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Abstract Review of *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (1999), by Mark D. Thomas.

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF BOOK OF MORMON NARRATIVES

Alan Goff

Whatever these men may be as Biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the text they are reading. . . . If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour; not how many years he has spent on that Gospel.

C. S. Lewis, in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism"¹

Mark Thomas has produced an ambitious book. He asserts that he wants to lay part of "the foundation for a new tradition in Book of Mormon studies," one that "begins with rigorous, critical scholarship" (p. ix). But this admirable sentiment isn't matched by adequate follow-through. Though better than most other LDS revisionist approaches to the Book of Mormon, Thomas's book seriously

1. C. S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," reprinted from *Christian Reflections* in *BYU Studies* 9/1 (1968): 35.

Review of Mark D. Thomas. *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999. xi + 236, with scripture and subject indexes. \$24.95.

underestimates the complexity of the scripture—whether for ideological reasons or just because of the writer’s incapacities as a literary critic isn’t clear yet. To take Thomas’s aspiration seriously and base Book of Mormon criticism on studies such as this would be to repeat the mistake literary critics made regarding the Bible. Late in the nineteenth century, as historical criticism of the Bible became the dominant approach to the text, the Bible went into steep decline as an object of literary analysis; it was viewed as a superficial text that literary critics (and perhaps even biblical critics) didn’t need to take seriously, a book fit only for fundamentalists of various stripes. That situation was (fortunately) reversed in 1981 when Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative* was published. Since then, even among secular literary critics (Alter himself is a secular Jew who teaches literature at the University of California at Berkeley), the Bible has not only gone through a revival as a subject of scholarly literary criticism, but because of Alter and other literary critics, even biblical criticism has been rejuvenated by literary concerns. The Bible is now viewed as one of the most sophisticated literary compositions in history.

Like the Bible fifty years ago, the Book of Mormon is an overwhelmingly underappreciated literary text. Thomas himself notes that the book is more complex than both its supporters and detractors appreciate; this claim is true, but Thomas’s book will do little to rectify the situation. Mature literary criticism requires, in addition to a rich text, an experienced, intuitive reader using appropriate literary tools and judgment. Thomas’s book doesn’t demonstrate those qualities in any sustained way, and it radically underestimates the Book of Mormon as a literary text.

Thomas isn’t the only one making grandiose claims for his approach. The back cover of the book quotes Wayne Booth, a lapsed Mormon and emeritus professor at the University of Chicago who also happens to be one of the world’s most prominent literary critics (which also means he should not have to resort to the kind of puffery that occurs too often on book jackets), as saying that “this astonishing book probes more deeply into the Book of Mormon’s literary and spiritual qualities than any other work I know.” Whether blame for this typical advertising puffery should be attributed to the author or

publisher (claims made on book covers are usually the domain of the publisher because they are one of the few advertising opportunities most books will get), such claims don't do much harm unless readers as uninformed as Booth take them seriously. Booth's claim that "the most influential American narrative of the nineteenth century has at last found the scholarly reader it deserves" is overblown because the Book of Mormon deserves a more detailed and perceptive reading. The back cover also quotes Robert M. Price, a Jesus Seminar Fellow, as saying that "Mark D. Thomas has rediscovered the Book of Mormon." The *re* in *rediscovered* is equivalent to the *Re* in *Reclaiming* from the title. If a text has to be *reclaimed*, someone must have claimed it badly or parochially in the first place. Thomas feels the need to reclaim the Book of Mormon from those who believe it to be an authentic ancient source. He wants to put the book in its place, in its "original" context (antebellum frontier America). This assertion is insulting because many of the literary analyses Thomas dismisses are superior to his readings.

The Book of Mormon is a complex literary work, as complex as the Bible or Shakespeare (though complex in different ways). Thomas's book does little to reveal that sophistication and is good for only the most rudimentary introduction ("this interpretive primer," as the back cover states) to the literary features of a still undervalued text.

Lack of Nuance and Subtlety

Since Thomas attempts to reorient discussion of Book of Mormon narrative away from historical claims and toward literary analysis, let me use literary terms to frame my review. The following example I intend as a synecdoche of Thomas's approach to the Book of Mormon; I will demonstrate my thesis using only a small part of the whole, but the reader should apply my comments to the whole of Thomas's book. In one of the few passages in which Thomas attempts to make the book of scripture relevant to contemporary concerns, he notes (from 2 Nephi 1:8–11) "the need for both population control and careful management of natural resources." Further, he asserts

that population pressures will dramatically shape every other social and moral issue in the future. If we have not reached the earth's carrying capacity, we soon will. If we do not take considered measures, the decision about population stabilization will be taken out of our hands by modern plagues, by starvation, and by wars to control an ever-shrinking pool of natural resources. (p. 95)

Whether or not, like Isaac Asimov, Thomas is willing to go so far as to endorse state-sanctioned, forced abortion and infanticide as one of these "considered measures," he doesn't say. Not content just to interpret apocalypses, Thomas waxes both apocalyptic and prophetic in these predictions about the population bomb.

This passage echoes what Paul Ehrlich has been claiming since 1969: more than thirty years ago Ehrlich asserted that the earth had already exceeded its human carrying capacity and that famines would soon decimate human populations and wars would break out between poor and rich nations over access to natural resources. Ehrlich's Armageddon has been delayed indefinitely, and any adequate view of human population has to be more subtle than that of Thomas or Ehrlich. For example, the current population problem in much of the world is not too many human births but too few. Western Europe and Japan have dipped far below the replacement rate of 2.1 births for every woman (at the replacement rate an equilibrium is achieved at zero population growth, a child to replace each potential parent). Italy has the lowest birthrate worldwide at 1.2 births. The crisis in places like Germany, Japan, France, and Italy will consist of too few young people to support an aging society. Canada too has dipped below the replacement rate, and the United States is right at or barely below the replacement rate (disregarding factors such as immigration). For large parts of the developed world, no population crisis exists outside of population shrinkage. Even in China—with a growing population and severe, even coercive, governmental measures to reduce the population rate—the problems of an aging population with too few females compared to males aren't quite what those who

thought themselves the Cassandras of population growth predicted. Such predictions may apply to Asia and Africa (even in southern Africa AIDS may cause a shortage of people in many localities) but to few places in the Americas and Europe. Are plagues, starvation, and wars the likely consequences of population growth, as Thomas asserts? Predictions beyond generations currently alive are notoriously inaccurate, and the record of such prognostications has not been trustworthy. The estimates I've seen say that the human population (now at six billion) will stabilize in the coming century at between thirteen and sixteen billion. Is that higher than earth's carrying capacity? The answer largely depends on whether you ask biologists (generally pessimistic) or economists (largely optimistic). Questions about population control require balance and nuance, something lacking in Thomas's discussion. Similarly, literary readings of the Book of Mormon require an informed and capable reader, a characteristic not evident in this book.

Thomas correctly asserts that the Book of Mormon is undervalued as a literary text. He proposes as the "foundation for a new tradition in Book of Mormon studies" his "rigorous, critical scholarship," because if "we value our faith and respect the Book of Mormon, there is no substitute for honest, thorough, and serious scholarship" (p. ix). Thomas's book, though, is insufficiently rigorous, thorough, serious, and critical; he too easily dismisses those Book of Mormon researchers with whom he disagrees (those he calls "apologists" for the Book of Mormon) as dishonest. Surely, without having strong evidence of dishonesty, we shouldn't impugn the integrity of those who disagree. Likewise, why puff up your own approach through rejecting those who believe the book is an ancient text by saying that these critics "fear to read their own holy book" and don't bother to "read the text itself" out of "neglect, prejudice, over-reverence, and fear" (p. viii). If Thomas knows Book of Mormon researchers who are afraid to read the text, he ought to produce names and evidence rather than personal aspersions about dubious motives; I find it disconcerting to be psychoanalyzed by someone I have never met. A whole range of capabilities exists among interpreters of Mormon scripture, believers

and nonbelievers. Some believing Book of Mormon readers are good at reading complex texts and even exceptional; some are bad and even excessively bad. Most revisionist readers of the Book of Mormon are exceptionally bad textual exegetes because their ideology makes it imperative that the Book of Mormon be superficial. Thomas is about the best this movement has produced, and we must congratulate and thank him when he notes that the book is a complicated work of literature that deserves sophisticated analysis. However, to attack all of one group as dishonest or afraid without naming names, so that the reader is led to apply the injunction to an entire class of readers, is arrogant and inaccurate.

I will point the reader to some literary interpretations, written by believers, superior to Thomas's. It is inevitable that I refer to my own writings on this topic because (for twelve years) I have been covering the same ground Thomas has—using similar literary tools and reading an overlapping set of narratives from the scripture (I assume this is the reason the *FARMS Review* has asked me to review this book); naturally, I believe my interpretations (and readings by others such as Richard Rust) would be a much better foundation for literary appreciation of the text. Thomas claims that his approach is “molded by critical biblical scholarship, is eclectic and interpretive, combining various textual, historical, and literary-critical techniques” (pp. viii–ix). Whatever adjectives Thomas uses to describe his own project, it isn't sufficiently critical, eclectic, or informed by literary and narrative theory. I had originally intended to provide alternate and hitherto unpublished readings of the very narratives Thomas looks at, but pointing out deficiencies in Thomas's approach will make for a too-long review essay. Instead, I will refer the reader to published readings, which is to say readings that Thomas could have used to enrich his own project.

Making Historical Claims While Criticizing the Habit

Digging in Cumorah, by the way, has been pretty crisply edited. It contains a scriptural index and a general index. Still, Thomas and Signature do have at least one factual error in the book: He asserts

that “the Book of Mormon does not include narratives of the deaths of the righteous, only those of heretics” (p. 167), but even Thomas refers to Abinadi’s death (see p. 11); the scripture also refers to the martyrdom of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis (see Alma 24:21–24), and Alma and Amulek’s converts at Ammonihah are burned to death (see Alma 14:8–14). But such errors are small matters and one expects to find them in almost every book.

On small concerns the book can be quite good. Thomas usefully notes (see pp. 35, 81–82) that Zeniff (see Mosiah 9:1) uses an introductory formula quite similar to Nephi’s (see 1 Nephi 1:1–3), Enos’s (see Enos 1:1), and Mormon’s (see Mormon 1:1–2). He also provides basic insights when he notes similarities between the conversion of Lamanites by Nephi and Lehi and the visit of Christ to the descendants of Lehi (see pp. 141–42). He also asserts, correctly, that the Zeniff narrative is the most complex in the Book of Mormon (see p. 85); this insight is useful when expanded to include the entire book of Mosiah and the first few chapters of Alma. The book of Mosiah carries on a complex conversation with the “Biblical Politeia.” (Biblical scholars often call 1 Samuel the Biblical Politeia because it is the founding document of the Israelite monarchy, but most scholars recognize that the work of the Deuteronomistic historian—Joshua through 2 Kings and the book of Deuteronomy itself—is filled with a sophisticated discussion of politics. The first few books in the Book of Mormon—Mosiah and the first few chapters of Alma in particular—constantly allude to the Biblical Politeia in a way that directs the reader back to a biblical examination of human society. I propose, consequently, that we refer to Mosiah as the Book of Mormon Politeia to emphasize its dialectical relationship with the Deuteronomistic history.) But Thomas takes us only so far: while recognizing that Mosiah is the most sophisticated part of the Book of Mormon, he hardly begins to uncover its complexity.

Thomas’s book ought also to be appreciated by all, whether or not you agree with him about Book of Mormon origins, because his is an implicit attack on reductive and superficial readings. Before Thomas, revisionist readings of the Book of Mormon had reversed the interpretive meaning of the narrative; when Fawn Brodie, Wayne

Ham, and Brent Metcalfe² read repetitions in Book of Mormon narrative (stories that are similar to each other), they concluded the book couldn't be a historical text because literary patterns negate historicity; repetitions, or type-scenes, are deficiencies. These conclusions have always been dubious, but in Thomas we have a reader who agrees with Brodie, Ham, and Metcalfe that the Book of Mormon isn't an ancient text, and yet his approach is a repudiation of their superficiality. Thomas notes that "almost all serious Mormon scholarship on the book attempts to reconstruct its historical origins, making little or no effort at interpretation" (p. viii). This assertion is aimed at the interpretive work most FARMS contributors do but also applies to Brodie's, Ham's, Metcalfe's, and even Thomas's work because these latter writers look for literary parallels to place the book in a nineteenth-century historical context. Similarly, Thomas repudiates the vacuous readings of critics who examine the text superficially with simplistic historical interests in mind: for example, Susan Curtis, Dan Vogel, John L. Brooke, D. Michael Quinn, Ernest H. Taves, and Anthony A. Hutchinson, just to name a few.³ Thomas asserts that a literary approach free of historical concerns is preferred. This claim is simplistic

2. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971), 62–63; Wayne Ham, "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 1/1 (September 1970): 19, 22 n. 8; and Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue* 26/3 (1993): 170.

3. See Susan Curtis, "Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon," in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 81–96; Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), and *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), and revised and enlarged edition (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); Ernest H. Taves, *Trouble Enough: Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1984); and Anthony A. Hutchinson, "The Word of God Is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent L. Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 1–19, and virtually every other contribution to this collection of essays.

and naive, but it deserves consideration.⁴ Note that it is a slight twist on the attempt to find “middle ground” in the debate over whether Joseph Smith was a prophet or a fraud (Marvin Hill has most insistently argued this position for a middle ground view of Joseph Smith and his scriptural works that views him neither as fraud nor sanctified prophet). But just as Hill’s “middle ground” really starts by assuming Joseph Smith isn’t a prophet of God (or perhaps is psychologically but not ontologically), Thomas’s attempt to sidestep issues of historical origins begins by assuming the book is a nineteenth-century work and not written by ancient Israelites. Thus Thomas takes sides on this historical question while in general castigating those who take sides on historical issues. “Nearly all research on the Book of Mormon is not about the Book of Mormon at all, but about its claims to religious authority. This battle of authority centers on one question: ‘Is the Book of Mormon ancient or modern—history or fiction?’” (p. 1). For Thomas, historical questions hinder appreciation of the book. “But we have fought for so long over the age of the book that its messages have become accidental casualties. In the end, a book’s authority lies less in its origin than in its messages” (p. 1). But origins are part of a text’s message. If the book is ancient, its message is radically different than if it is modern; even Thomas has to assume an original audience before he can derive a message for that audience. Historical questions can’t be avoided and are inevitably circular. It isn’t possible to transcend “the history/fiction debate” in any simple way as Thomas thinks he has done. Stewart Sutherland’s discussion of scriptures applies to the Book of Mormon:

A set of Scriptures within a theistic religion claims some absolute status and importance for its content. Thus the Gospels are not just “good news” they are the Good News.

4. A biblical scholar asks the question of the Bible, “Isn’t the text’s meaning as *literature* dependent on the weight and moment of its deliberations as *history*?” Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 106. Later on the same page Rosenberg notes what ought also to be applied to the Book of Mormon, “Somehow, our understanding of the text as a *story* improves with immersion in its dimensions as *history*.”

They provide the history of the events, but not just as a chronicle, rather as interpreted (in that sense “narrated”). Thus they compare in this specific respect with works of history. If they have blundered historically then they are in deep trouble. However, unlike a work of history they cannot simply be shelved as “the best so far,” or “brilliant but flawed,” or “overtaken by advances in historiography or archaeology.” If they diminish in status so does the Good News which they proclaim.⁵

Rhetorically, Thomas attempts to avoid taking sides on the issue of the text’s historicity, but as a practical matter he can’t; he assumes the book is a modern work of fiction.

For example, Thomas writes about the “original audience” of the book (pp. viii, 2, 4, 5, 31 n. 16, 19, 40, 64 n. 4, 111, 129, 203). Leaving aside how thoroughly poststructuralism has brought into question the pursuit of origins, to discuss an original, foundational, primary audience of nineteenth-century readers is to make a historical assertion. (If Thomas had been current on literary theory, a theoretical approach such as reception theory—also called reader response criticism—would have deepened his analysis of this author/audience relationship.) Thomas asserts that “any reference to ‘Joseph’s language’ in this work simply means the language used in the Book of Mormon. It is not a comment about authorship” (p. 5). I assume the same holds true while referring to an “original audience.” But using a word such as *original* carries implications that are not ideologically innocent. An original audience is a primary or first audience, but the Book of Mormon itself claims a prior audience: Nephites and Lamanites. Alma claims that the Nephites were speaking and writing to their own descendants (see Alma 5:44; see also 2 Nephi 33:3–4; 25:21–27; Mosiah 1:4–7; Alma 37:8–9; and 18:37–38). Thomas notes that in spiritualizing narratives (later Nephites, such as Alma in

5. Stewart Sutherland, “History, Truth, and Narrative,” in *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility*, ed. Martin Warner (London: Routledge, 1990), 112.

chapter 37, spiritualized Lehi's journey), Nephites universalized particular narratives (see pp. 7–9). The Nephites are constantly referring to earlier passages from their scripture for insight on how they should live (for example, Amulek in Alma 10:19 refers to King Mosiah's discussion of leaders and citizens from Mosiah 29:27; likewise, Alma 9:13 is one of many instances in which the Nephites refer back to 2 Nephi 1:20); not only were the Nephites the "original audience," their use of the text shows how quickly the records became canonical for them. For Thomas, such an audience didn't exist historically, so it need not be taken into account rhetorically; the question of audience is a complex one that Thomas doesn't consider with any rigor. Thomas ignores the book's original audience in favor of one that does the ideological work he wants done.

Additionally, to assert that the nineteenth-century reader is the original audience poses historical questions that Thomas doesn't address, though they seem obvious and obligatory. I agree with Thomas that Robert Alter's reading of the Bible as a sophisticated literary text is brilliant and richly rewarding. It marks a new epoch in our modern understanding of the Bible. Alter's primary contribution was to note how the Bible uses type-scenes to allude to and comment on other parts of the Bible. Alter's first book on this topic came out in 1981. These type-scenes were unknown in the nineteenth century. How did Joseph Smith, in 1829, presage the insights of Robert Alter's type-scenes? Is the Book of Mormon to get the credit for embodying literary principles that weren't theorized until 1981? Thomas frames audience reception in terms of historical situations: "Like any text, the Book of Mormon was produced in a particular historical setting for a particular audience. An understanding of how the internal forms of the text address their nineteenth-century audience can greatly aid us as readers today" (p. 5). If Alter's rediscovery of type-scenes (with all the tools of modern biblical criticism, linguistic analysis, modern literary criticism, and Syro-Palestinian archaeology at his disposal) is ingenious, what about Joseph Smith's genius if he preceded that discovery without those tools? How can type-scenes address that nineteenth-century audience if members of that audience didn't know about them or if Thomas doesn't even claim that Joseph

knew of them? These two aspects of Thomas's book—(1) knowing how its "original" audience would have received it and (2) applying "modern narratology with great effect, using Robert Alter's 'type-narrative' schema," as Robert Price asserts on the back cover—are in conflict. However, if one allows the possibility that the book is ancient, an alternative *historical* explanation emerges for this literary question: if the book were written by ancient Israelites who understood the principles of biblical composition, then they would make use of those conventions; therefore, Joseph Smith doesn't have to be the greatest of all modern biblical readers.

Instead of straightforwardly facing the historical problems his approach raises, Thomas asserts a cheap psychologism to explain how the Book of Mormon is so richly allusive: "So what appears to be happening is that the prophetic mind is saturated with the Bible and pulls out patterns—what at first appears to be random phrases turns out to be arranged in significant patterns." Joseph Smith's mind is the source, the origin of Book of Mormon narrative because, "in short, the prophet's mind is filled with difficult biblical passages and a theological problem current in his time. These biblical phrases and the theological problem serve as a kind of jigsaw puzzle that is pieced together into a new narrative that has a life all of its own" (p. 24). The beauty of this explanation is that one can posit that the prophetic mind works any way needed to fill an ideological imperative. Thomas produces no evidence to support this assertion. So the Book of Mormon is a misprision (i.e., a reworking of traditional text as the contemporary author wrestles with the inheritance of powerful predecessors) of the Bible, but these are very crude historical assertions. Couldn't Thomas at least have entertained an alternative that the Book of Mormon is fraught with biblical background (allusion more sophisticated than its modern readers have yet fathomed) because "nothing confirms the literary character of biblical narrative and biblical poetry more strikingly than their constant, resourceful, and necessary recourse to allusion."⁶ The Book of Mormon is so allusive be-

6. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 107.

cause it was written by Israelites who understood “after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5) and who used the principles of biblical composition:

The corpus of ancient Hebrew literature that has come down to us in the Bible exhibits a remarkable density of such allusions. . . . [T]he Bible offers rich and varied evidence of the most purposeful literary allusions—not the recurrence of fixed formula or conventional stereotype but a pointed activation of one text by another, conveying a connection in difference or a difference in connection through some conspicuous similarity in phrasing, in motif, or in narrative situation.⁷

Thomas’s discussion of Book of Mormon allusion is impoverished when compared to Alter’s discussion of the same biblical feature, even though both the Bible and the Book of Mormon are highly allusive.

Allusion and Intertextuality

Thomas could have used powerful theoretical constructs to discuss allusion if his reading were informed by contemporary narrative and literary theory. Harold Bloom has discussed Mormon concerns in his attempt to found a new discipline called religious criticism. Bloom’s own engagement with the Book of Mormon has been disappointing and superficial,⁸ but someone in the future will use Bloom’s notion of belatedness, the anxiety of influence, or transumption applied to the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon (Bloom’s own reading of the Bible was, in my opinion, also inadequate).⁹ Narrative theory has produced good studies on what was called allusion but is often now called intertextuality.¹⁰ Jacques

7. Ibid., 110–11.

8. See Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 86. I discuss Bloom’s work in my “Reduction and Enlargement: Harold Bloom’s Mormons,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 96–108.

9. See Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990).

10. For example, the essays in *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna N. Fewell (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1992). The approach begins with

Derrida has provided a useful discussion of iterability.¹¹ Old-fashioned literary criticism has produced good studies on allusion.

While Thomas could have revealed the sophistication of Book of Mormon narrative by using narrative and literary theory, he fails to do either (even his use of Robert Alter is brief and unsustained), so his notice that every page of the Book of Mormon shows the influence of the Bible (see p. 16) is a helpful but halting first step. When Thomas states that “no study to date has adequately grasped the diverse and intricate ways that the Bible is used in the Book of Mormon” (p. 17), one would have to include Thomas’s own readings in that indictment. The first recognition will have to be that when the Book of Mormon uses the Bible to constantly create its own mosaic (see p. 18), this too is a principle of biblical composition, for “the books of the Bible are interwoven by and from each other and no account of their composition that avoids addressing their intertextual nature can be an adequate account of anything in the Hebrew Bible.”¹² To support the statement that we have only begun to appreciate the Bible’s use in the Book of Mormon, Thomas refers his reader only to revisionist essays by himself, Melodie Charles,¹³ and George D. Smith,¹⁴ a book by Philip Barlow,¹⁵ and the essays in Brent

Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 73–81. Robert Alter rejects intertextuality, preferring the old-fashioned language of allusion in chapter 4 of *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). I find Daniel Boyarin’s *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) to be quite useful.

11. See Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 33–75, and *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

12. Robert P. Carroll, “Intertextuality and the Book of Jeremiah: Animadversions on Text and Theory,” in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1994), 61.

13. See Melodie M. Charles, “The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament,” in *The Word of God*, 131–42.

14. George D. Smith, “Isaiah Updated,” in *ibid.*, 113–30.

15. Thomas enigmatically refers the reader to Barlow’s book, 251 (see p. 32 n. 24), which would take the reader to the last page of Barlow’s index; he probably means page 221.

Metcalf's *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*. While Barlow's book is worth reading on this topic, the other essays demonstrate Thomas's impoverished selection of superficial secondary sources. I would suggest my own reading, which places the story of Ammon at the waters of Sebus (see Alma 17)¹⁶ against the backdrop of the biblical betrothal-at-the-well type-scene.¹⁷

Typology and Theories of History

Thomas arranges the book around five narrative features: (1) narrative commentary, (2) spiritualizing the narratives, (3) typology, (4) conventional narrative forms, and (5) biblical parallels (see pp. 6–19); he then applies these features to various stories within the book: Lehi's departure into the wilderness, the Jaredite migration, the captivity and exodus stories in Mosiah, Lehi's and Nephi's dream of the tree of life, conversions to the gospel, leadership and kingship stories, the death of heretics, Christ's visit, and social destruction through wickedness. Again, these distinctions are used unimaginatively, but sometimes the obvious needs to be stated. Where would we be without Aristotle's statement that a story must have a beginning, middle, and end? Thomas's mundane readings are sometimes necessary to make plain some obvious features of the text.

I can't discuss all the shortcomings of Thomas's readings, so I will briefly mention one and then develop some comments about his discussion of typology. Thomas provides some analysis of narrative

16. See Goff, "Reduction and Enlargement," 101–8. I also show how detailed are the intertextual relationships between some Book of Mormon narratives and biblical stories. For example, Ham and Brodie claim that Joseph Smith stole stories from the Bible, including stories of dancing maidens kidnapped by eager husbands (see Judges 21 and Mosiah 20). I show the complex nature of the relationship in my thesis: "A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and Book of Mormon" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1989), 57–91. An abbreviated version of that material was published as "The Stealing of the Daughters of the Lamanites," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 67–74.

17. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 52–62.

commentary (pp. 6–7). His idea of narrative commentary is sketchy and undertheorized. More sophisticated discussions of narrators¹⁸ and focalization¹⁹ are available, but Thomas seems to be unaware of them or of an even more old-fashioned notion, point of view.²⁰ He is ignorant of theoretical discussions of narrative.

More important is Thomas's approach to typology. He is so concerned as an ideologue to find historical parallels for Book of Mormon elements in the nineteenth-century American environment that, once he has found the right element to put the book in its place, he stops looking. He is right that "Nephite typology is more than a literary feature; it acts as a revelation of the divine scheme of history" (p. 11; see also 73). Thomas's own attempt to find a historical context for typology also depends on an (often unarticulated) theory of history. Although he notes that typological interpretation (in which one event or person prefigures Christ or the individual in the pageant of salvation) also occurs in the New Testament (see p. 10), his main ideological concern is to find nineteenth-century parallels for this interpretive approach. Problematically, Thomas wants to shift the language of narrative analysis away from Alter's vocabulary of "type-scene" to "narrative scene" to describe repetitions in the text (see p. 31 n. 20). Doing so ignores the philosophy of history, which ties various forms of symbolic thought together; we should use the term Alter uses because it connects to other linguistic inheritances from Greek: prototype, archetype, typical, typological, type-scene. Christian typology is, after all, a variant of older Hebraic forms of interpreting history. Thomas wants to trace reading principles to sources available to Joseph Smith (the King James Version, nineteenth-century American speculation); he avoids telling the reader that the ap-

18. See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

19. The best discussion of focalization is in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 1988). Focalization is a more differentiated tool than just discussing narrators. Often a story reflects numerous perspectives even if it has just one narrator.

20. See Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 240–82.

proaches are much older and could potentially have been practiced by Nephites: "Typology prevails as a method of interpretation prepared in the Old Testament itself."²¹ The Jewish rabbis had a similar principle of interpretation that they used in midrash: "Whatever happens to the fathers happens to the sons." Thomas's reading of Book of Mormon typology could be deepened and widened if he brought a more complete background from biblical and literary criticism. For example, Northrop Frye has asserted the antiquity of typology as an approach to history: "We cannot trace the Bible back, even historically, to a time when its materials were not being shaped into a typological unity."²² What Christians call the Old Testament may actually be more typological than is the Christian New Testament: "Typology in the Bible is by no means confined to the Christian version of the Bible: from the point of Judaism at least, the Old Testament is much more genuinely typological without the New Testament than with it. There are, in the first place, events in the Old Testament that are types of later events recorded also within the Old Testament."²³ Typology is not an interpretive principle that begins with Christians and their reading of the Hebrew Bible. Thomas could have been more fair to the Book of Mormon if he weren't so concerned about limiting the interpretive possibilities to those sources available in Joseph Smith's environment.

Thomas also seems unaware that modern discussions of typology as a form of symbolic language go back to the early Christian notion of the four senses of scripture (i.e., the literal, the moral or tropological, the allegorical, and the anagogical or mystical meaning) and that "the history of typological exegesis is complex and varied."²⁴

21. Hans W. Wolff, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Richmond, Va.: Knox, 1963), 188.

22. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 315.

23. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 83.

24. Regina M. Schwartz, "Joseph's Bones and the Resurrection of the Text: Remembering in the Bible," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), 43.

His brief discussion of typology would benefit from an understanding of how typology, allegory, and other forms of figuration fit into the long history of symbolic thought in the Western tradition. For example, Erich Auerbach discusses typology under the title of *figura* (the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *tupos*).²⁵ Thomas evidently isn't familiar with the history of typology in literary or biblical criticism. He also seems unaware that typology is still a matter of conflict today, largely between secularized inheritors of Christian and Jewish forms of interpretation. Susan Handelman, for example, claims that allegory and typology are rigid and oppressive forms of interpretation and that in these postmodern times they are logocentric and restrict the play of interpretations.²⁶ We inheritors of the various forms of textual meaning are better off resorting to Jewish midrash and its toleration of multiple, polysemic interpretations. Allegory is Greek, and midrash is Jewish in this scheme.²⁷ Whether Thomas is unaware of this interpretive history or feels he can start from scratch without its benefit, his readers ought to be aware of how impoverished his discussion is.

The upshot of Thomas's ideological ignorance of the history of ideas is that he looks only to Joseph Smith's background to find the sources of ideas in the Book of Mormon: "Lehi would be more appropriately compared with prophetic figures such as Robert Matthews or the Shakers" than to Old Testament prophets, he says (p. 52). A more sophisticated approach would take other alternatives into account. Thomas asks, "Why does the book repeat itself?" (p. 72). An answer that at least deserves consideration is that ancient peoples, especially ancient Israelites, thought in such patterns.

25. See Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 11–76; *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 119–20, 190–97.

26. See Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

27. I take up such issues in my doctoral dissertation; see Alan Goff, "Biblical Typology: Continuity and Innovation" (Ph.D. diss., University at Albany, 1993).

Thomas notes that the “Nephite and Jaredite histories mirror each other” (p. 71) and that they both repeat the biblical exodus (see p. 72). “All migrations to establish nations are like the Hebrew exodus” (p. 176). This is a natural impulse for people who think typologically. In fact, if the Book of Mormon didn’t use exodus types, that would be the clearest evidence that it isn’t what it claims to be, for “in the Hebrew Bible the exodus served as the typological paradigm of redemption for ongoing generations.”²⁸ The exodus is *the* typological pattern Israelites drew upon to apply to their current circumstances.²⁹ The exodus pattern dominates in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon;³⁰ in fact, any time any Bible-believing people have been oppressed (from Boers, to liberation theologians, to Mormons driven from the United States, to Puritans, to Jews in the Soviet Union, to the Dutch under Spanish rule, to African slaves), they have viewed themselves reenacting the oppression under Pharaoh and the exodus from Egypt. Thomas seems blissfully ignorant of all this history.

Making the Least of the Text

Perhaps Thomas intends his book as a primer and is saving his really good textual analysis for another venue. At one point, he does say that he could develop more allusions to the Bible from the vision of the tree of life material (see p. 109). However, when the writer never goes beyond a superficial reading of the text that can’t sustain itself for more than a page or two without referring to nineteenth-century parallels, the reader begins to believe that the limitation

28. Michael Fishbane, “Torah and Tradition,” in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 291.

29. I have already dealt with the exodus pattern in Nephi’s account in “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts,” 133–54. I have applied the exodus type also to the book of Mosiah in “Historical Narrative, Literary Narrative—Expelling Poetics from the Republic of History,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 84–100.

30. It is so common in the Bible that an entire scholarly monograph has been written to point this out: David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

resides not in the Book of Mormon but in the interpreter and the method.

For example, Thomas performs a reading of the conflict between Laban and Lehi's sons (see pp. 44–46). Most of his reading is summary, but he does derive two themes from the story: the sons are delivered by God and the narrative is grouped in threes.³¹ These results are paltry for such a rich text. Thomas explains in a footnote that Laban's death is parallel to the stories of Judith, Samson, Jesus, and Moses in the Bible and the Apocrypha (see p. 66 n. 13). The intertextual connections with several biblical stories are very complex. For one, Laban (possessor of the plates of brass) is parallel to the Laban in Genesis 29–31. That Laban is a Pharaoh figure who keeps Jacob in bondage for twenty years (seven years for Rachel, seven for Leah, and the final six the maximum period that a Hebrew—under later biblical law—could spend in slavery to another Hebrew before being set free). Like the children of Israel fleeing Egyptian slavery, Jacob despoils his father-in-law of flocks and herds as he leaves in haste (Nephi despoils Laban of the plates). A deception—Rachel's theft of the *teraphim* and Nephi's use of a disguise—makes both flights successful. The Lord also protects Jacob so the pursuing Laban can't destroy him, just as Moses and his people were protected. The biblical Laban is also connected to Nabal: David comes into conflict with Nabal in a little-known story from the Bible. The ancient rabbis knew that *Laban* and *Nabal* were anagrams—the same name reversed. They saw Nabal as a Laban figure who attempted to do to David what Laban and Pharaoh had done to Jacob and the Israelites. These parallels require more development; my point is that the text is rich in allusion, but Thomas does so little with it. By connecting the Israelites' founding father (Jacob) with the founding dynastic king (David) of Israel, the Bible makes a statement about leadership. When David gets angry at Nabal's lack of hospitality, he intends to kill Nabal. Nabal has been feasting "like a king" and is drunken and

31. Even here, Thomas is citing Richard Dilworth Rust's *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 27–29.

vulnerable, just as the Book of Mormon Laban was. The chapter about Nabal and David (see 1 Samuel 25) is flanked by stories of conflict between Saul and David; in each, David has an opportunity to kill Saul but declines. Nabal is not only a stand-in for Laban, but he also symbolically stands for Saul, a similar narrative function that Laban fills in the Book of Mormon story, for as Saul attempts to kill David, Laban attempts to kill the sons of Lehi. It is in the slightest details, such as Laban's name, that the Book of Mormon indicates some of its allusive intentions. (The same principle holds true for the Bible.) Even when the Book of Mormon would validate Thomas's claim that the most artful element of the text is its clustering parallels to the Bible (see p. 18), he does little to demonstrate the point.

Another example of Thomas's textual impotence arises when he discusses Abinadi (see p. 88), who gets just one paragraph in his reading. I have elsewhere noted that a single word in Mosiah 12:1 triggers the allusive connection the reader is intended to make to biblical narrative. After having been run out by King Noah's people a first time, "Abinadi came among them in *disguise*." This one word connects the confrontation between the prophet Abinadi and the king Noah to several biblical stories (see 1 Samuel 28; 1 Kings 14; 20; 22) that also feature a confrontation between king and prophet involving some sort of disguise. But I have analyzed this connection elsewhere at length.³² Not only is Thomas's reading superficial, but he also seems unaware that a discussion of allusion between the two books of scripture has been ongoing.

Similarly, when Thomas reads Alma 17–19 (Ammon and the conversion of King Lamoni), he finds allusions to the resuscitation of Jairus's daughter and to two other stories in which Jesus comments on the faith of Gentiles. "Thus the Book of Mormon spiritualizes three New Testament miracles of healing and raising the dead to describe the conversion of the spiritually dead" (p. 140). I have noted the sophisticated allusive character of this story, especially Ammon's

32. See Alan Goff, "Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 192–206.

saving the king's sheep at the waters of Sebus;³³ the meaning isn't Thomas's anemic healing and raising the dead. (He ties the stories into New Testament narratives for ideological reasons when better parallels should be sought in the Old Testament. He doesn't want parallel stories from the plates of brass; rather, he prefers ones that chronologically follow the stories in the Book of Mormon as an implied claim that Joseph Smith, not Alma or Mormon, is the author of this narrative.) The message of this story is that Ammon, the son of a king and potentially the son-in-law of a king, gives all that up to preach the gospel. The story is about kingship and leadership. Again, Thomas shows no sign of being aware of published material that covers the same ground he does.

I have long claimed that the book of Mosiah is sophisticated not only in its intertextual relationship with the Deuteronomistic history in the Bible (see Joshua–2 Kings) but also in its political commentary (Thomas also correctly notes the strong parallels to the exodus, p. 86). Again, Thomas doesn't do justice to the complex literary and political matrix in Mosiah (which laps over into Alma). In the most sustained attention Thomas gives to a Book of Mormon narrative (see pp. 151–59), he notes that this section of the book is modeled on the biblical pattern of kingship, not some American frontier paradigm (see p. 152), and he finds that the text uses introductory formulas that mirror 1 and 2 Kings (see p. 153). He just mentions the fact that the same formulas are used to introduce the judges in the Book of Mormon (see p. 154). Thomas is content to develop parallels between two kings within the Book of Mormon: Noah and Riplakish. In this he follows Brent Metcalfe,³⁴ except Metcalfe's point is that

33. Goff, "Reduction and Enlargement," 100–108.

34. See Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions," 169–70. Metcalfe notes on page 170 that "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." Besides depending on a positivist distinction between history and fiction, this is precisely the simplistic textual analysis Thomas claims to be arguing against. Notice how Thomas makes no attempt to distance himself from or to criticize the very interpretive activities he opposes when they are engaged in by ideological compatriots.

since the portraits of the two kings are so similar to each other, the Book of Mormon author must be manipulating history and is engaging in fictional writing in drawing the parallel. I have already published my own criticism of Metcalfe's reading,³⁵ so I won't do so again here. Parallels to biblical kings are much stronger than either Metcalfe or Thomas has recognized. All the parallels Metcalfe sees between Noah and Riplakish are also shared by Solomon,³⁶ both scriptures are describing the concentration of power that occurs with an oriental despot. Herodotus conveys much the same message, especially when examining the rulership of Persian kings. The portrayal is intended to be typical. The biblical portrait should include other abusive kings besides Solomon: Ahab (really, all of the Omride dynasty), Jeroboam, Rehoboam, Manasseh, and Ahaz. In fact, we ought to see the political import of the book of Mosiah. Earlier in the biblical narrative, the Israelites had moved from leadership by judges to kings; they foolishly insisted they wanted a "king like all the nations." They rejected leadership by Yahweh, who provided ad hoc leaders through the period of judges when the Israelites needed to be delivered. Gideon, in the book of Judges, is one such *mosiah* who delivers or "saves" his people. After the deliverance Gideon explicitly rejects the kingship offered by the Israelites (see Judges 8:22–23), but there are ambiguous counterindications. He keeps a harem (see Judges 8:30, something only kings could afford) and names his son Abimelech, "my father is a king" (Judges 8:31). Abimelech himself becomes a king over Shechem for a short time (see Judges 9:6). Gideon is a narrative bridge between judges and kings—a proto-king. So when a second Gideon emerges in the Book of Mormon to oppose King Noah (see Mosiah 19), helps Limhi's people escape from captivity and therefore is a *mosiah*—"savior" is what the Hebrew word means (see Mosiah 22:4)—and confronts the would-be king-men after the political transition to judges (see Alma 1:8–9; 2:1), the allusion back to

35. See Goff, "Uncritical Theory and Thin Description," 170–207.

36. My essay showing the evidence is still in manuscript. Currently it is called "Repetition in Historical Literature: The Ancients Versus the Moderns," parts 1 and 2.

the earlier Gideon is complete.³⁷ Just as Gideon is a biblical bridge between judges and kings, Gideon in the Book of Mormon is a bridge in the political transition between kings and judges. The mistake the Israelites made in converting to leadership by kings (see 1 Samuel 8–12) was undone by wise rulers in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 23 and 29).

Thomas's political analysis is as weak and inadequate as his textual analysis. The Book of Mormon pays strong attention to evil leaders and evil institutions (see p. 149), but it is merely continuing a critique begun in the Bible; reading the book against the backdrop of the biblical political interrogation is necessary if we are to understand it. Thomas's book is a failure at this task. Therefore, when Thomas offers his own political analysis, it is characteristically naive: he wants to convert political discussion into a symbolic one, for "if the symbols are taken literally, they lead to fascism or McCarthyism."³⁸ For this reason, if I am mistaken in viewing the social concepts in the Book of Mormon as symbolic, its social message would need to be rejected as simplistic and dangerous" (p. 207). Thomas wants to ensure a separation between church and religion, secular and sacred, to ensure that we don't fall into fascism; this is a curious argument, for fascism is directly a result of modern thought (influenced by Romanticism's valorization of the folk and nationalism's subjugation of the individual to state interests). How does the Book of Mormon,

37. Robert Alter notes that in the Bible often "the juxtaposition of disparate materials that are purposefully linked by motif, theme, analogy and, sometimes, by a character who serves as a bridge between two different narrative blocks otherwise separated in regard to plot and often in regard to style and perspective or even genre" serves to connect stories. This is a device often used in "Numbers, Joshua, Kings and, above all, in the Book of Judges, but [is] also discernible elsewhere." Robert Alter, "Sodom as Nexus: The Web of Design in Biblical Narrative," in *The Book and the Text*, 147.

38. Thomas apparently believes that the evangelizing aspects of making strong truth claims are thoroughly dangerous in a pluralistic and tolerant society: That if I believe strongly I will soon resort to violence to impose my will on those who don't agree with me. This is an old archaism left over from the Enlightenment attack on religion. All ideologies are evangelizing and make some measure of exclusive truth claims. This old stereotype merely singles religious ideologies out as dangerous, absent the realization that all truth claims (even the postmodern and liberal modern) have coercive elements and tolerant elements.

which even Thomas recognizes as challenging modern ideas, lead so easily to a modern idea such as fascism? Developing a discussion of modern liberal democracy is an analysis I can't do in this essay, but if I could then I would point out that simplistic thinkers engage in false dichotomies such as this: either believe as I do in liberal modern thought (with the strict separation of church and state, the commitment to a pluralism regarding the ultimate good, and the notion that fundamental differences ought to be tolerated at all costs), or the result will be fascism.

Thomas has smuggled modern political theory in as his fundamental ideology without informing his reader. But he is mistaken in his reading of the political message and is naive in his political analysis. His commitment to liberal modernity is shared by modern political thinkers (John Rawls and Bruce Ackerman, for example) who claim that reasons for a citizen's behavior must be articulated in publicly verifiable propositions: in other words, you can't use religious revelation as a reason for your position on abortion because the rest of the public (who might belong to a different religion or have no religion at all) can't duplicate that evidence. Let me defer a full development of these ideas for some other venue. The relevant point is that Thomas is an ideologue who advocates modern political ideas and modern epistemological ideas; what is true of the Bible is as true of the Book of Mormon, that "there is no innocent reading of the Bible, no reading that is not already ideological."³⁹ As writers we have an obligation to inform our readers what our ideology is because "as there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of."⁴⁰ He isn't even aware that he takes an ideology for granted, so he is an uncritical ideologue. Thomas rather nastily dismisses those who believe the Book of Mormon might be literally relevant to our discussions of power and leadership today as potential fascists and McCarthyites. This message has a fairly strong political bite, an antireligious one.

39. The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4.

40. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy," in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979), 14.

Residual Positivism and the Role of Ideology

This ideological element in Thomas's interpretation is poignant considering Thomas thinks he is being objective and unbiased: "I have attempted to be both objective about my task and sensitive to the sentiments of fellow believers" (p. ix). By itself, I don't believe that a claim to being objective is enough to brand a person's position as positivist. To do so requires that the idea of objectivity be expanded with other claims, which often include the following: access to brute, uninterpreted facts free of all interpretation (a variant of this form of positivism is exclusive to historians, i.e., that archives contain brute facts free of interpretation and ideology); empirical knowledge is the only valid form of truth; historians must approach the task of explanation free of presuppositions; metaphysical claims can and ought to be eschewed; the scientific method provides the only valid approach to truth; researchers ought to produce interpretations free of all values; the particular commitments of a historian (religious, political, familial, national) are hindrances to proper interpretation; and a sharp line needs to be drawn between literary and historical accounts of the past.

Thomas's claim to the authority of literary and narrative theory is particularly galling considering the new view of ideology that has emerged through literary theory. Louis Althusser was the main expositor of the idea that ideology isn't something extra that gets added on but is at the foundation of any interpretation. An interpretation doesn't emerge without the undergirding of an ideology. Rather than being incidental or plain nuisances, ideologies make interpretations possible. Historical interpretation does not exist free of ideology: "If you do not have an explicit politics—an ideology—then one will certainly have you."⁴¹ Those who claim freedom from ideology are uncritically in the grip of one. "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,

41. Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 70.

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."⁴² It is implausible for Thomas to claim that he reads the "text itself" free of all interpretation and ideology, that he is free of prejudice: "The Book of Mormon begs readers from both sides of belief to push away the debris of neglect, prejudice, over-reverence, and fear—and begin to read the text itself. That is what I intend to do" (p. viii), but there is no such thing as a text-in-itself free of our models, literary tools, and theoretical constructs. So when Thomas claims to discuss "what the book actually says," he sounds as though he himself, but not the readers he disagrees with, has access to some uninterpreted form of the text free of ideological hindrances.

Thomas has a type of reader in mind who lets ideology interfere with interpreting the text: "apologists" who believe it is important to ask whether or not the book is an ancient one: "We will never find out the book's real value or messages until we set aside the apologetic issues of authorship, at least temporarily, so that we can actually recognize the genres in which the book is written" (pp. 2–3). Thomas never applies the epithet of "apologist" to revisionists who believe the book is a modern novel. However, John Sorenson and Hugh Nibley are listed as apologists (see p. 63 n. 1). Never does it occur to Thomas that he himself, or Brent Metcalfe, or Edward Ashment is an apologist. Any nonpositivist understanding will have to recognize that everyone is an apologist, and that we should no longer divide the world into "apologists" with whom we disagree about fundamental issues and "critical" thinkers with whom we agree. Thomas divides readings of sacred texts into two classes: apologetic readings that end up "interfering with interpretation" and critical readings that interpret properly (p. 3). But a more subtle approach recognizes that all readings are a mixture of the apologetic and critical. From my perspective, Thomas's reading is light on the critical aspect and heavy on

42. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 129.

the apologetic because he adheres to a modern ideology that doesn't recognize its own status as ideology.⁴³ He doesn't "understand the inner workings of the narrative itself" (p. 190) any more than I do; his textual interpretation is at least partly (or largely) the result of prior ideological decisions. I have previously mentioned Thomas's political bias toward liberal modernity. He is also committed to historicism, the modern idea that a text's meaning cannot transcend the historical context in which it was written. He often notes that the Book of Mormon's message claims to be relevant to all times and people. However, his historicism implicitly denies that claim, saying that the only valid context of interpretation is nineteenth-century America. But such a move accepts historicism too uncritically:

When historical critics assert, as they are wont to do, that the Hebrew Bible must not be taken "out of context," what they really mean is that the *only* context worthy of respect is the ancient Near Eastern world as it was at the time of composition of whatever text is under discussion. Religious traditionalists, however, are committed to another set of contexts, minimally the rest of scripture, however delimited, and maximally, the entire tradition, including their own religious experience. Their goal is not to push the Book back into a vanished past, but to insure its vitality in the present and the future: "The word of our God endures forever" (Isa. 40:8).⁴⁴

The historicist element in Thomas's readings is at odds with the literary critical element. Literary critics don't often focus on questions of historical context the way Thomas does in insisting that the "original context" of nineteenth-century America is *the* normative one for the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon can be meaningful for

43. Thomas does note that "every interpreter has a theological perspective that colors his other perspective," but he believes that the theological commitments of those people with whom he disagrees go beyond the acceptable limit and lead to "flagrant misrepresentations of the text" (p. 197). I think *his* commitments do.

44. Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1993), 4–5.

Nephites who took seriously its claims about bad kings; its political message can also be relevant today in that concentration of power in the hands of judges who engage in judicial usurpation of the democratic process is dangerous: "Practicing Jews and Christians will differ from uncompromising historicists, however, in affirming the meaningfulness and interpretive relevance of larger contexts that homogenize the literatures of different periods to one degree or another."⁴⁵ I also believe, as the scripture claims, that a prophetic voice is often needed in society to counterbalance a wicked leadership and that this view can be accepted without Thomas calling me a fascist. One way to undermine historicist ideology is to historicize the historicists: their own position is a "secular analogue to religious revelation" because "historicism, which 'exempts itself from its own verdict,' is a secular equivalent to fundamentalism. For though it subjects all else to critique, it asserts axiomatically its own inviolability to critique. Demanding to be the norm by means of which truth and error are disclosed, this type of thinking, by definition, can never be in error."⁴⁶

I wish I had the space for a full discussion of the Enlightenment presuppositions behind Thomas's thought. I don't, but I should note that Thomas's appropriation of literary and narrative criticism is fraught with danger to his own position. Half-knowledge of the discipline doesn't do justice to the field or to the text under analysis. "When theologians and biblical scholars today adopt a literary frame of reference, they enter a minefield which looks harmless enough and even attractive, on the surface"⁴⁷ but is dangerous for the uninitiated. If Thomas doesn't learn the ins and outs of literary criticism better, I suggest he take up dancing in other minefields.

Let me offer ten guidelines for any future applications of literary approaches to the Book of Mormon:

45. *Ibid.*, 104.

46. *Ibid.*, 117.

47. Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 218. By the way, literary theory is equally threatening to my own position. Literary theory and postmodernism are equal-opportunity acids (as even modernity is) that will eat away at any foundation.

1. We must recognize the text as a complex source, one so sophisticated it will often escape our attempts to pin it down with our theories and interpretations.

2. Recognizing the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon is essential to any reader claiming to do exegesis. Dismissing that relationship as plagiarism or borrowing is a cheap way of failing to address the text.

3. The Book of Mormon so insistently uses biblical modes of composition that if you don't learn as much about the Bible as you do about the Book of Mormon from a reading, the reading is inadequate.

4. The small, unknown stories from the Bible are as important for understanding the Book of Mormon as the well-known narratives are. The reader must know the Bible extremely well in order to have a chance at keeping pace with the Book of Mormon.

5. Literary and historical approaches are inseparable, and privileging one over the other is a mistake.

6. The Book of Mormon, like the Bible, knows no separation between politics and religion. To insist on such a division is axiomatically to assume that modern ideas ought to be normative for reading scripture. The Book of Mormon is persistently political, even when the material seems to be quite innocuous and apolitical.

7. Like the Bible, which insistently demands that we conform to it rather than letting us make it conform to the modern world,⁴⁸ the Book of Mormon challenges even the most sophisticated modern assumptions. Those challenges to modern ideas ought not to be facilely dismissed and modernity's truth claims raised instead to the status of scripture.

8. Modernity is a dogma as doctrinaire as any organized religion. We are all moderns and it is hard to think in any other way, but we

48. "The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy." Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14–15. Modern ideologies, similarly, are exclusive of other positions and seek to drive them from the field.

ought to recognize that modern insights—though often valuable—are tentative and fragile.

9. The Bible and the Book of Mormon constantly probe humanity's weaknesses and strengths. We ought to allow the possibility that we have something to learn from their keen insight into human nature and actions.

10. The Book of Mormon makes certain ontological and epistemological claims whose possibility at least needs to be allowed. If the reader dismisses them out of hand, he or she imposes an alien interpretive framework on the text that converts it into something it already repudiates.

I have much more I could write, and planned to say, about Thomas's book, but I won't here. What Meir Sternberg says about the Bible is also true of the Book of Mormon. Speaking of the weaknesses in Robert Alter's reading of the Bible, he says: "The case has never been stated so well, and the parts abound in shrewd observations; but the whole suffers from the same fatal flaw as all the previous arguments for the Bible's fictionality. As so often, the historical approach is not nearly historical enough and the literary not literary enough, for one sees fiction only when one loses sight of history and convention."⁴⁹ Historical writing in the Book of Mormon operates according to specific conventions; we stand little chance of understanding the meaning of the text if we don't understand those conventions. The book is also subtle and sophisticated. We, likewise, stand little chance of understanding it if we are superficial because that is one thing the book isn't. Thomas's insight, that literary appreciation of the Book of Mormon is necessary to our understanding the text, is a small beginning—one we ought to appreciate. What Robert Alter says about the Bible is as true of the Book of Mormon: "The evidence of the texts suggests that the literary impulse in ancient Israel was quite as powerful as the religious impulse, or, to put it more accurately, that the two were inextricable, so that in order to

49. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 24.

understand the latter, you have to take full account of the former.”⁵⁰ Half-understanding of literary concepts and half-knowledge of the text will not serve the purpose of increasing appreciation of the Book of Mormon.

50. Robert Alter, “Introduction to the Old Testament,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 16–17.