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Theological Apostasy and the Role of Canonical Scripture: A Thematic Analysis of 1 Nephi 13–14

Paul Owen

Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written. (2 Nephi 29:10)

FIRST NEPHI 11–14 CONTAINS A COLLECTION OF THIRTEEN apocalyptic visions in which the future mysteries pertaining to the Lamb and his church are disclosed to Nephi, first through the direct agency of the Spirit (11:8–11) and then through an angelic mediator (11:14–14:30). A clear structural marker delineates the consecutively revealed contents of this apocalyptic section (with minor variations): “And he said unto me: Look! And I looked.”¹ The boundaries of Nephi’s visions are as follows:

11:8–11	Vision of the tree of life
11:13–19	Vision of the virgin mother
11:20–23	Vision of the virgin with child
11:24–25	Vision of the Son of God
11:26–29	Vision of the prophet, the Lamb and the Twelve
11:30	Vision of ministering angels
11:31	Vision of the healed multitudes
11:32–36	Vision of the world’s conflict with the Lamb

1. 1 Nephi 11:8, 12, 19–20, 24, 26, 30–32; 12:1, 11; 13:1; 14:9, 11, 18–19.

12:1–10	Vision of Nephi's seed in the land of promise
12:11–23	Vision of conflict in the land of promise
13:1–14:8	Vision of the abominable church and the book
14:9–17	Vision of the mother of harlots
14:18–30	Vision of John the apostle

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the final three visions of this collection. As we will see, this final set of materials within the overall collection shares an interest in the struggle between true and false religion and the collection of books of scripture (13:20, 38–39; 14:23). What follows is a thematic analysis of the contents of these three visions. After analyzing this material, I will attempt to make the following arguments and contributions to the discussion of 1 Nephi.

- The great and abominable church is not hellenized Christianity, but politicized Christianity.
- The chief role of the false church that 1 Nephi highlights is the corruption of the Old Testament.
- First Nephi supports the notion of a wider corpus of canonical writings than is presently found in the Old Testament (including both public and esoteric texts).
- The Jew whose role is highlighted in 1 Nephi 13–14 is Ezra the scribe.
- In all likelihood some sort of literary relationship exists between 1 Nephi and 2 Esdras in the Apocrypha.
- First Nephi shows familiarity with the apocalyptic custom of editing and reusing previous divine disclosures for new audiences.
- This apocalyptic custom could have implications for the sources and literary history of the Book of Mormon, which have thus far been given little attention by scholars of ancient scripture.

In making these proposals, I hope to broaden the discussion of the Book of Mormon in relation to the following issues:

- The relationship between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the wider catholic Christian tradition.
- The importance of Anabaptist ecclesiology for Joseph Smith's theological vision.
- Consideration of the deep influence of apocalypticism upon the author(s) of the Book of Mormon.²
- The possibility of alternative models for the literary history of the Book of Mormon that break the boundaries of typical divisions between liberal/fictional vs. conservative/historical in the analysis of the contents of this text of ancient scripture.

Vision of the great and abominable church (1 Nephi 13:1–14:8)

Nephi's eleventh vision opens with the appearance of "many [gentile] nations and kingdoms" (1 Nephi 13:1–3). These kingdoms set the stage for the "formation of a great church" (13:4). There then follows a description of this church, which has four primary characteristics: (1) it does great harm to the "saints of God" (13:5), (2) it has the devil as its founder (13:6), (3) it enjoys financial prosperity (13:7–8), and (4) it desires the "praise of the world" (13:9). The precise identity of this church is never disclosed to Nephi.³

First Nephi 13:10–14:8 then shifts the focus of this vision from the false church among the Gentiles to the seed of Nephi's brethren on the other side of "many waters" (13:10). After an ominous reference to the divine wrath that will visit this seed (13:11), Nephi is then enabled to see a man

2. Typically, apocalyptic texts have complicated histories, with earlier traditions taken over, reused, edited, augmented, and renewed for subsequent Jewish and Christian audiences. For a general introduction to this body of literature, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

3. It is never identified with any particular denomination, or branch, of Christendom.

(Christopher Columbus)⁴ who travels across the waters from among the Gentiles to the promised land (13:12). This is followed by the journey of other Gentiles (the British colonists) to the Americas (13:13–15); they will serve as the agent of God’s wrath on those native inhabitants of the land. Nephi also sees the Revolutionary War that will break out in those days (13:16–19) and learns that God will be on the side of (what we know to be) the American Revolutionaries against the British Empire.⁵

These events set the stage for the appearance of new books in the New World. The Americans will prosper in the land and have in their possession an important “book.” The nature of this book and its literary elaboration is explained in 1 Nephi 13:21–42. It is obvious enough that, in some general sense, the book that is “carried forth among” the new inhabitants of America is the Christian Bible (13:20), but the specific description of this book has several features. The angel tells Nephi that it “proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew,” is a “record of the Jews,” and contains “the covenants of the Lord” and “the prophecies of the holy prophets” (13:23). This cluster of characteristics indicates that the book that is shown to Nephi materially consists of the contents of the Protestant Old Testament, which contains records that are “of great worth unto the Gentiles.”⁶

4. See Louise G. Hanson, “Christopher Columbus,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:294–96.

5. See Richard L. Bushman, “The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 189–211.

6. Here I differ with Stephen E. Robinson, who identifies the book of the Jew with the New Testament. See “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13–14,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 186–87. So also Kent P. Jackson, “Asking Restoration Questions in New Testament Scholarship,” in *How the New Testament Came to Be*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2006), 34–37. Both Robinson and Jackson seem to presume that “the Jew” is merely a way of speaking of the culture of Palestinian Judaism that gave birth to the literature and theology of earliest Christianity prior to its hellenization and capitulation to Greek philosophy. I reject their proposals, not only because they fail to identify “the Jew” as a specific individual who dictated the contents of the Bible with his mouth (see below), but because Christianity was already a hellenized religion when it sprang up from the

However, the angel goes on to explain that this book has been altered before it comes into the possession of Americans. Initially, the book contained “the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record” (1 Nephi 13:24). This description might seem to suggest that the book is not the Old Testament, but it seems plain that, within the theological perspective of this vision, the Old Testament originally contained the fulness of the gospel. It is only after the Old Testament was altered by nefarious hands that such fulness was removed. The twelve apostles originally bore record of a gospel that they already found in the version of the Old Testament that was still available to them. Verses 24–25 refer to the dissemination of the scriptures among the Gentiles, which echoes the reference to the “great church” formed among “the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles” at the beginning of this vision (13:3–4). We are therefore to understand that the “great and abominable church,” which has the devil as its founder (13:6), is responsible for the removal of the fulness of the gospel from the scriptures: “for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious” (13:26). The effects of the activity of the false church upon the form and content of scripture is elaborated in verses 27–29: God’s people lose their divine guidance, the Bible is passed on in a defective form, and many people in America fall into Satan’s hands because the defective version of the scriptures is passed on to those settled in the New World.

However, according to the vision, there are limits to what God will allow the devil to accomplish. The harmful activity of the abominable church will be curtailed by the operation of God’s mercy, such that the seed of Nephi and his brethren (the Nephites and Lamanites) will not be entirely wiped out, despite the destruction that the Gentiles (the British colonists) shall mete out upon their offspring (1 Nephi 13:30–31). In addition, after rendering judgment upon the “remnant of the house of Israel” (the Lamanites), God will visit the Gentiles in such a way that “I will bring forth unto them, in mine own power, much of my gospel,

soil of Palestinian Judaism. See Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

which shall be plain and most precious, saith the Lamb” (13:34). This second point is crucial: God will restore the knowledge that was removed from the book by the great and abominable church. This will involve the disclosure of other books of scripture. This topic occupies the remainder of Nephi’s eleventh vision in 1 Nephi 13–14, which might be outlined as follows:

1. Nephi’s seed will make sacred records that will be “hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles” (13:35).
2. These records will contain the gospel of the Lamb (v. 36).
3. The gift of the Holy Ghost shall empower preachers of this newly discovered gospel who will “seek to bring forth my Zion” (v. 37).
4. The “book of the Lamb of God, which had proceeded forth from the mouth of the Jew” (the Bible) will be made known to the “seed” of Nephi’s brethren (the Lamanites) by the Gentiles (v. 38).
5. Subsequently, “other books” will come forth from the Gentiles “by the power of the Lamb,” which will convince Gentiles, Lamanites, and the Jews who are “scattered upon all the face of the earth, that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (v. 39). This clearly refers to the contents of the Book of Mormon, though it probably alludes to other books as well (cf. 14:26).
6. The purpose of these “last records” will be to establish the truth of the former records (the Old and New Testaments), and furthermore they “shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them” (13:40).
7. The earlier and latter records will contain the words of the same Lamb of God, “for there is one God and one Shepherd over all the earth” (v. 41).
8. Thus, just as God used the Jews to bring divine revelation to the Gentiles (through the Bible), God will also use the Gentiles to bring God’s latter-day revelation to the Jews (both

among the Lamanites and the scattered tribes of Israel on earth; v. 42).

9. The vision concludes with a general exhortation to the Gentiles not to harden their hearts (14:2), but instead to “hearken unto the Lamb of God” (14:1), so as to be numbered among the children of Israel (14:2) and delivered from the destruction of hell (14:3–5) and “the captivity of the devil” (14:7).

Vision of the mother of harlots (1 Nephi 14:9–17)

Nephi’s twelfth vision offers another depiction of the great and abominable church, this time represented with feminine imagery as the “mother of abominations” (1 Nephi 14:9), the “whore of all the earth” (14:10), and the “mother of harlots” (14:16). The dominant point seems to be that the false church is seductive and alluring, leading people into the path of false religion. The angel informs Nephi that ultimately only two churches are on the earth: “the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church” (14:10). The apocalyptic imagery employed here also emphasizes the worldwide influence of this false religion: “she sat upon many waters; and she had dominion over all the earth, among all nations, kindreds, tongues and people” (14:11).⁷

Clearly anticipating the conflict between good and evil that will intensify as the end of the world approaches, Nephi sees a battle unfolding: “And it came to pass that I beheld that the great mother of abominations did gather together multitudes upon the face of all the earth, among all the nations of the Gentiles, to fight against the Lamb of God” (1 Nephi 14:13). But the false church will be defeated through the agency of the true church of the Lamb (14:14) and the historical unfolding of God’s wrath upon the wicked on earth (14:15–17). When this unfolding of divine wrath nears its pinnacle in the last days, “then,

7. Cf. Robinson, “Early Christianity,” 178–84.

at that day, the work of the Father shall commence, in preparing the way for the fulfilling of his covenants, which he hath made to his people who are of the house of Israel” (14:17). Although the meaning of this promise is open-ended, it appears related to the earlier prediction of 1 Nephi 13:39 that after the settlement of America by the Gentiles, “other books” will be produced “by the power of the Lamb,” which will bring about the conversion of the Lamanites and also “the Jews who were scattered upon all the face of the earth.” This is the “work of the Father,” which “shall commence, in preparing the way for the fulfilling of his covenants” in the last days (14:17).

Vision of John the apostle (1 Nephi 14:18–30)

The final vision of Nephi in this collection centers on the character of the apostle John. He is specifically identified with the name of John (1 Nephi 14:27) and is designated as one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (14:20, 24–25, 27). He is described as wearing a “white robe” (14:19), which is indicative of his purity of character and blameless testimony (cf. Revelation 3:4). The angel announces that John will write “concerning the end of the world” (1 Nephi 14:22), and his writing will be “written in the book which thou beheld proceeding out of the mouth of the Jew” (14:23). This ties back to the earlier description of the Bible in 1 Nephi 13:20–24, 38. Earlier, we saw that the fundamental identity of the book that proceeds out of the mouth of the Jew is the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. This is clearly the case in 13:23; however, the record is not a static collection, for it is open to augmentation and expansion. First Nephi 13:39 anticipates latter-day records (found in the Book of Mormon) that shall convince the Jews that the “records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” are true. Furthermore, these “last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them” (13:40). Clearly the characteristics of the Old Testament (which proceeds out of the mouth of “the Jew”) transfer to the writings

of the apostles because their writings are viewed as one piece with the earlier prophetic collections they augment. In other words, supplementary books that are added to the canon of Jewish books bear witness to the same body of plain and precious truths and hence are viewed as one “book of the Lamb of God” in a synthetic unity (13:38).

Another interesting feature of this last vision is the importance of repeated revelations. In the future, John the apostle will see the things that had already been shown to Nephi (1 Nephi 14:24–25). Furthermore, the things revealed to Nephi and John have already been seen by prophets before them (14:26). And finally, Nephi reminds his readers, “I bear record that I saw the things which my father saw, and the angel of the Lord did make them known unto me” (14:29; cf. 11:1–3). This is an important point for understanding the literary complexity of the Book of Mormon and one to which I will return below.

Theological and literary implications of Nephi’s visions

The identity of the great and abominable church

Plainly the author of 1 Nephi employs apocalyptic conventions in relaying the content of these visions. As is typical of that genre, the symbols employed are open to historical interpretations but also contain symbolic or mythical overtones that are subject to repeated application. So it is with the great and abominable church. In 1 Nephi 13 we are introduced to an entity that is first entitled a “great church” (v. 4), then “a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortureth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down to captivity” (v. 5). In light of 14:1–7, this descriptive imagery should likely be understood in terms of spiritual destruction and the effects of bondage to the devil in the realm of religious piety and practice.⁸

8. Contra Robinson, “Early Christianity,” 185–86, who highlights the idea of physical persecution and martyrdom.

The key to the identity of this church is found in the characterizing features of 1 Nephi 13:7–9. These verses emphasize the financial power and worldly prosperity of the great church, which destroys the saints “for the praise of the world” (v. 9). Religion as the expression of gentile power is the essence of this symbolism: “These are the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles” (13:3). The saints are destroyed when they are allured and attracted by the visible pomp and circumstance of the worldly church. This is especially clear in 14:2–3, where Nephi is told that the captivity of the church and the destruction of God’s saints are a spiritual continuation of the Babylonian exile of the Jews.⁹ In other words, it represents Christendom’s captivity to worldly power and her subjection to the control of any state-sponsored and state-supported form of religion. This is why one of the titles of the false church is “Babylon” (Doctrine and Covenants 86:3).

This church is charged with responsibility for corrupting the canonical scriptures in 1 Nephi 13:26–28. Obviously a historical timetable is at work here, for this corruption takes place only “after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (v. 26). This is the church that will take away “from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away” (v. 26). The book that contained these plain and precious parts, as we have seen above, is the canonical Old Testament, which is transmitted intact, with all purity, by the twelve apostles.

What, then, is the identity of the false church that engages in this nefarious activity? It is a postapostolic church that exercises gradual control over the contents of the earlier Jewish canon within the Christian community. This suggests that the great and abominable church, an open-ended apocalyptic symbol in 1 Nephi 14, has a specific historical (though still apocalyptic) expression in 1 Nephi 13—visible Christendom in the Roman Empire after the time of Constantine (AD 313).¹⁰

9. This surely is the “captivity” of 1 Nephi 13:9.

10. Robinson considers this option, only to reject it, in “Early Christianity,” 185–86. Robinson’s main reason for rejecting post-Constantinian Christendom as the “great and abominable” church is because (he argues) the contents of the New Testament

The book that proceeds from the mouth of a Jew

Repeatedly, the angel tells Nephi that the book of scripture, which will be altered and corrupted by the false church, comes out of the mouth of a/the “Jew” (1 Nephi 13:23, 24, 38; 14:23). But who is the Jew? Why does the angel always speak of the mouth of this Jew when making reference to written records? And why are the words *mouth* and *Jew* always in the singular if this is just a generic reference to the role of the Jews in producing the Bible before its corruption? The following points should be kept in mind. First, from the description of this book (13:21) as one that “proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew” (13:23), it is evidently “a record of the Jews” and hence (as we saw above) at least initially consisted of the Hebrew scriptures. Second, apparently “the Jew” is an individual. The indefinite article *a* (13:23, 24) is replaced with *the* in subsequent references to this Jew (13:38; 14:23). So *the* cannot be taken as a generic article (Jews as a category), given the fact that it finds its original antecedent in “a Jew.” Finally, this Jew’s primary role is that of an oral dictator of scripture. There is simply no other reason to emphasize the activity of his mouth as opposed to his hand.

But what is the identity of this Jew who transmitted an authoritative version of the Old Testament by reading the text out loud? Certainly the role of Ezra the scribe, who reads aloud for seven days from the law of God in Nehemiah 8, comes to mind. More specifically, these references in 1 Nephi 13–14 appear to bear some connection (whether prophetic, literary, or merely thematic) to the contents of 2 Esdras 14 in the Apocrypha.¹¹ The following links between Ezra’s revelation and the visions of Nephi (and the Book of Mormon more generally) seem fairly transparent:

were, for the most part, already settled by the beginning of the fourth century. But if the interpretation being proposed in the present essay is correct (see below), the plain and precious parts of the canon do not refer to missing books or passages in the New Testament, but rather to now-lost or corrupted apocryphal books that originally circulated among the “wise” along with the Old Testament, at least until the death of the apostles.

11. I have explored this topic elsewhere. See Paul Owen, “The Enigma of Mormonism,” in *Mormonism at the Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L. Paulsen*, ed. Jacob T. Baker (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 116–18.

1. The background of the theophanic epiphany to Ezra is the destruction of the Bible (the books of the Old Testament) and the necessity of its restoration (2 Esdras 14:21–22; cf. 1 Nephi 13:26, 28).
2. This destruction of scripture has caused God’s people to lose their way (2 Esdras 14:22; cf. 1 Nephi 13:27, 29).
3. The restoration of scripture will be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Esdras 14:22, 40; cf. 1 Nephi 13:37, 39).
4. The books that are revealed to and dictated by Ezra are first written down on “writing tablets” (2 Esdras 14:24 NRSV; “box trees” KJV). So also the Book of Mormon (cf. 1 Nephi 13:23; Mosiah 1:3).
5. Ezra (the recipient of the revelation) is to dictate the contents of these books to chosen scribes (2 Esdras 14:24). So also Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon (cf. 2 Nephi 3:17; 27:9–10).
6. Only some of what is revealed to Ezra and written down is to be made public; the rest is reserved for the wise (2 Esdras 14:26, 45–46; cf. 1 Nephi 14:26, 28).
7. In order for God’s people to have all the wisdom they need, they must have access both to the public and the esoteric texts dictated by Ezra: “For in them is the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom, and the stream of knowledge” (2 Esdras 14:47; cf. 1 Nephi 13:40–41).
8. The scribes who wrote on the tablets “wrote what was dictated, using characters that they did not know” (2 Esdras 14:42 NRSV; “they wrote the wonderful visions of the night that were told, which they knew not” KJV). So also the Book of Mormon (cf. 1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:2; Mormon 9:32).
9. There is a repeated emphasis on the mouth of Ezra (2 Esdras 14:38, 39, 41; cf. 1 Nephi 13:23, 24, 38; 14:23).

10. What was previously revealed to Moses is now freshly disclosed to Ezra (2 Esdras 14:5–6, 21–22; cf. 1 Nephi 14:24–26, 29).

Notably, the distinction between public and hidden books correlates with the distinction between the contents of the Palestinian Jewish canon on the one hand (also the Protestant Old Testament) and an additional collection of apocalyptic and apocryphal books on the other: “Make public the twenty-four books that you wrote first, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the seventy that were written last, in order to give them to the wise among your people” (2 Esdras 14:45–46 NRSV). Ezra’s community has access to the public canon, but only the “wise” are given additional access to a broader collection of inspired texts.

This passage seems to correlate with 1 Nephi 13:39–40: “I beheld other books, which came forth by the power of the Lamb. . . . These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them.” This clear allusion to the Book of Mormon (and other texts also) is all the more striking in light of the way Ezra’s esoteric revelation is described in 2 Esdras: “Therefore write all these things that you have seen in a book, put it in a hidden place; and you shall teach them to the wise among your people, whose hearts you know are able to comprehend and keep these secrets” (2 Esdras 12:37–38 NRSV; cf. 1 Nephi 13:35).

The correspondence between these texts enables us to see the latter-day revelations alluded to in 1 Nephi 13 (which certainly include the Book of Mormon) as a restoration of the contents of esoteric texts that were passed on to the “wise” in times past, at least until the death of the apostles. Subsequently, in the centuries following the writing of the New Testament, when the Roman Empire became a patron of worldly Christendom, these texts were suppressed by the false church (through destruction and corruption), leaving the saints without that ancient collection of apocryphal wisdom necessary to see the plain and precious

things in the Hebrew scriptures with adequate clarity (1 Nephi 13:40–41; 14:23).¹²

The apocalyptic reuse of previous revelations

These suggestive parallels between 2 Esdras 14 and 1 Nephi 13–14 could be explained in a number of ways: (1) they could be coincidental; (2) Nephi could have been given a prophetic glimpse of the future role of Ezra, as accurately described in 2 Esdras; (3) Joseph Smith (or someone in his circle) could have read 2 Esdras in the King James Version of the Apocrypha and perhaps had access to commentary on its meaning through libraries and cultural knowledge; or (4) the Book of Mormon could be viewed as a restoration of an ancient Christian apocryphal text, which itself made use of earlier Jewish sources.

Choosing among these options is a highly subjective matter, to be sure. In my opinion, the parallels between the two texts are simply too numerous and too compactly gathered within confined, corresponding sections of 2 Esdras and 1 Nephi to be a pure coincidence. And most important, the first solution leaves us with no adequate identification of “the Jew” in 1 Nephi 13–14. So I think we can safely exclude the first option.

But should we then see Nephi as being given a prophetic vision of the future role of Ezra (option 2) to account for the similarities?¹³ A number of factors could point in this direction: (1) The text of 1 Nephi

12. Note that we are not identifying the false church in 1 Nephi with any particular denomination, whether the Roman Catholic Church or any other. Rather, it is the willingness of the church to accommodate to the power of the state, or the state’s direct involvement in the affairs of the church, that constitutes the essence of false religion in 1 Nephi 13–14. It is the unholy marriage between the church and the state. Roman patronage of Christendom beginning in the fourth century is merely one historical application of that symbolism within the Book of Mormon. What is expressed here in Nephi’s vision is a quintessentially Radical Reformation ecclesiology.

13. It should be noted that options 2 and 3 could be combined if one were to adopt something like Blake Ostler’s “expansion” theory of the Book of Mormon. See Blake T. Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20/1 (1987): 66–123. For a more recent proposal along the same lines, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

never names Ezra, but merely describes “the Jew” in a manner that would suggest this identification. If this were a case of prophecy “after the fact,” the author would presumably have named Ezra more explicitly. (2) If Joseph Smith, rather than relying on the printed text of 2 Esdras, was exposed by divine encounter and inspiration to a body of ancient lore that eventually found its way into Jewish-Christian apocalyptic works (cf. 2 Esdras 13:41–42), this would explain why we find those curious references to Jews writing on “tablets” (2 Esdras 14:24) in obscure characters (2 Esdras 14:42)—both of which details were only cryptically expressed in the English language of the rendition of the Apocrypha to which the prophet had ready access.

This second option should thus be kept in play as a real possibility. However, it would seem that the primary reason one might view this as a case of prophetic prediction (rather than the influence of 2 Esdras on the author of 1 Nephi) is because of a prior commitment to the historicity of the narrative of the Book of Mormon. Only if there really was a historical family of Lehi that actually traveled to the Americas in the buildup of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem; only if a historical Jew named Nephi really was granted a vision of Christopher Columbus, the Revolutionary War, the settlement of the British colonists in America, and their defeat of the Native American populations; and only if these populations really did contain the actual genetic remnants of the seed of the Lamanites—only then would there be a prevailing reason to favor this second option.¹⁴ Furthermore, while divine inspiration might explain how Nephi could be aware of the future role of Ezra in dictating and restoring the lost contents of the Jewish scriptures (setting aside for the moment questions about the historicity of that account), it would not have the explanatory power to account for the cluster of shared features that link the two confined sections of text. This cluster of shared features points to (but does not secure) a *literary* connection of dependence. If such dependence is granted, since the author of 2 Esdras could not have

14. Most conservative LDS scholars continue to maintain these commitments. See the important collection of essays in Paul Y. Hoskisson, ed., *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001).

had access to the contents of the Book of Mormon, the influence would have to go in the other direction. This would imply that the historical setting for the writing of 1 Nephi 13–14 cannot be any earlier than at least the end of the first century AD (which is when the Jewish core of 2 Esdras is typically dated).¹⁵

This leaves us with options 3 and 4 (or some combination of the two) as, in my view, the most likely solutions. Those who view the Book of Mormon as a work of nineteenth-century religious fiction (whether divinely inspired or merely human-produced) will naturally gravitate toward option 3. And there can be no doubt that Joseph Smith's access to 2 Esdras provides a simple, straightforward explanation of the textual evidence—with the exception of one point. The references in the text of 2 Esdras to Jews writing on “tablets” in “obscure characters” are unclear in the King James translation available to Joseph Smith. While a bit mysterious, this could potentially be explained in several ways: (1) Smith (or someone in his circle) could have intuitively surmised (based on the context) the underlying meaning of the King James renderings “box trees” (2 Esdras 14:24) and “which they knew not” (14:42) in a way that happens to correspond to modern English translations. (2) Smith (or someone in his circle) could have had access to annotations on the Apocrypha through various sources (libraries, local ministers, bookstores) that clarified the meaning. (3) These particular parallels between 1 Nephi 13–14 and 2 Esdras 14 could be coincidental, parallels of which Smith and his associates actually had no awareness prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon. It should be noted, however, that even if these two features on the list of parallels are removed entirely from consideration, the remaining eight points still constitute a striking cluster of shared characteristics that tend to support a literary dependence on the text of 2 Esdras on the part of the author of 1 Nephi (whoever he was).

But what are we to say of option 4? Certainly, an apocryphal Christian text, written subsequent to the death of the apostles (and the

15. For a discussion of background issues, see B. M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume One*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 517–23.

publication of 2 Esdras), could account for the literary dependence we have noted. As we saw above, the apocalyptic rhetoric of 1 Nephi 13–14 seems to find its setting in a critique of worldly, state-sponsored Christendom, which has suppressed plain and precious parts of the Bible. Such a critique could not have been warranted prior to AD 313, when Constantine began to give Christianity protection and patronage.¹⁶ It is also interesting to note that by this time, 2 Esdras had already been taken over, edited, augmented, and utilized in Christian circles. Might Joseph Smith, by means of divine inspiration and angelic assistance, have “restored” (with expansions reflective of his own nineteenth-century setting) an ancient Christian apocryphal text—itsself based on earlier Jewish apocalyptic sources—in the dictation of the Book of Mormon? Were such to be the case, it certainly would not be surprising for it to reflect the influence of 2 Esdras. Perhaps 1 Nephi 13–14 provides us some important hints as to the complex documentary history of the Book of Mormon as a whole.

Such a proposal has some significant advantages, in my opinion:

1. It would allow traditional Latter-day Saints to continue to maintain that the gold plates that were shown to Joseph Smith by the angel Moroni—though not necessarily historical artifacts from the history of the Americas—were nonetheless factual objects (albeit of heavenly origin).
2. It would allow Latter-day Saints to maintain that Joseph Smith’s claims of heavenly visitation and divine revelation had an objective and factual content.
3. It would retain the integrity of the Book of Mormon as an authentically ancient text, albeit originating in a different time and place.

16. The state church was formally established in AD 380 with the edict of Theodosius I, which made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

4. It could explain the date of the *terminus ad quem* of the Book of Mormon narrative (ca. AD 421).¹⁷
5. It would allow for the subsequent augmentation and updating of this ancient apocryphal text (which could have utilized earlier Jewish sources and traditions) by Joseph Smith when its contents were passed on to him by the angel Moroni.
6. It would allow for a better explanation of the curious parallels between the general storyline of the Book of Mormon and the *History of the Rechabites* (since the traditional core of the Book of Mormon narrative remained in the Old World).¹⁸
7. It would allow the Book of Mormon to be taken as simultaneously modern and fictional, on the one hand, and miraculous and inclusive of authentic ancient material on the other. It would thus bring the manner of the production of the Book of Mormon more in line with the restoration of other ancient texts (e.g., the Book of Abraham, the Book of Moses, Doctrine and Covenants 7).¹⁹

17. Interestingly, AD 421 is the traditional Catholic date of the death of Saint Mary of Egypt (the patron saint of penitents). She was one of the most prominent of the Desert Mothers and a close associate of St. Zosimus of Palestine (see note 18). Others however, date her death at 522 or 530.

18. See John W. Welch, "The Narrative of Zosimus (History of the Rechabites) and the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 323–74. St. Zosimus was a Palestinian monk who lived in a desert location near the Jordan River, and his biography is found in the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, attributed to St. Sophronius of Jerusalem, Patriarch of Jerusalem from AD 634 through 638. He could be (and in my view probably is) the Zosimus named in the *History of the Rechabites*.

19. For different views as to the origins of the Book of Abraham and its relationship to the Joseph Smith Papyri, see John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 19–30. Gee notes that "a handful of Latter-day Saints think that the Book of Abraham was written by an unknown individual in Greco-Roman Egypt (fourth century BC through the fifth century AD) and that it is an ancient pseudepigraphon translated by Joseph Smith" (p. 25). This bears a close resemblance to the view of the Book of Mormon being considered here. In any event, all scholars agree that the

8. It would relieve modern apologists of the difficult burden of establishing a determinate New World setting for the Book of Mormon.²⁰
9. It would cohere with the repeated message within 1 Nephi that apocalyptic revelation typically repeats and amplifies the content of previous divine disclosures (1 Nephi 11:1–3; 14:24–26, 29).

What I am suggesting, in essence, is that the Book of Mormon *could* be taken as a genuinely restored ancient text with a fictional narrative that originated in the Old World, an account that bore some connection to the mysterious (and probably later) *History of the Rechabites*. Sometime after AD 421, a Christian apocryphal book was penned in the deserts of Palestine. I will call it the *History of the Lehites*. This book told a story (set in the days prior to the fall of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC) of the voyage of a Jew named Lehi, who traveled with his family to a new promised land found on the other side of a great body of water, their settlement in that land, their wars and subsequent history, and the visitation of the resurrected Savior among them. Perhaps due to its antiestablishment ecclesiology, or its small circle of exposure in the Christian world, the *History of the Lehites* was soon lost to the sands of time. Maybe its influence was eclipsed and replaced by the more widely known *History of the Rechabites*. However, its valuable contents reappeared through Moroni's apocalyptic disclosure to Joseph Smith (now with updates and expansions appropriate to the religious and cultural concerns of nineteenth-century America). Moroni's words to Joseph, indicating that the Book of Mormon contained "an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence

Book of Abraham is not a literal "translation" of the Joseph Smith Papyri (or at least any of the papyri we now have access to). Likewise, the Book of Moses is viewed as the direct product of heavenly inspiration and not the translation of any ancient textual artifacts preserved on earth (even if it does restore a text actually written by Moses). The same is true of the restored "parchment" of John in Doctrine and Covenants 7.

20. It has long been recognized that the case for Old World contacts in the Book of Mormon is much easier to defend than any hypothetical New World setting.

they sprang” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34), in this view, would still be an accurate summary of the fictional (though ancient) narrative as Joseph received it from the angel, though such a detailed application to the Americas specifically would no doubt have been expressed in more cryptic terms in the original *History of the Lehites*. The broad outlines of this apocalyptic approach to the Book of Mormon is one that has significant explanatory scope and one that I think should be given more consideration on both sides of the debate over the origins of this fascinating text of scripture.²¹

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21. I discuss this possibility further in my forthcoming essay, “The Book of Mormon: A Revelation for the Modern World,” in *The Mormon World*, ed. Richard Sherlock and Carl Mosser (Routledge, forthcoming).