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Abstract The term *word of God* is used in rich and varied ways in the Book of Mormon. The word of God is of great worth and is clearly identified with Christ, or the Logos. The word of God is often portrayed as a two-edged sword, is associated with creation and power, provides both comfort and discomfort, is nourishing and enlightening, and plays a role in the last days. The fundamental characteristics of the word of God are constant throughout scripture.

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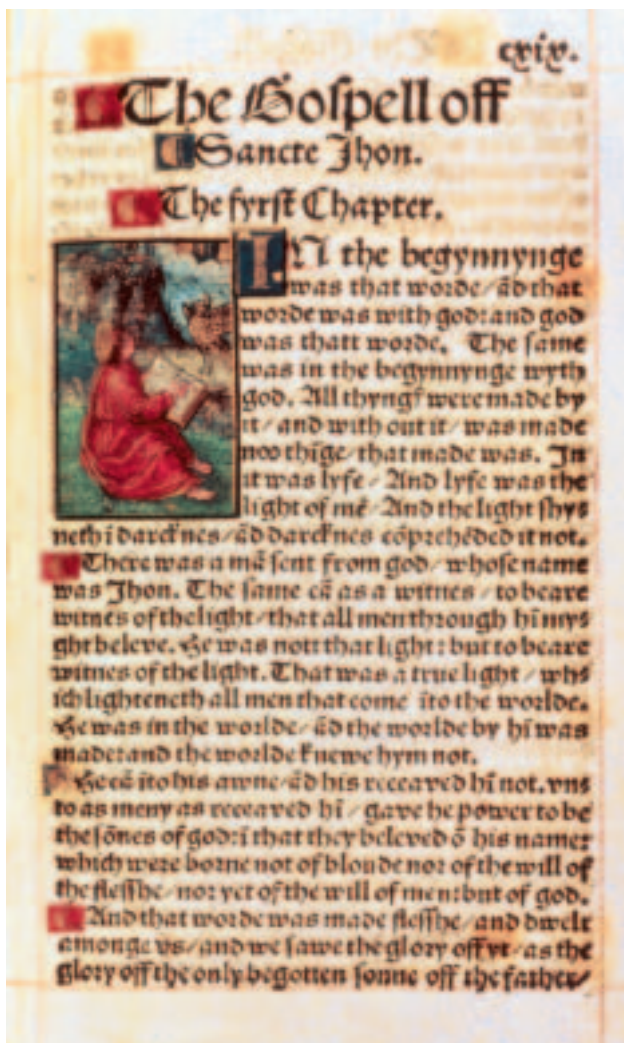
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In the beginning was the Word



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LDS King James Version

THE BOOK OF MORMON IS PERHAPS THE MOST LOGOS-CENTRIC OF ALL SCRIPTURE. ITS SIGNIFICANCE AS THE WORD OF GOD (LOGOS) IS EXPRESSED IN TERMS OF ITS DIVINE ORIGIN AND ROLE. WRITTEN “BY THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY AND OF REVELATION,” THIS SACRED TEXT WAS DESTINED TO “COME FORTH BY THE GIFT AND POWER OF GOD” AS AN ADDITIONAL TESTIMONY OF THE WORD OF GOD UNTO THE INHABITANTS OF THE EARTH (SEE TITLE PAGE, 1 NEPHI 13:38–41; 2 NEPHI 29:12–14; MORMON 7:8–9). IN ACCORDANCE WITH THAT PROPHETIC ROLE, REFERENCES IN THE RECORD TO THE WORD OF GOD ARE RICH AND VARIED.

Like other scriptural sources, the Book of Mormon contains cosmological references to the word of God as well as metaphorical images that reveal how the word of God intersects with people’s lives on a personal level. The many references to the word of God constitute an important thematic thread running through the record and indicate how fully the Book of Mormon peoples experienced the word of God in their lives. This study explores the multifaceted nature of this concept with enhanced appreciation for the Book of Mormon and its messages as the primary end in view.

Of Great Worth

Through both its narrative and commentary, the Book of Mormon places great value on written records. It is a point of emphasis, for example, that the Lord directed Lehi to send his sons on a risky mission to obtain the plates of brass from Laban (see 1 Nephi 3–4). Mormon’s pleased reaction upon discovering the smaller plates of Nephi while he was abridging the larger plates is another indication of the importance of sacred records (see Words of Mormon 1:3–6). The authors of the Nephite record were familiar with earlier scriptures and displayed their reverence for them by often quoting them, sometimes after a gap of several hundred years. Moreover, there is a pervasive awareness on the part of the book’s authors, narrators, and abridgers that they were recording the word of God, that the resulting record would come forth in a unique fashion, and that it would be of great worth.

Upon searching the plates of brass, Lehi was filled with the Spirit and prophesied that that record would never perish (see 1 Nephi 5:17–19). Nephi’s comment at that point in the narrative underscores the importance of the brass plates specifically and, by extension, of God’s word generally: “We . . . searched them and found that they were desirable;

yea, even of great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children” (1 Nephi 5:21). Nephi’s subsequent vision taught him that the rod of iron that his father had seen in vision was “the *word of God*, which led to the . . . tree of life,” a symbol of the love of God, the “most desirable above all things” (see 1 Nephi 11:22, 25). Thus it becomes clear from the outset of the Book of Mormon why the word of God came to be so highly valued by Nephi and his descendants.

Jesus Christ: The One Who Speaketh

In the Christian tradition that developed in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean region, Jesus Christ became identified with the concept of the Logos, the word of God, largely because the preface of John’s Gospel equates the Savior with the Greek term for “word,” *logos*: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This metaphor associates Christ with concepts of the Logos borrowed from Greek philosophy and Roman Stoicism.¹ John was highly influenced by Greek and Roman culture, which spread to Palestine with Alexander the Great’s military incursions there in the third century B.C. and with later rule by the Roman Empire. Lehi’s colony, however, had left the area toward the beginning of the sixth century B.C., thereby avoiding those influences on their culture and scriptural tradition.

Despite the Book of Mormon authors’ isolation from Greek and Roman influences, the text strongly emphasizes the association of Jesus Christ and the word of God, suggesting that the concept predates those influences. The most striking emphasis of this kind appears in Alma’s commandments to his son Shiblon:

And now, my son, I have told you this that ye may learn wisdom, that ye may learn of me that

there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ. Behold, he is the life and the light of the world. Behold, he is *the word* of truth and righteousness. (Alma 38:9; compare 3 Nephi 18:24; John 1:4; Doctrine and Covenants 84:45–46)

Alma’s speech is not as direct as John’s in personifying the word as Jesus Christ, yet Alma conveys the essential relationship between Christ and the word of God: that Christ is the source of “the word of truth and righteousness.” Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of John 1:1 clarifies John’s direct equivalence of Jesus Christ and the word by using a hierarchically arranged ordering: “In the beginning was the gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God” (John 1:1 JST). Here Christ is depicted as being responsible for imparting the word (the gospel).

As in John’s account, the word of God is personified in Helaman 3:29–30 as “lead[ing] the man of Christ in a . . . course across that everlasting gulf of misery . . . and land[ing] their souls . . . in the kingdom.” This rhetorical device illustrates the saving power of the scriptures (as in Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions of the iron rod that represented the word of God). Yet in this passage the role of both guiding and delivering souls is the role of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer. In this way the passage both characterizes the role of the Redeemer without explicitly stating it and personifies the scriptures as a very literal tool of redemption. Because Jesus Christ is strongly associated with the word, it is often difficult in scriptural interpretation to differentiate between the two.



“. . . and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword” (Revelation 1:16). Detail from late-15th-century stained-glass window, Sainte-Chapelle, Paris. (Illustration by Michael Lyon)

The strong association between the word of God and Jesus Christ is emphasized in Moroni’s narrative insertion in Ether 4, where he records the words that the Savior spoke to him concerning the coming forth of the records. Significantly, Jesus Christ characterizes himself as speaking: “for I am he who speaketh” (Ether 4:8), and later, “for ye shall know that it is I that speaketh, at the last day” (Ether 4:10; see 1 Nephi 11:11, where the Lord speaks to Nephi “as a man speaketh with another”). Speaking to Moroni, the Savior acknowledges his role as the one who speaks the word of God (Ether 4:8) and emphasizes the power of his word: “And at my command the heavens are opened and are shut; and at my word the earth shall shake; and at my command the inhabitants thereof shall pass away, even so as by fire” (Ether 4:9). As we will

now see, the power of Christ’s word is often characterized by the metaphor of the *Logos-tomeus*.

Logos-tomeus: A Metaphor for the Word of God

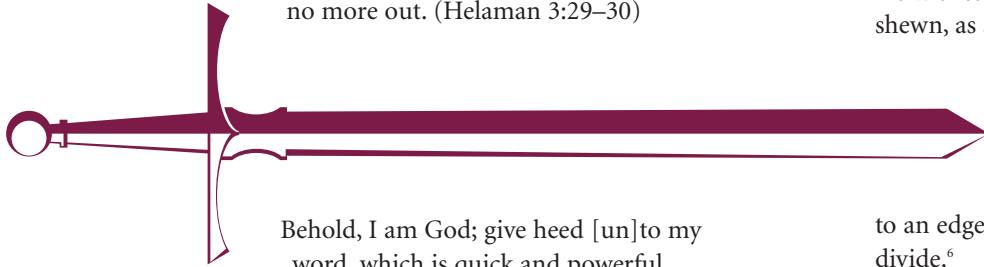
The numerous and varied scriptural references to the *Logos-tomeus* date back at least to the composition of the book of Isaiah.² This metaphor characterizes the word of God, *Logos*, as a *tomeus* (Greek for “cutter”).

Scripture often employs the word *sword* for this meaning, especially the “two-edged” sword. John A. Tvedtnes presents an extensive list of instances in which the terms *rod* and *sword* mean the word of God in both the Bible and latter-day scripture.³ He calls attention to how the word of God is similarly characterized in Hebrews 4:12 and Helaman 3:29–30, noting also that Hebrews 4:12 is one of the most frequently quoted scriptures in the early sections of the

Doctrine and Covenants. These passages are quoted below for easy comparison:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the *dividing asunder* of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall *divide asunder* all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—and land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out. (Helaman 3:29–30)



Behold, I am God; give heed [un]to my word, which is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the *dividing asunder* of both joints and marrow; therefore give heed unto my word[s]. (D&C 6:2; 11:2; 12:2; 14:2)

Behold, I say unto you, my servants Ezra and Northrop, open ye your ears and hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, whose word is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the *dividing asunder* of the joints and marrow, soul and spirit; and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (D&C 33:1)

Despite the differences of time and location, these scriptures exhibit striking similarities. All characterize the word of God as “quick and powerful.” The Greek words that supply these meanings in Hebrews 4:12 are ζῶος (living) and ἐνεργῆς (active, productive). In addition, all of these references use a form of the construction *to divide asunder*.⁴ There are differences, however, in what is divided. Hebrews 4:12 and the sections from the Doctrine and Covenants make direct references to the dividing that is associated with offering sacrifices (i.e.,

“joints and marrow”). Helaman 3:29, Hebrews 4:12, and Doctrine and Covenants 33 emphasize the epistemological significance of the word of God and link it to the ability to discern (divide) truth from falsehood.

Noting the prevalent use of this metaphor, Tvedtnes surmises, “The epistle to the Hebrews probably quoted a more ancient source, which was also borrowed in Helaman 3:29–30.”⁵ Further support of this idea is the use of the metaphor by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a near contemporary of Jesus Christ. Philo is known for his extensive philosophical works, including his commentaries on the writings of Moses. Two statements in his treatise entitled *Heres* (also known as *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things?*) employ the metaphor of the *Logos-tomeus* to emphasize the dividing function of the word of God:

He wishes you to think of God who cannot be shewn, as severing through the Severer of all things, that is his word, the whole succession of things material and immaterial whose natures appear to us to be knitted together and united. That severing word whetted to an edge of utmost sharpness never ceases to divide.⁶

Thus God sharpened the edge of his all cutting word, and divided universal being.⁷

Philo does not characterize the word as “quick and powerful,” but he does characterize it as “sharp,” as do many of the scriptural references cited above and others that will be discussed below.

The use of the *Logos-tomeus* metaphor in the same general time period by Paul, Helaman, and Philo—who were geographically removed from one another—points to a more ancient source of this metaphor, one that predates the departure of Lehi’s colony to the New World. Its widespread use also indicates that different authors considered it a very apt characterization of the word of God.

As a master metaphor, the *Logos-tomeus* reflects belief that the word of God can divide or differentiate on many levels. On a literal level, the two-edged sword divides the sacrificial animal. On an epistemological level, the word of God helps us discern truth from falsehood. And on an axiological level, the word of God defines righteousness and unrighteousness.⁸ Philo’s characterization of the word as

“dividing” is unique in that he associates it with the literal act of creation rather than with the literal act of sacrifice. Interestingly, however, Philo’s *Heres* is a commentary on Genesis 15, the chapter in which Abraham offers the sacrifices that seal his covenant with God. In fact, Philo’s discussion of the *Logos-tomeus* begins when he explains that Abraham “divided them [the sacrificial animals] in the midst” (Genesis 15:10).

The Word of God and Creation

Philo of Alexandria explored the dynamic of creation through the concept of the *Logos-tomeus*. In his view the word of God accomplishes creation through the continuous differentiation of things “material and immaterial.” From the opening verses of Genesis, we witness a similar dynamic: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light . . . : and God divided the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3–4). Whether focusing on the concept of division or not, all scriptural accounts of creation seem to indicate a strong association between the spoken word of God and the creative acts of God.

In the Pearl of Great Price, God instructs Moses about the creation of the world: “And by the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth” (Moses 1:32). A few verses later, God associates the “uncreation” of worlds with the concept of the word as well: “For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power” (Moses 1:35). Interestingly, in these two scriptures the common ordering of *power* and *word* is reversed. The word is presented as an emanation of “power,” that is, something that derives and goes forth from it. The only other use of this construction in scripture occurs in Moses 2:5, Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of Genesis 1:5: “And I, God, called the light Day; and the darkness, I called Night; and this I did by the word of my power, and it was done as I spake.” Significantly, it is God who speaks to Moses, recognizing that Jesus Christ emanates from Him and equating “the word” directly with Jesus Christ, His Only Begotten Son. But God the Father is also acknowledging that the words that Jesus Christ speaks (and thus the creative acts that Jesus Christ accomplishes) originate with Him. He explains to Moses, “My works are without end, and also my words, for they never cease” (Moses 1:4).

This association between the word of God and

creation also appears in the Book of Mormon. The first reference occurs in Jacob’s speech to the Nephites: “For behold, by the power of his *word* man came upon the face of the earth, which earth was created by the power of his *word*” (Jacob 4:9). We notice that in this passage, unlike the passages in the Book of Moses, “power” emanates from “his [God’s] word.” Moroni presents the same association between word, power, and God’s act of creation:

Who shall say that it was not a miracle that by his word the heaven and the earth should be; and by the power of his word man was created of the dust of the earth; and by the power of his word have miracles been wrought? (Mormon 9:17)

The fact that Jacob, who was one of the original colonists, and Moroni, who was the last known survivor of his people, both appeal to this imagery shows its enduring importance for Nephite teachers.

Power and the Word of God

Scripture indicates that the power of the word of God is not limited to the initial acts of creation, but exerts control over the physical world as well. Helaman 12, one of Mormon’s admonitory insertions into his history of the Nephites, presents a stirring litany on the power of the word of God over the natural elements. Mormon writes:

O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the *dividing asunder*, at the [spoken] command of our great and everlasting God. (Helaman 12:7–8)

Significantly, the power of the word of God over natural elements can be transferred to individuals, a common theme in scripture. When this happens, the word of God is often characterized as the release of a power not intrinsic to the person speaking. In many of these instances the power of the word of God is tied directly to miracles. Two such instances are recorded about the disciples of Christ who suffered persecutions:

And they were cast down into the earth; but they did smite the earth with the word of God, inasmuch that *by his power* they were delivered out of the depths of the earth; and therefore they could not dig pits sufficient to hold them. (3 Nephi 28:20)

Therefore they did exercise power and authority over the disciples of Jesus who did tarry with them, and they did cast them into prison; but *by the power of the word of God*, which was in them, the prisons were rent in twain, and they went forth doing mighty miracles among them.

(4 Nephi 1:30)

One of the most moving passages in the Book of Mormon appears in Mormon 8:24. Having taken over the sacred records after his father's death, Moroni discusses the valiant who have died and how they will cry from the dust. The following verse summarizes many of the miracles that the people of God were able to bring about by the power of his word:

And he knoweth their prayers, that they were in behalf of their brethren. And he knoweth their faith, for in his name could they remove mountains; and in his name could they cause the earth to shake; and *by the power of his word* did they cause prisons to tumble to the earth; yea, even the fiery furnace could not harm them, neither wild beasts nor poisonous serpents, because of *the power of his word*. (Mormon 8:24)

The Book of Mormon also emphasizes that it was the word of God that allowed Old Testament prophets to perform miracles. In rebuking his brothers for criticizing his desire to carry out the Lord's command to build a ship, Nephi points out all that Moses was able to accomplish through the power of the word of God. After citing many examples of Moses' miracles, Nephi concludes:

And it came to pass that *according to [God's] word* he did destroy them; and *according to his word* he did lead them; and *according to his word* he did do all things for them; and there was not any thing done save it were *by his word*. (1 Nephi 17:31)

The experiences of Lehi and his family in the wilderness are strikingly similar to the experiences of Moses and the Israelites in the desert.⁹ Both are displaced groups who must hearken to the word of the Lord in order to reach their promised destinations. Nephi's summation of the Israelites' experiences—that “according to [God's] word he did do all things for them; and there was not any thing done save it were by his word”—echoes the experiences of Lehi's group. The emerging Nephite culture continued to value the word of God, a fact mirrored thematically throughout the Book of Mormon. As we will see, the Nephite record depicts

the differing roles of the word of God in people's lives.

The Word of God as Comforting

The word of God is often characterized as providing comfort to those who accept it. In an early example, Jacob calls the Nephites together to chasten those in transgression. Before spelling out their iniquities, he says, “And it supposeth me that they [the innocent] have come up hither to hear the pleasing word of God, yea, the word which healeth the wounded soul” (Jacob 2:8).

Later in the record we find a similar characterization of the word of God. Ammon and the other sons of Mosiah have just been reunited after their missions to the Lamanites. Ammon rejoices in the power that the word of God has brought about in the lives of the people whom they have taught:

Behold, how many thousands of our brethren has he loosed from the pains of hell; and they are brought to sing redeeming love, and this because of the power of his word which is in us, therefore have we not great reason to rejoice? (Alma 26:13)

The Word of God as Discomforting

Just as the word of God can be comforting to those who accept it, it can be discomforting—“hard,” “sharp,” or “strict”—to those who reject it. This dichotomy is a prevalent theme in the Book of Mormon. The prophet Jacob explains it in these terms:

O, my beloved brethren, give ear to my words. Remember the greatness of the Holy One of Israel. Do not say that I have spoken hard things against you; for if ye do, ye will revile against the truth; for *I have spoken the words of your Maker*. I know that *the words of truth are hard* against all uncleanness; but the righteous fear them not, for they love the truth and are not shaken. (2 Nephi 9:40)

Nephi expresses a similar sentiment after explaining the vision of the tree of life to his brothers:

And it came to pass that I said unto them that I knew that I had spoken hard things against the wicked, according to the truth; and the righteous have I justified, and testified that they should be lifted up at the last day; wherefore, the guilty *taketh the truth to be hard*, for it cutteth them to the very center. (1 Nephi 16:2)



“Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God” (Helaman 3:29). *The Rod and the Veil*, by Franz M. Johansen. (Courtesy of Brigham Young University Museum of Art. All rights reserved.)

Nephi’s speech contains a reference to the Logos-*tomeus* metaphor in which the truth of the word of God acts as a “cutter” (“it cutteth them”) and causes pain to the guilty. Abinadi expresses the same idea when he challenges King Noah and his wicked priests: “I perceive that it [his message] cuts you to your hearts because I tell you the truth concerning your iniquities” (Mosiah 13:7).

The characterization of the word of God as “sharp” also applies to the dichotomy of how the righteous and the unrighteous receive the word of God. An early example of this is recorded in Lehi’s speech to Laman and Lemuel, wherein he rebukes

them for their treatment of Nephi:

And ye have murmured because he hath been plain unto you. Ye say that *he hath used sharpness*; ye say that he hath been angry with you; but behold, *his sharpness was the sharpness of the power of the word of God*, which was in him; and that which ye call anger was the truth, according to that which is in God, which he could not restrain, manifesting boldly concerning your iniquities. (2 Nephi 1:26)

Mormon discusses in similar terms the preaching of the word at the time of King Benjamin: “And there were many holy men in the land, and they did speak

the word of God with power and with authority; and *they did use much sharpness* because of the stiff-neckedness of the people” (Words of Mormon 1:17). In his second epistle to his son Moroni, Mormon notes that he too must use “sharpness” when addressing the people: “Behold, I am laboring with them continually; and when I *speak the word of God with sharpness* they tremble and anger against me; and when I *use no sharpness* they harden their hearts against it” (Moroni 9:4).

The word of God also offends the wicked because of its strictness, as seen in Alma’s reflections at the end of his mission to the Zoramites:

Now Alma, being grieved for the iniquity of his people, yea for the wars, and the bloodsheds, and the contentions which were among them; and having been to declare the word, or sent to declare the word, among all the people in every city; and seeing that the hearts of the people began to wax hard, and that they began to be offended because of the *strictness of the word*, his heart was exceedingly sorrowful. (Alma 35:15)

Jacob, when chastising the Nephites for their iniquities, notes the sorrow that the righteous feel when witnessing iniquity: “And because of the *strictness of the word of God*, which cometh down against you, many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds” (Jacob 2:35).

The Word of God as Nourishing

Another dimension of the word of God is that it can provide nourishment. For example, Jacob challenges his fellow Nephites: “For behold, after ye have been nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire?” (Jacob 6:7). In discussing conversion, Moroni likewise employs the metaphor of the word of God as a nourishing agent:

Their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer, relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith. (Moroni 6:4)

In speaking comforting words to the Nephites who have survived the destructions following his crucifixion, the Savior characterizes himself as providing nourishment:

O ye people of these great cities which have fallen, who are descendants of Jacob, yea, who are of the

house of Israel, how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you. (3 Nephi 10:4)

The imagery that Jesus Christ employs in this passage expresses the idea that he nourishes his people by imparting his word unto them, either directly or through prophets. Only one scriptural reference outside of the Book of Mormon characterizes the word of God as nourishing: “If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, *nourished up* in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained” (1 Timothy 4:6).

Of course, one must embrace and partake of the word of God in order to be nourished. Thus Jacob counsels the Nephites to “feast upon” the word of God:

Wherefore, do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy. Hearken diligently unto me, and remember the words which I have spoken; and come unto the Holy One of Israel, and *feast upon that which perisheth not*, neither can be corrupted, and let your soul delight in fatness. (2 Nephi 9:51; compare Isaiah 55:1–2)

The image of feasting upon the word of God appears six times in scripture, all in the Book of Mormon.¹⁰ In the excerpt from Jacob’s speech cited above, the image of feasting on the word is visually developed. The word of God is eternal; thus it is like food that cannot spoil. It is also abundant and pleasing, so Jacob states, “Let your soul delight in fatness.” Nephi employs this metaphor of feasting in the closing chapters of 2 Nephi: “Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, *feasting upon the word of Christ*, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20, see 2 Nephi 32:3). Jacob uses the metaphor twice when he addresses the Nephites in the temple (see Jacob 2:9; 3:2).

In Alma’s speech to the poor of the Zoramites, the images of being nourished by the word and feasting upon the word appear in a slightly different context. Alma counsels them to nourish the word of God, completing the imagery that we are not only nourished by the word, but that we need to nourish it as well: “If ye will *nourish the word* . . . by your faith . . . it shall be a tree springing up into everlasting life” (Alma 32:41). This process will produce fruit, he explains, and “ye shall *feast upon* this fruit even until ye are filled” (Alma 32:42). Alma empha-

sizes that those who do not nourish the word “can never pluck of the fruit of the tree of life” (Alma 32:40), a point that resonates with Nephi’s imagery in 1 Nephi 11:25.

The word of God can also be “tasted,” as seen in Alma’s commandments to his son Helaman:

For because of the word which [God] has imparted unto me, behold, many have been born of God, and have *tasted as I have tasted*, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen; therefore they do know of these things of which I have spoken, as I do know; and the knowledge which I have is of God. (Alma 36:26)

This metaphor is very similar to feasting upon the word of God, but it is found in the Bible as well. It

THE ENLIGHTENING
WORD OF GOD ENABLES
US TO DISCERN TRUTH
FROM FALSEHOOD.
IT CAN EXPOSE AND
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first appears in Psalms: “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (119:103). Alma, however, uses this image in the more active sense of gaining understanding: because he has preached the word of God, many people have come to understand the things of God as he understands them. Paul employs this image in a similar sense, but he discloses its perilous aspect when he explains that those who have been “once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and . . . tasted the good word of God,” and later “fall away” cannot be “renew[ed] . . . unto repentance” (Hebrews 6:4–6).

The Word of God as Enlightening

The Book of Mormon also testifies that it is the word of God that enlightens us and expands our minds (see Alma 32:34). This concept is often conveyed through the images of light and darkness in which the word of God is characterized as bringing people into the light and unto understanding. Through Jacob, the Lord prophesies that he “will be a light unto them forever, that hear my words” (2 Nephi 10:14). In a speech to his brethren, Nephi makes a similar point and then adds a warning about spiritual darkness: “After I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark” (2 Nephi 32:4). Alma develops this dichotomy of light versus darkness more fully in his speech to the people of Zarahemla. Recounting the conversion of those who embraced his father’s teachings, he states:

Behold, he [God] changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. Behold, they were in the midst of darkness; nevertheless, *their souls were illuminated by the light of the everlasting word*; yea, they were encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell, and an everlasting destruction did await them. (Alma 5:7)

The enlightening word of God enables us to discern truth from falsehood. For example, it can expose and “divide asunder” the temptations and snares of the devil (see Helaman 3:29). Alma 35 records that the rulers, priests, and teachers of the Zoramites would not listen to Alma and Amulek because the word of God “did destroy their craft” by which they propagated lies and deceit in order to exercise power over the people (see vv. 3–5). Understanding this quality of the word of God, Alma, at an earlier time, relinquished the judgment-seat and embarked on a ministry in which he hoped to “pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them” (Alma 4:19).

In Nephi’s writings the image of “feeling” the word means “to understand” or “to internalize” the word. Nephi chastises his brothers because their lack of understanding is a direct result of their unresponsiveness to the word of God:

Ye are swift to do iniquity but slow to remember the Lord your God. Ye have seen an angel, and he spake unto you; yea, ye have heard his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were *past feeling*, that ye could not feel his words; wherefore, he has spoken unto you like unto the voice of thunder, which did cause the earth to shake as if it were to *divide asunder*. (1 Nephi 17:45)¹¹

The Word of God and the Last Days

Excluding the book of Ether, the narrative time recorded in the Book of Mormon dates from around 600 B.C. to around A.D. 421. Throughout this 1,000-year period, the numerous Book of Mormon authors shared an understanding of the importance of the records they were keeping and knew through prophecy that the resulting book would come forth in a unique fashion. This knowledge was made known to even the earliest prophets. In his closing words to his son Joseph, Lehi prophesied of the Prophet Joseph Smith and of the coming forth of the Nephite record (see 2 Nephi 3:11–15). Nephi recognized from the beginning that he was making plates and keeping sacred records for a “wise purpose” (1 Nephi 9:5; see 1 Nephi 6: 19). Enos, knowing the struggles that his brethren, the Lamanites, would endure, prayed “that the Lord God would preserve a record of my people, . . . that it might be brought forth at some future day” (Enos 1:13). The Lord responded, “Thy fathers have also required of me this thing; and it shall be done unto them according to their faith; for their faith was like unto thine” (v. 18).

Several scriptures in the Book of Mormon refer specifically to the fact that the records would be “brought forth” in the latter days. Two images are commonly used to express this idea: that the words contained in the records would “hiss forth” and that the Book of Mormon peoples would figuratively “cry from the dust.”

The word *hiss* has varied meanings in the scriptures.¹² Interestingly, it is found only in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. As a noun or verb, *hiss* can be used in a derogatory sense: “And I will make this city desolate, and *an hissing*; every one that passeth thereby shall be astonished and *hiss* because of all the plagues thereof” (Jeremiah 19:8; emphasis added). This is the most common sense of *hiss* in the Old Testament, and this sense appears

three times in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 19:14; 3 Nephi 16:9; 29:8). Isaiah used the verb *hiss* in a positive sense to convey the meaning of gathering: “And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will *hiss unto them* from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly” (Isaiah 5:26). Isaiah’s words are repeated in 2 Nephi 15:26. In the Old Testament, Zechariah records, “I will hiss for them, and gather them” (Zechariah 10:8).¹³

Whereas the Lord will “hiss” to gather his people, the Book of Mormon describes that the records, the word of God, would “hiss forth.” Unique to the Book of Mormon, this construction refers specifically to the coming forth of the scriptures. The Lord prophesies to Nephi:

And also, that I may remember the promises which I have made unto thee, Nephi, and also unto thy father, that I would remember your seed; and that the words of your seed should proceed forth out of my mouth unto your seed; and my words shall *hiss forth* unto the ends of the earth, for a standard unto my people, which are of the house of Israel; and because my words shall *hiss forth*—many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible. (2 Nephi 29:2–3)

Moroni uses this same image in one of the last verses of the Book of Mormon:

I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall *hiss forth* from generation to generation. (Moroni 10:28)

The image of crying from the dust is also unique to the Book of Mormon, and its initial use, like the image of hissing forth, comes from the Lord. Lehi records the following prophecy in his closing remarks to his son Joseph:

And the words which he shall write shall be the words which are expedient in my wisdom should go forth unto the fruit of thy loins. And it shall be as if the fruit of thy loins had *cried unto them from the dust*; for I know their faith. And they shall *cry from the dust*; yea, even repentance unto their brethren, even after many generations have gone by them. And it shall come to pass that their *cry* shall go, even according to the simplicity of their words. (2 Nephi 3:19–20)

Nephi repeats this image in his farewell at the close of 2 Nephi: “I speak unto you as the voice of one *crying from the dust*: Farewell until that great day shall come” (33:13).

Moroni commonly repeats the words of earlier Book of Mormon authors, demonstrating his understanding of and appreciation for scripture. As noted above, he reiterates in the closing verses of his book that the scriptures would “hiss forth.” He also adopts the image that the Book of Mormon peoples will “cry from the dust” and uses this image on three occasions—the first in Mormon 8:23 (the Lord will remember his covenant with Moroni’s predecessors who “shall cry, yea, even from the dust will they cry unto the Lord”), the second in Ether 8:24 (those “who have been slain” by a secret combination will “cry from the dust for vengeance”), and the third in Moroni’s farewell speech:

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one *crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?* (Moroni 10:27)

Toward Fuller Appreciation and Understanding

This study has analyzed the varied and rich ways that the word of God is characterized in the Book of Mormon. We often approach the scriptures on different levels. At times we focus on the narrative stories that edify us and serve as examples in our lives.

At other times we focus on the advice of the prophets concerning spiritual and temporal subjects. Searching the subtleties of the language of the Book of Mormon helps us to appreciate the importance of scripture in developing an understanding of our lives and our relationship with our Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ speaks to us through scripture, the language of scripture mediates our understanding of who we are and who we strive to be.

As we study the word of God in the Book of Mormon, we recognize important similarities and differences in how this concept is characterized in other scripture. Significantly, however, the fundamental characteristics of the word of God are constant throughout scripture, namely, that the word of God played an essential role in the creation, that it holds a continuing influence over the natural elements, and that it can be transferred to individuals. Certain images associated with the word of God also remain constant throughout scripture, most notably the metaphor of the *Logos-tomeus*. Some images are unique to the Book of Mormon because they describe a unique circumstance, such as the concept that the Book of Mormon peoples would “cry from the dust.” As expected, other images in the Book of Mormon seem to have come directly from the Old World, such as the concept of “tasting” the word or “hissing,” and seem to have evolved during the 1,000-year narrative period of the Book of Mormon. All of these images serve to demonstrate the multifaceted and powerful nature of the word of God. ■

The Word of God

Leslie A. Taylor

1. For a concise overview of the differing concepts of the Logos in Hellenism, Judaism, and early Christian theology, see J. Lebreton, "The Logos," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann (New York: Universal Knowledge Foundation, 1913–14), 9:328–31.
2. Two uses of the metaphor of the Logos-tomeus are found in sections of Isaiah quoted in the Book of Mormon. The first occurs in 1 Nephi 21:2: "He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword" (compare Isaiah 49:2), and the second in 2 Nephi 7:8: "Who is mine adversary? Let him come near me, and I will smite him with the strength of my mouth" (compare Isaiah 50:8, which omits the last clause). This image that associates the word of God with a sword is also prevalent in the book of Revelation (see 1:16; 2:12, 16).

3. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Rod and Sword as the Word of God," *JBMS* 5/2 (1996): 148–55.
4. The verb form *to divide asunder* seems to possess specific meaning in regard to both sacrifice and the power of the word of God. This construction occurs only 13 times in scripture, 7 of which are quoted in this article. Two references in the Old Testament—Leviticus 1:17 and 5:8—state that sacrificial birds should not be "divided asunder." Hebrews 4:12 (quoted earlier) is the only instance of this construction in the New Testament. The Book of Mormon contains the richest uses of this verb form. It is found in Helaman 3:29, 3 Nephi 8:6; Helaman 5:33; 12:8; and 1 Nephi 17:45 (the last two will be discussed later). All five uses of this construction in the Doctrine and Covenants were quoted earlier.
5. Tvedtnes, in "Rod and Sword," also notes that although in the Helaman passage the word of God "seems to be compared to a sword," the common language and imagery of this passage "ties [Helaman 3:29–30] to Lehi's vision, where it is the rod or the word of God that brings people safely past Satan's obstacles" (p. 154). Helaman 3:29–30 would seem to have two intertextual sources: the unidentified Old World source that it shares with Hebrews 4:12 and also Lehi's vision of the tree of life.
6. Philo, *Heres* 130, in *Philo*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (1932; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958).
7. Philo, *Heres* 140, in *Philo*, trans. Colson and Whitaker. For more discussion on Philo's use of the Logos-tomeus metaphor, see David M. Hay, "Philo's Treatise on the Logos-Cutter," *Studia Philonica* 2 (1973): 9–22. For a general background on Philo's life and writings, see David T. Runia, "Philo, Alexandrian and Jew," in *Exegesis and Philosophy: Studies on Philo of Alexandria* (Brookfield, Vt.: Gower, 1990), 1–18.
8. In his decision to lead a mission to the apostate Zoramites, Alma recognizes that the word of God can transmit virtue: "And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God" (Alma 31:5).
9. For a discussion of the striking parallels between the exodus story and Nephi's account of his family's journey in the wilderness, see Terrence L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 38–51.
10. Richard D. Rust notes that feasting on the word is "implicitly a sacramental experience" (*Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 245).
11. Paul uses the phrase *past feeling* in Ephesians 4:19, but it appears nowhere else in the Bible or in other LDS scripture besides the Book of Mormon. The verb *to feel* is used to express other unique concepts in scripture. For example, *to feel after* is used to convey the meaning "to seek after Jesus Christ" in Acts 17:27 and D&C 101:8. Jesus Christ uses the expression in D&C 112:13: "Behold, I, the Lord, will feel after them." Interestingly, Exodus 10:21 and 3 Nephi 8:20 both refer to a darkness that can be "felt." Like the concept of the word of God, the verb *to feel* possesses rich and varied meanings in scripture.
12. The words *an hissing* and *hiss* in the KJV translate derivatives of Hebrew *šāraq*, meaning to hiss or whistle as a signal or summons.
13. In 2 Nephi 29 the Lord associates the gathering of his people with the gathering of his word: "And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one" (v. 14).