Joseph Smith's American Bible: Radicalizing the Familiar

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The Book of Mormon treats many topics that most nineteenth-century Christians would have been thoroughly familiar with: the fall, atonement, and resurrection, just to name a few. However, the Book of Mormon treats these subjects in a way that would have required such readers to rethink their relationship with the divine, their place in Christian history, and God’s relationship to history. Christ’s visit to the New World, the continuance of the scriptural canon, and abundant personalized revelation all create a text that is both familiar and radical.
The nine-teenth century saw repeated calls for an authentic American Bible. Restorationist Walter Scott described the second Great Awakening as rife with rumors of a “new Bible.” He probably didn’t have Walt Whitman in mind, but Whitman considered his mission to be “The Great Construction of the New Bible” and thought he pulled it off with *Leaves of Grass*.

Scott did not have Joseph Smith in mind either, but when the century’s dust had settled, the Book of Mormon had emerged as the foremost claimant for the title. There are two principal points to be made about the Book of Mormon’s status as an “American Bible,” or more generally, as modern scripture. The first is this: the Book of Mormon emphasizes its own provenance in a way that deserves closer attention. Indeed, provenance is the book’s first, and perhaps most important, theme. This theme goes a long way to explain the structure of the Book of Mormon and its particular purpose as intended by its narrators. Second, the Book of Mormon fully engages familiar nineteenth-century scriptural forms, terms, and categories, only to subvert them and constitute them into an utterly new American Bible; for instance, a few of these themes are revelation, Christology, Zion, and scripture.

Provenance

Read against the paradigm of Judeo-Christian scripture, the opening of the Book of Mormon is conspicuously unusual. The Book of Mormon opens with a series of sentences that claim and reaffirm one central point: the original story that we are reading was personally narrated—and recorded—by a man named Nephi: “I Nephi . . . make a record of my proceedings in my days,” he writes. Then he adds, “I make a record in the language of my father”; “I make” a record which I know “is true”; “I make it with my own hand”; and “I make it according to my knowledge” (1 Nephi 1:1–3).

Why all this redundancy? Why such emphatic insistence on the literal origins of the record, with Nephi’s own hand? Clearly, unlike the impersonal voice with which Genesis opens the biblical account of creation, focusing as it does on cosmic history,
The most striking claim within the Book of Mormon is undoubtedly its insistence that Jesus Christ was worshipped in the Western hemisphere, by way of anticipation, as long ago as six centuries BC.
epic events, and God’s primal acts of creation, the Book of Mormon’s first named author urgently presses upon his audience the very human, very local, and very historical nature of his narrative. It is as far removed from mythic beginnings and anonymous narratives as he can possibly make it. This is firsthand, eyewitness history of local events (set in 600 BC Jerusalem, we learn shortly). It is a beginning also strikingly unlike the gospels of the New Testament. None of the authors of the four Gospels, as certain critics delight to point out, identify themselves in their account of Jesus. There is no, “I, Matthew, proceed to give an account of one Jesus of Nazareth,” or “I, Mark, write this narrative of the Christ.” Some of these critics, in fact, find the unstipulated authorship of the Gospels to be a blow against their authenticity or reliability. Of course, we could read the silence differently. The anonymity of those four books seems almost calculated to emphasize the infinitely greater significance of the Christ who is the focus of their narratives. The authors themselves disappear in deference to the Messiah they proclaim. The Book of Mormon, by contrast, begins with the personal introduction of the book’s first author: “I, Nephi.” We need to ask why. To say it is because he is beginning a family history is, we shall see, insufficient as an explanation.

True enough, Nephi is a self-described record keeper who believes God has called him to maintain an account of his clan. He gradually comes to an awakening of his record’s importance and future mission, and of his own inability to personally steer and shepherd his work to its intended audience that he only vaguely apprehends. This preoccupation with audience, and with self-authentication in the face of his inability to control the fate of his written words and the terms of their reception, weighs upon him like a sacred burden. He cannot make any claims for the record’s future disposition. But he can attest to its past, its origins. Hence, the motif that Nephi deliberately decides to foreground is the record’s provenance, and his concern is to make it indisputable.

In art history, provenance means derivation. More fully, it refers to authenticity that is secured in a particular way, establishing the true origins of an object by verifying its unbroken history of transmission from original owner to the present. In the Book of Mormon, we never lose sight of the links in the chain of transmission. This fact is no coincidence. And it makes sense of the otherwise peculiar series of perfunctory and yet dutiful handoffs that Nephi’s descendants make to each successor. For after Nephi, each inheritor of the plates of ore attests to the unbroken chain of transmission, calling the responsibility to continue the tradition a “commandment” passed on through the generations. The weight of solemn obligation felt by these chroniclers is evident in their clear attestations of a responsibility both executed and then transferred, and explains the curious feature of the Book of Mormon’s structure in which a series of mini-books follows upon the heels of Enos’s record.

For it is precisely this very brevity, it is the dutiful but soulless nature of some of these entries, that points all the more powerfully to the intimidating magnitude of the obligation the authors have inherited to maintain intact the line of transmission, the authentication of the provenance, of the sacred records.

The accounts of Nephi, Jacob, and Enos are progressively shorter, and that of Enos’s son Jarom is only two pages, making it the shortest of all books named for their authors. (The only exception is the Words of Mormon, but that is more of an explanatory editorial insertion than a chapter proper.) Following Jarom’s brief account, the succeeding chronicles are too short to even constitute books. In one case, that of Chemish, his stewardship takes the form of a single paragraph.
This perfunctory brevity and the self-confessed wickedness of authors like Omni make the whole section seem, somehow, too mechanical—almost pointless. Why do they so dutifully fill their roles when their hearts seem so little invested in record keeping, and why do editors Nephi and Mormon alike leave their portions intact? A terribly important point hinges on those questions. For it is precisely this very brevity, it is the dutiful but soulless nature of some of these entries, that points all the more powerfully to the intimidating magnitude of the obligation the authors have inherited to maintain intact the line of transmission, the authentication of the provenance, of the sacred records. This is the message conveyed loudly and clearly by the economical Chemish: “Now I, Chemish, write what few things I write in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. And I make an end” (Omni 9).

So, that is the first detail of the Book of Mormon that draws attention: the authorial preoccupation—almost obsessive concern—with authenticating the record’s provenance. We are never permitted to lose sight of a documented genealogy that extends back in time—not to an anonymous author, or an implied Moses or even pseudepigraphal writer—but through a meticulously documented lineage to a historical personage of flesh and blood, who fashioned with his own hands the very materials on which the record was engraved. And from those hands, going forward, through a thousand years to Moroni. And one can now see the bridge from Moroni to Joseph Smith, attested to by the sworn affidavits of eleven men, as following in this same path, of confirming with legalistic documentation the still unbroken history of the record’s provenance. That is why, even though the final form those plates take is a printed volume and is now mass produced, each copy nonetheless inherits the same pedigree, and each volume can therefore function as a sacred artifact, a holy icon, from the moment the first copy came off the Palmyra press. This is the final meaning of the book’s ironclad guarantee of provenance. Aaron’s budding rod was not a horticultural treasure, the pot of manna was not a culinary relic, and the Book of Mormon’s primary function has never been textual. It is oracular.

A very accomplished scholar of Mormonism has continued to insist, at least in private conversations, that no one will take Mormonism’s theology seriously until Mormons learn to mythologize their scriptures. That remark fails to appreciate the very dimension to the Book of Mormon I have just indicated. For this aspect of the Book of Mormon, so self-consciously and pointedly constructed by its narrators, is stubbornly resistant to such acts of dislocation from history—and from authorial rootedness. Why is this unbroken chain of transmission so important? Because that is how the narrator of this record enacts, rather than describes, an uninterrupted connection to the divine that transcends centuries and continents. The Book of Mormon, precisely because of the testimony of its own provenance, functions in a way best captured by the imagery of George Herbert’s magnificent poem, “The Pearl.” “Through the labyrinths of this world,” the poet writes, addressing his God,

not my grovelling wit,
But thy silk twist let down from heav’n to me,
[Does] both conduct and teach me, how by it
To climb to thee. 3

In its own self-portrayal, the Book of Mormon functions as that silk twist let down from heaven.

Theme

Moving on to the content rather than the structure of this work, something is thematically at work that reinterprets, and does not just reenacts, this meaning of scripture as sacred contact with the divine. This new scriptural identity is based upon, even as it creatively restructures, biblical elements. This is what I mean by the radicalizing of the familiar. As illustration, I will draw attention to four examples—four motifs in particular in the Book of Mormon: revelation, Christology, Zion, and scripture. It is no coincidence that each of these topics is introduced by successive visionary experiences of Lehi.

We know virtually nothing for certain of Lehi or his background except that he is a person of wealth and, as his wife laments and Lehi agrees, is a “visionary man” (1 Nephi 5:2, 4). His first recorded vision occurs as Lehi is praying “with all his heart”
(1 Nephi 1:5) on behalf of his people. Strangely, this is the only one of Lehi’s visions about whose content we are told nothing at all. Nephi simply reveals that as Lehi prays, “there came a pillar of fire . . . and he saw and heard much” (1 Nephi 1:6). No details of the message, no particulars of any message, are available to distract from the fact of the visitation itself, given to a man who shares neither the public prestige nor, so far as we can tell, the national stewardship of his contemporary Jeremiah. What we do have is the sheer fact of a personal revelation, apparently containing images and words (“he saw and heard much”), that comes as a result of petitionary prayer and profoundly affects the recipient. This definition of revelation as propositional, or content-bearing, will become one of the dominant themes of the Book of Mormon, even as it is manifested in the lives of a broadening range of recipients.

Immediately following Lehi’s first vision, he returns to his home and experiences a second vision. This one takes the form initially of a theophany, or vision of God, and calls to mind the divine assembly described in Old Testament passages like Psalm 82 or 2 Chronicles 18. Lehi sees “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” Then follows a sight that is decidedly without Old Testament precedent: “And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he saw also twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Nephi 1:8–10). Christians have not shrunk from reading messianic prophecies into the psalms or passages from Isaiah and Zechariah. But nothing biblical approaches the degree of specificity with which Book of Mormon prophets and writers detail their anticipation of a Christ, six centuries before his birth. Christocentrism pervades the text from its first pages to its last.

Following this vision, which includes forebodings of the destruction of Jerusalem, Lehi preaches repentance to an unreceptive populace. Like Jeremiah’s exhortations, which led to his persecution and imprisonment, Lehi’s public warnings prompt threats against his life (1 Nephi 1:19–20). Consequently, Lehi receives a third vision, wherein God commands him to take his family and flee into the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:1–2). Lehi promptly complies, setting in motion the principal action of the early Book of Mormon, the family’s journey to and settlement of a new world. This exodus also establishes a structural motif, as the first of many hegiras the Book of Mormon records. Flight from the old Jerusalem and building new ones, scattering and gathering, covenantal integrity in the midst of apostasy and dispersion and a “land of promise”—all these constitute variants of the Book of Mormon’s recurring theme of building Zion in the wilderness.

After traveling three days in the wilderness by the Red Sea, Lehi and his family make camp. There south of Jerusalem, Lehi has a fourth dream-vision,
in which he is commanded to send his four sons back to Jerusalem to secure a record of the Jews, together with a family genealogy, inscribed on plates of brass (1 Nephi 3). This is a formidable challenge because the plates are in the possession of one Laban, apparently a Jewish official of some standing. Twice the brothers fail, almost losing their lives in the process. Nephi himself returns a third time and succeeds unaided, but only through the extreme measure of killing a drunken and helpless Laban at the persistent urging of “the Spirit” (1 Nephi 4). The cost in expense, effort, and human life demonstrates and justifies a profound valuation of scripture—a concept that comes to be developed in the Book of Mormon in ways very unlike Catholic and Protestant notions.

Revelation

Emil Brunner has written, “God’s revelation of Himself always occurs in such a way as to manifest more deeply his inaccessibility to our thought and imagination. All that we can know is the world. God is not the world. . . . He is Mystery.” Another contemporary religious scholar agrees and finds this a dominant motif in Christian thought:

The history of theology is replete with this truth: recall Augustine’s insight that if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God; Anselm’s argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived; Hildegard’s vision of God’s glory as Living Light that blinded her sight; Aquinas’s working rule that we can know that God is and what God is not but not what God is; Luther’s stress on the hiddenness of God’s glory in the shame of the cross; Simone Weil’s conviction that there is nothing that resembles what she can conceive of when she says the word God; Sallie McFague’s insistence on imaginative leaps into metaphor since no language about God is adequate and all of it is improper.

This is not the God of the Book of Mormon.

In the Book of Mormon, God is not mystery. He is fully knowable, accessible, and susceptible to petitionary prayer. The Book of Mormon opens upon a scene of prophets and prophecy set in a time of extreme national peril. This is the world of Jeremiah, vintage Old Testament drama, epic in scope and sense of looming threat. Then, quite suddenly, everything abruptly changes. Within pages, the focus shifts from the city of Jerusalem and her inhabitants to the destiny of one man named Lehi and his family. From national destinies hanging in the balance, we go to a family in crisis. But ironically, in the process of this narrowing of focus, the manifestations of divine communication with which the record opened are not diminished, but multiplied. This shift of direction, from a public prophet advocating national repentance for the sake of collective survival in the face of geopolitical crisis, to a father contending for the preservation

Lehi overcome with the Spirit. Jerry Thompson. © IRI.
of his sons and daughters in the wilderness, perfectly exemplifies the Book of Mormon’s tendency to invoke familiar categories and settings, only to abruptly shift the ground under our feet. Yes, the Old Testament also has its family sagas with warring siblings—but with a crucial difference. Because in the Old Testament, the Cains and Abels, the Isaacs and Esaus, are largely etiologies, explanatory types who represent or explain larger human destinies. And the revelation that guides them guides the enormous currents of human history and cosmic understanding. Writes one scholar of the subject: “[Prophecy] was preeminently the privilege of the prophets.” Prophecy is “exegesis of existence from a divine perspective,” writes Abraham Heschel.

In the Book of Mormon, this is most emphatically not the case. Prophecy and revelation contract into the sphere of the quotidian, the personal, and the immediate, where they proliferate and flourish.

There are indications that the writers of the Book of Mormon intended the prevailing moral of the book to be, in fact, an openness to radically individualistic and literalistic conceptions of divine communication to mortals—that is, dialogic revelation. The kind of revelation we are referring to is seen in the Old Testament most memorably in Moses’s encounter with God on Mount Sinai, when it is recorded that “the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11), or in Abraham’s prolonged exchange with God over the fate of Sodom, when they haggle over numbers like a housewife and a bazaar merchant (Genesis 18:20–32). These exchanges, figurative or mythical as they may be to today’s readers, are certainly portrayed in anthropomorphic terms understood literally by the writer. At the conclusion of the latter episode, he writes, “And the Lord went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place” (Genesis 18:33), as if human language and human paradigms of interaction were perfectly adequate to describe prophetic negotiations with the divine.

The major thrust of the Book of Mormon is an elaboration of this model of revelation, expanding and extending it to lesser mortals, and more intimate concerns. It is most dramatically revealed as a radical departure from Old Testament norms in the story of Lehi’s dream. Nephi’s father Lehi has a magnificent vision of a tree of life, resplendent with allegorical details, extensive symbolism, and several elements of eschatology. In the aftermath of this father’s vision, Nephi goes to the Lord in prayer, desiring that he may also “behold the things which [his] father saw” (1 Nephi 11:3).

The Spirit of the Lord appears to him and, at first, leaves him in possible doubt as to the propriety of his request. Does he not believe his father’s account? Why then ask for his own version? Assured by Nephi that he does indeed trust the words of his father, the prophet and patriarch Lehi, the Spirit breaks into a song of rejoicing and blesses Nephi for seeking his personal revelatory experience. Nephi then records his version of the vision, which exceeds his father’s in points of detail, at least in the written version (1 Nephi 11:24–14:30). Anyone reading this text, in the nineteenth century or our own, would have encountered a paradigm shift of dramatic proportions. This is why Alexander Campbell’s first protest against the Book of Mormon and an evangelical’s recent book on Mormonism both point to Moroni 10, with its promise of personal, dialogic revelation, as a nonnegotiable point of theological difference.

Christology

Second, I will say a few things about Christology in the Book of Mormon. According to Joseph Smith, when the angel Moroni first appeared to him with the commission to retrieve and translate the Book of Mormon, the angel reported that the “fulness of the everlasting Gospel” was contained in the plates, but added the enigmatic clause “as delivered by the Savior to the ancient [American] inhabitants” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). Such a formulation seems almost calculated to combine shocking novelty with a kind of wry nonchalance. He might as well have said, the record affirmed the Ten Commandments—you know, the ones that God delivered to Atlantis. The angel’s perplexing description foreshadows the pattern I am trying to unpack: that the Book of Mormon flirts with both the clichéd and heretical, the pedestrian and preposterous.

Many claims surrounding the Book of Mormon—its inscription on plates of gold, its delivery to Joseph Smith by an angel, its miraculous translation involving seer stones and Urim and Thummim—are remarkable to say the least. The most striking claim within the Book of Mormon is undoubtedly its insistence that Jesus Christ was
worshipped in the Western hemisphere, by way of anticipation, as long ago as six centuries BC. The subtitle printed on the Book of Mormon cover since 1982 is a recent development that reflects both the centrality of Jesus Christ in Latter-day Saint belief and the Church’s concern to emphasize that belief in the face of public skepticism and uncertainty about its designation as Christian. But the gesture is no mere act of modern revisionism. On the title page itself, the final record keeper Moroni, upon concluding his ancient record, explains the second major purpose of the Book of Mormon to be “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the eternal God.”

The two questions such an assertion immediately invites are, first, how detailed was the Nephite knowledge of the Christ and, more to the point, how did a group of ancient Israelites exhibit such an emphatic and detailed knowledge of Jesus when their Jewish contemporaries had, at best, vaguely defined beliefs in some kind of Messiah to come? The Book of Mormon seems in this regard a pseudepigraphal response to the tantalizing possibilities intimated by Peter, when that apostle wrote that “the prophets pondered and . . . tried to find out what was the time, and what the circumstances, to which the spirit of Christ in them pointed, foretelling the sufferings in store for Christ and the splendours to follow” (1 Peter 1:10–11 NEB). The Church historian Eusebius argued that “Moses . . . was enabled by the Holy Spirit to foresee quite plainly the title Jesus (evident, he believes, in his naming his successor Joshua—which transliterates as Jesus).” Most Christians, however, see such biblical typology as inspired foreshadowings apparent in detail only through hindsight. In the case of the Book of Mormon, by contrast, the references are clear and unobscured by allegory, symbolism, or cryptic allusion.

Christology in the Book of Mormon is not an occasional intrusion, but the narrative backbone of the story and the dramatic point of orientation. All of Book of Mormon history, in other words, pivots on the moment of Christ’s coming. Its narrative centrality is emphasized by describing the steadfastness and travails of those who anticipate the messianic moment, the subsequent Utopian era of those who keep the coming and its significance in memory, and the rapid decline and degradation of those who don’t. Book of Mormon prophets even establish their chronology around his coming: Logic would dictate that dating “Before Christ” can only occur from the perspective of a people living in the “Anni Domini.” But Nephi states and twice reaffirms that their departure from the Old World to the New occurs “six hundred years” before his birth (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19). To Enos it is reaffirmed that he is living “many years . . . before he shall manifest himself in the flesh” (Enos 1:8). And to the prophet Alma, even the demise of their civilization is dated in reference to that coming event: “Behold, I perceive that this very people, the Nephites, according to the spirit of revelation which is in me, in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief” (Alma 45:10).

One principal critique the Enlightenment made of Christianity was the historical particularity of the incarnation and ministry of Christ. Why would a God of the entire human race confine his earthly manifestation to only a fortunate few living in proximity to a Jewish village. Such criticism had been anticipated centuries earlier, when Christians
developed a doctrine of *prisca theologia*, holding that versions of the gospel were transmitted imperfectly to other peoples and cultures, affording even pagans a partial glimpse of gospel truth. The Book of Mormon suggests a more radical corrective, when Christ presents his own ministry to the Nephites as but one in a series of proliferating manifestations of his gospel and even his presence.

ye are they of whom I said: Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also must I bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd... And verily, verily, I say unto you that I have other sheep, which are not of this land, neither of the land of Jerusalem, neither in any parts of that land round about whither I have been to minister... But I have received a commandment of the Father that I shall go unto them, and that they shall hear my voice. (3 Nephi 15:21; 16:1, 3)

Instead of a single unparalleled eruption of the divine into the human, we have in the Book of Mormon a proliferation of historical iterations, which collectively become the ongoing substance rather than the shadow of God’s past dealings in the universe. For the third time, we see a familiar topic, central to Christian culture, introduced only to be fashioned into a version that moves in directions opposite to readerly expectations.

### Zion

The central fact in the history of Israel is the exodus from Egypt and the settling of the promised land. Millennia later, the Puritans who settled America would see themselves as exiles from the Old World, figurative Israelites who were guided to this promised land to establish a spiritual Zion. The early Christian saga involves movement from the covenant of blood extended to a chosen tribe, to the covenant of adoption that creates a community of believers; it changes from a gathering in real space, centered in a literal Zion, to a spiritual gathering that constitutes a figurative body in Christ. The Book of Mormon reenacts the former, Jewish model, even as it anticipates the latter, Christian version. For the Book of Mormon is the record of a people’s repeated quests for a land of promise and their anxiety about their covenantal status before God, even as it insistently repeats the theme that “as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord” (2 Nephi 30:2).

Gods who hold dominion and sway by the power of love evoke a particular kind of anxiety in their people. We are never so vulnerable as when we love, writes Freud, and that holds true in relations with the divine as much as in relations with humans. The fear of alienation, anxiety about rejection, and the terror of being forgotten—these sentiments seem to be fully acknowledged and mercifully addressed in God’s institution of the covenant as a compensating mechanism. There is no more pervasive and unifying theme to the Jewish scriptures than the covenant made with Abra-
ham. It is the basis of both collective and individual identity. It is the foundation not just of a particular status vis-à-vis other peoples, but it is principally and primarily the guarantee of God’s constant love. A woman may forget her nursing child, the Lord assures them through Isaiah, “yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands” (49:15–16).

Only in this context does the dominant emotional tone of the Book of Mormon have a recognizable resonance. The Book of Mormon begins with an event that must have been traumatic to the principal actors in the drama: exodus. Not an exodus from bondage and wilderness exile to the land of promise, but exodus away from the land of promise, away from Jerusalem, the people of the covenant, from the temple, and into the wilderness. This is why the form of so much of Nephi’s preaching in the early days of exile is reassurance and consolation. He invokes Isaiah repeatedly, precisely in order to convince his people that they are “a remnant of the house of Israel,” and that, though broken off, they “may have hope as well as [their] brethren” (1 Nephi 19:24). A thousand years later, at the conclusion of the record, Moroni reaffirms this message by giving it pride of place on his title page. The sacred record, he writes, is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.”

This lesson—the portability of Zion—is reenacted so many times in the Book of Mormon story that it becomes a leitmotif. Lehi erects an altar in the wilderness and makes of his exile a sacred refuge. After a terrifying sea voyage, the clan becomes established in the promised land. But there, dissension immediately breaks out, and Nephi is directed to again flee into the wilderness and reestablish a remnant of the original remnant (2 Nephi 5). A few hundred years later, the Lord directs a subsequent king, Mosiah, to depart from there “into the wilderness” with “as many as would hearken” (Omni 1:13). Having arrived in Zarahemla, Mosiah and his people encounter another remnant from Jerusalem who “journeyed in the wilderness” to this New World Zion. Other iterations of this theme will include the newly converted Alma the Elder’s flight from the court of King Noah and his founding of a church in the wilderness (Mosiah 23), and yet another people descended from Old World exiles, who cross the sea in barges after being commanded to “go forth into the wilderness” at the time of the Tower of Babel (Ether 2:5). Most poignantly of all, the record will close with the spectacle of a lonely Moroni, sole survivor of his race, finding in his wilderness exile that he has neither family, friends, “nor whither to go” (Mormon 8:5). The successive chain of Zion-building finds its definitive end, and the record closes thereafter.

The Book of Mormon may be seen in this light as the story of the unending transmission of the gospel into new contexts, a chronicle of the
volatility and fragility of lands of refuge, a testament of the portability and ceaseless transmutations of Zion, with the only constant being the eternally present promise of a special relationship to God and direct access to his power and truth. The original dislocation signified by Lehi’s exodus becomes a prelude not to a new geographical gathering, but to a shadow of the permanent reconstitution of Zion into spiritual refuge. The resonance of this theme for early American descendants of those who had embarked on their own errand into the wilderness would have been unmistakable. And the theme would undoubtedly have held special poignancy for the first readers of the Book of Mormon, nineteenth-century religious refugees who persisted doggedly and tragically in attempts to realize their own earthly Zions on a trail from Ohio through Missouri to Illinois and the Great Basin of Utah.

Scripture

A fourth major leitmotif in the Book of Mormon is scripture itself. After explaining the origins of this record that will eventually comprise the Book of Mormon and establishing his intent to write nothing “save it be ... sacred” (1 Nephi 19:6), Nephi goes about constituting his record in a way that is markedly different from simple prophetic utterance or inspired dictate. He constitutes his record as a kind of bricolage, or assemblage of already existing pieces into a new mosaic. In doing so, he reinforces a conception of scripture as something fluid, diffuse, and infinitely generable—the very opposite of scripture as something that is unilinear, concretized, fixed in a canon.

Nephi characterizes the first eight chapters of his record as a summation of a record his father kept. His own record commences with the details leading up to his vision of the tree of life. He then assimilates into his account a number of other prophetic voices unknown to us; he writes, “[Christ shall yield himself to] be lifted up, according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified, according to the words of Neum, and to be buried in a sepulcher, according to the words of Zenos” (1 Nephi 19:10). Nephi then progresses to the prophecies of Isaiah, which he has obtained from another set of plates taken from Jerusalem. Not content to merely cite him, Nephi incorporates into his narrative entire swaths of Isaiah, largely unchanged from the form known to Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible.

The dynamic, vibrant life of scripture, as something that is generated, assimilated, transformed, and transmitted in endless ways and in ever new contexts, is clearly indicated in these scenes where Nephi centers in on his commission to produce a sacred record. But the theme achieves its most pronounced instance well into the subsequent narrative at a time when a repentant sinner, Alma, living among a heathen people far removed from the God-fearing Nephites, begins, surprisingly enough, to preach Christ to his peers: "And now it came to pass that Alma, who had fled from the servants of king Noah, repented of his sins and iniquities, and . . . began to teach . . . concerning that which was to come, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ" (Mosiah 18:1–2).
How did Alma obtain a knowledge of Christ? He heard the preaching of Abinadi, an itinerant prophet martyred by a wicked king called Noah. And Alma “did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4). Where did Abinadi, who appears suddenly in the narrative with no background or introduction, get that knowledge? In chapters 13–14 of Mosiah, we find him reading, from some unnamed text, the words of Moses and of Isaiah to Noah’s court, and finding in them clear foreshadowing of a “God [who should] himself . . . come down among the children of men, and . . . redeem his people” (Mosiah 15:1). From where did Abinadi obtain those scriptures? He was a member of a colony founded by one Zeniff, an offshoot of the major Nephite settlement, whose founders took copies of the Nephite records with them when they departed Zarahemla and resettled a land called Lehi-Nephi. And those Nephite records? Before even leaving Jerusalem at the record’s beginning, Nephi and his brothers abscond with the brass plates of a Jewish ruler named Laban, which plates contain the writings of Moses, Isaiah, and several other Hebrew prophets. So we have a clear line of transmission from prophetic utterance, to brass plates, to Nephi’s small plates, to Zeniff’s copy, to Abinadi’s gloss, to Alma’s transcription. And that is only half the story. From Alma we learn that those teachings become a part of his written record. When he and his band of exiles arrive back in the major colony of Zarahemla, the Nephite king there, Mosiah, reads to the assembled people “the account of Alma and his brethren” (Mosiah 25:6). King Mosiah, as guardian of the large plates, presumably incorporates the record into his own record. Those plates are subsequently abridged by Mormon, acquiring finally the form they have today.

One might object that the Book of Mormon itself cannot embody such an organic, constantly evolving and morphing canon without self-contradiction (it was, after all, given its final and definitive form in 1830). But the Book of Mormon undermines its own pretensions to simply reenact or supplement the Bible by situating itself, along with that Bible, as one in an endless series of scriptural productions. As the Book of Mormon’s God says, “I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it” (2 Nephi 29:12). As with revelation, we find parallels to these concepts in the Hebrew scriptures. The point is that a Christian audience of Joseph’s day would have considered scriptural history to move inevitably toward completion and closure. In the Book of Mormon, scripture always moves toward proliferation and dissemination in both directions.

Historicity and the Book of Mormon

The themes and strategies I have surveyed convey something of the ways in which the Book of Mormon exploited the materials of the biblical text and biblical culture to fashion a work that was, as the designation Golden Bible implied, alien and recognizable, sacred and profane, at the same time. In this regard, the Book of Mormon mirrors Mormonism’s own peculiar synthesis of opposites. For Mormonism provides a very interesting case study of how a modern church tries to successfully negotiate a synthesis of modern science and biblical literalism, intellectual credibility and folk magic.
beginnings; how it has been managing, the critics notwithstanding, to persist in basing its theology on its history—an intractably and conspicuously vulnerable history at that.

I hope to have shown in this regard that the Book of Mormon’s place as canonical scripture cannot be separated from the particular ways it has portrayed itself as a literal historical creation, and from the unexpected ways it has both engaged and rewritten important strands of Christian historical understanding. All this strikes me as a remarkably novel way to think about scripture. Unlike the Bible or the Qur’an, both of which constitute the basis of their respective faiths’ doctrine, the Book of Mormon grounds virtually none of those principles or practices unique to the LDS faith. The premortal existence of human souls, the eternity of the family, a multi-tiered heaven, vicarious ordinances performed for the dead, the Mormon code of health (the Word of Wisdom), the law of tithing, a modern church organized under a prophet and 12 apostles—none of these distinctives appear in the Book of Mormon. No, it is the way the Book of Mormon challenges its audience to rethink their relationship to the divine, their place in Christian history, and God’s relationship to history—that is the point. In this capacity as a sign or pointer to meaning outside itself, the Book of Mormon was one of a panoply of heavenly portents that signaled the commencement of a new dispensation. During that first generation in which the Book of Mormon appeared, theophanies, angels, gold plates, Nephite interpreters, magic compasses—the whole entourage of otherworldly visitants and priestly articles—were like the vibrant, extravagant uncial in an illuminated manuscript, drawing attention to the inauguration of a new chapter in God’s conversation with man, conspicuous heralds of another revelation, of a fresh deluge of heavenly light.

Had Joseph Smith—or God—intended the Book of Mormon to be read and evaluated on its own merits, then Joseph could have presented it as an ancient text he had simply discovered and translated, as James McPherson had done with Ossian so successfully just a few years removed. Or he could have produced a volume of inspired writings and left his audience to gauge the extent of that inspiration, as would Mary Baker Eddy. He could even have claimed the second sight, and described civilizations ancient, exotic, or, like Emanuel Sweden-
side itself with manifest authority and convincing materiality to larger events and processes underway. In summary, the Book of Mormon affirmed the Bible's status as scripture, even as it undermined it. For while it testifies to “the gospel of Jesus Christ” and even prophecies and facilitates its restoration in purity, the Book of Mormon demolishes the Bible’s monopoly on its articulation.

It opens with a scene steeped in the trappings of biblical prophets and prophecy, then moves decisively in the direction of a divine discourse, a dialogic revelation, that is literal, egalitarian, and suggestive, if not indicative, of a God more possible, accessible, and anthropomorphic than most contemporary constructs. The Book of Mormon documents Christ’s Palestinian incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, but it then explodes their sublime historical uniqueness by reenacting Christ’s ministry and ascension in a New World setting, suggesting there were others besides (3 Nephi 16:1). It makes other gestures of radical revisionism I have not had time to explore, such as affirming Jehovah’s covenants with Israel, even as it specifies the American continent as a separate “land of promise” and then chronicles a whole series of portable Zions founded and abandoned in successive waves.

But in its own position as a third testament, its real burden was to provide a new and compelling genealogy, not of Christ back to Abraham, or of the human family back to Adam. It attested to its own provenance, in a chain of authenticity traceable from God’s first command to Nephi, through a thousand years of providential history, to a hillside in upstate New York, when a young Joseph Smith resurrected the record from its stone tomb. Like Herbert’s silken twist let down from heaven, or like Jacob’s ladder along which angels ascended and descended, the Book of Mormon serves believers as a concrete conduit that connects them to a divine source, along which sacred energies flow in both directions. As such, it functions not just as witness, but as tangible embodiment, of God’s living word, manifest in the continuing production of scripture through prophets who still walk the earth.

Notes
1. A. S. Hayden, Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1876), 121.
4. With these four themes—revelation, Christology, Zion, and scripture—briefly introduced, each will be examined in more detail to show how they take the familiar and turn it into a new creation.
9. Campbell writes, “I would ask [Book of Mormon witnesses Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris] how they knew that it was God’s voice which they heard—but they would tell me to ask God in faith. That is, I must believe it first, and then ask God if it be true! . . . If there was any thing plausible about Smith, I would say to those who believe him to be a prophet, hear the question which Moses put into the mouth of the Jews, and his answer to it—And if thou say in thy heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken?—Does he answer, ‘Ask the Lord and he will tell you? . . . Nay, indeed.’ Alexander Campbell, ‘Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon,’ Millennial Harbinger 2 (7 February 1831): 95–96; emphasis in original. And Craig Blomberg worries that “without some external checks and balances, it is simply too easy to misinterpret God’s answer when we try to apply a test like that of Moroni 10:4–5 and ask him to reveal through his Spirit the truth or falsity of the Book of Mormon.” Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997), 40.