contemporary literary, narrative, and biblical theory, I would be loath to accept either Metcalfe's diagnosis or treatment. I prefer doctors who have been to medical school.

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<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 262.