



1-1-2015

Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*

Reviewed by Rosalynde Frandsen Welch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Welch, Reviewed by Rosalynde Frandsen (2015) "Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol24/iss1/12>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Christopher James Blythe is a historian working on the *Joseph Smith Papers*. He completed a PhD at Florida State University in American religious history in 2015. Blythe also holds degrees from Utah State University and Texas A&M University. His published research has appeared in several academic journals including *Nova Religio*, *Communal Societies*, and *Journal of Mormon History*.

Joseph M. Spencer. *An Other Testament: On Typology*. Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012.

Reviewed by Rosalynde Frandsen Welch

A SEAFARING ISRAELITE CLAN FLEES JERUSALEM to establish a colony in the Western Hemisphere. There a schism between brothers fractures the young society into rival factions, carving out two competing views of the tribe's history and future. These factions compete for ascendancy across six centuries of political and religious upheaval, until a long-prophesied Messiah arrives to harmonize and heal the rift.

This is the broadest outline of Joseph Spencer's account of the Book of Mormon, and from high altitude this appears to be an unremarkable summary of the scripture. But it is not the ethnic history of Nephite and Lamanite that Spencer has in view. Rather, he traces a fascinating and novel theological fault line through the Book of Mormon, a split that begins at a subtle difference of emphasis between Nephi and Jacob, and reaches its fullest development in Abinadi's sharply delineated departure from Nephi's interpretation of Isaiah. The Abinadite view holds sway in the Nephite church until Christ's personal ministry closes the chasm.

Spencer's argument, developed in his book *An Other Testament: On Typology*, soon to be reissued by the Maxwell Institute, is at once a fresh avenue into Book of Mormon studies and an incremental development of his distinguished forebears in the field. Spencer draws generously on the work of Hugh Nibley, John Welch, Royal Skousen, Noel Reynolds, Kent Jackson, Grant Hardy, Brant Gardner, and other

architects of Book of Mormon scholarship. At the same time, he brings a new set of critical ideas to bear on the text, ideas adopted from the contemporary Continental philosophy in which he is trained. These thinkers, principally Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Marion, and Alain Badiou, will be unfamiliar to many of Spencer's readers, but he weaves their insights skillfully into his argument; the result is challenging yet stimulating for the motivated nonspecialist.

Despite the exotic whiff of Continental theory, Spencer's basic analytical technique is the sturdy bread and butter of Book of Mormon studies as the field has developed through the pedigree sketched above—namely, close exegetical reading in constant dialogue with the Hebrew Bible, rhetorical study of parallelism and chiasmus, and structural analysis of the book's narrative and editorial construction. In Spencer's hands, though, these tools are used to dense, complex effect. His dazzling style, partly a trace of the high critical theory in which he is steeped, is no cheap pyrotechnic. It is the necessary vehicle for what we might call the "analytical abundance" of his argument: every page, nearly every paragraph, offers a new claim, a new reading, a new vista.

This overflowing of analytic exuberance circles a set of theological ideas—principally law, prophecy, grace, covenant, atonement, and eschaton—that Spencer gathers together under the umbrella of typology. It seems like an odd move: typology, at first blush, is a pedestrian rhetorical encoding technique, hardly a compelling theological heading in itself. It soon becomes clear that Spencer, borrowing the term from Book of Mormon authors, uses it to signify something much richer and deeper, not a mere rhetorical technique, but a complex—and occasionally elusive—theological motif.

For Spencer, theological typology is a *pas de deux* between past and future, promise and fulfillment, creation and eschaton. At its most basic, typology is simply the scriptural gesture of moving significance forward or backward through sacred time, something that I'm calling here "temporal traverse." Once identified, this gesture can be seen at work in most theological ideas: in the notion of the eschaton, for example, which gestures forward to redemption and backward to covenant,

and in the related concepts of messianism, prophecy, and fulfillment. Temporal traverse informs ideas of restoration and Zion and, with more complexity, notions of repentance and grace, which refer backward to sin and forward to wholeness. And, of course, temporal traverse is the basic mechanism of ordinary rhetorical typology, which transfers significance from one set of signifiers to a future set.

Indeed the Book of Mormon itself is perhaps its own best example of typological temporal traverse. Spencer quotes Jan Shipps, who, though she does not use the vocabulary of typology, ably captures the scripture's complex temporality:

Since [the Book of Mormon] was at one and the same time prophecy (a book that said it was an ancient record prophesying that a book would come forth) and (as the book that had come forth) fulfillment of prophecy, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon effected a break in the very fabric of history. (quoted in Spencer, p. 28)

To the Book of Mormon notion of typology, Spencer marries the notion of the *event*, a central idea in contemporary Continental philosophy. The term carries a specific and rather knotty meaning in philosophy, and while Spencer's use of the category is fully informed by this substrate, he deploys it here lucidly. A *theological event* is a moment in sacred time that interrupts the flow of ordinary material history, that closed chain of cause and effect, and in so doing allows the past to be reordered in fidelity to the event and the emerging future it heralds. Thus *evental knowledge*—an infelicitous but useful adjectival elaboration—describes a spiritual way of knowing that is not fixed in a single trajectory by the closure of history, whether private or collective. Its resonance with Spencer's notion of typology is clear, as is its relevance to the theological categories in play: the past need not ossify the present and the future, because the theological event reverberates across time. Redemption, repentance, conversion, forgiveness, grace: all promise beauty for ashes, a spiritual reordering of the past that draws forth a living current of creation from cold, dead history.

To distil these theories of typology and event into abstraction, as I have here, is to disserve the delicacy with which the author both extracts and entwines them with the Book of Mormon text. He first introduces the terms in a novel psychological reading of Alma's conversion narrative in Alma 36. Noting that Alma's moment of transformation in verse 18 is prompted by a recollection of his father's prophecy of Christ's atonement, Spencer wonders what it can mean to have a *memory of a future event*. Only a history which is open and creative—that is, an evental history constantly traversed by typological significance—can resist closure and thus accommodate the intricate time-travel implicit in a “memory of the future.” And only evental history can accommodate Alma's radically reordered understanding of his own nature, a reordering that we understand as conversion. The merely historical is replaced by the infinite evental. “Conversion is,” as Spencer puts it, “the process of allowing the new to reorient the old without replacing it” (p. 25).

As the book's two-part title suggests, Spencer's aim is double: to explore the suite of ideas he brings together in theological typology and to offer a new account—“an other” account—of the Book of Mormon's basic theological shape. The Book of Mormon, Spencer argues, has an essentially bifurcate structure, following the distinct hermeneutic traditions developed by Nephi and Abinadi in their readings of Isaiah. Nephi's approach to reading Isaiah, which he calls “likening the scripture unto us,” consistently interprets the prophet's words in terms of the eschatological redemption of the covenant people in the last day. Israel's collective world-historical experience is given shape by Isaiah's prophetically predetermined template.

Nephi's characteristically collective and future-oriented interpretation of Isaiah, however, is not the theological typology that Spencer has in mind. He argues, rather, that as Nephi likens the words of the prophet to the future of his people, he discovers in them the *typological nature of the law*. This is the heart of Spencer's theological argument, and it is not easy to grasp as it emerges in a complex exegesis of Nephi's beheading of Laban. Because the law of Moses is given to Israel as a self-justifying gift—not as transaction or reward—it points only toward its promise of

eschatological redemption, not toward present-day expediency or merit based in the economic order. As Spencer puts it, “If a law is only fully a law when it is received as a gift, then the law of Moses—particularly in that it was *given*—orients itself, by its very nature, to its messianic fulfillment” (p. 96). In other words, law is justifiable only on the basis that it was *given by God*, and this givenness is a kind of grace. Grace is sovereign, beyond cause and mere history, the child of cause, without compulsion and without instrumental aim. Understanding the law typologically thus reveals the crucial truth that *law is not set against grace*, in the way justice is often set over against mercy. On the contrary, typology shows that the law is *inherently* graceful because it is given; indeed, law names, precisely, the graceful fulfillment of God’s covenant.

A note here, before turning to Abinadi’s typology, on the meaning of *theology* in a Book of Mormon context. In addition to the Book of Mormon scholars with whom he engages his exegetical claims and the Continental philosophers from whom he draws his vocabulary and style, Spencer draws on a third set of sources in *An Other Testament*, a group of Old Testament theologians including Margaret Barker, Gerard von Rad, Brevard Childs, and Jon Levenson. It is to these thinkers that Spencer’s section of overtly theological work in *An Other Testament*, the exploration of grace composing the book’s third chapter, is most closely related *methodologically*. Spencer, that is, wants to do more than piece together an intellectual history of Nephite religion or an editorial history of the Book of Mormon text, fascinating and novel as he shows those histories to be. Rather, he wants to develop in those histories ideas that are explicitly doctrinal in nature, new understandings of grace and law and covenant—ideas that are justified and grounded primarily in the text of canonized scripture itself, rather than by a prior appeal to official doctrine as has been typical in Book of Mormon exegesis to this point. Spencer aims, in other words, to do Book of Mormon *theology*. Spencer meticulously roots his theological claims in a seedbed of canonized scripture and stakes them to existing scholarly Book of Mormon literature: he is not out there building castles in the sky. Nevertheless, he is doing more than merely offering new flourishes on stable doctrinal understanding:

he is indeed offering us new understandings, and grounding those understandings in a new way.

Nephi's typology, then, is a theology of grace. What of Abinadi's? In answering this, Spencer wagers a fascinating conjectural history of the Zeniffite movement. He suggests, following John Welch, that Zeniff's attempted restoration of the original Nephite monarchy was closely linked to the Nephite interpretation of Isaiah—or an ideological distortion thereof. That is, Zeniff and his people understood themselves to have realized precisely the eschatological redemption of Israel with which Nephi's "likening" of Isaiah is so preoccupied. Situating themselves thus *within* the fulfillment of the law itself, Noah's priests see no need for a prophet like Abinadi to preach the law—indeed, Abinadi's message challenges their world-historical self-concept. Abinadi, for his part, can break through the priests' deadening complacency only by countering the Nephite approach to Isaiah at its root. Where Nephi finds in Isaiah collective covenantal theology, Abinadi finds in Isaiah a soteriology focused on individual salvation through Christ's atonement. Hermeneutic typology for Abinadi thus becomes a matter of identifying in scripture clues to Christ's mortal advent: Abinadi is concerned with "types of Christ" found in the law, where Nephi is concerned with "typifying Christ" through law. Likewise, Abinadi's understanding of law and grace departs sharply from Nephi's: where Nephi sees law *as* grace, Abinadi sees the law of Moses as temporary, limited, and expedient, set over and against Christ's merciful atonement. For Nephi, prophets preach the redemption of Israel; for Abinadi, prophets preach personal redemption through Christ.

Abinadi's radical departure from Nephi's typology becomes codified in the Nephite church through Alma's influence, Spencer argues. Mormon is an heir of Abinadi, chronicling Nephite history after the "Abinadite shift" and ever anxious to draw Christological soteriology from his large-plate sources. Yet when Christ himself visits the Nephite people, Spencer points out, he says little about the individual redemption effected by his sacrificial atonement. Rather, he returns to the old Nephite themes of Israel's eschatological redemption, subtly correcting

Abinadi's theological errors on matters of baptism and Godhead. Spencer sees in this an implicit privileging of Nephi's approach to typology, law, and grace. The Abinadite way is not abandoned as a mistaken dead end, however; its "reinterpretation of the small plates may well have been the only way to salvage the [Isaianic] tradition" from the Zeniffite perversion, through "strict anticipatory Christology" (pp. 167, 169).

In reviewing a book that makes claims both sweeping and minutely granular, the reviewer must avoid both Scylla *and* Charybdis: that is, entangling herself in the underbrush of the argument *and* overreading its global implications. In any work of such analytic abundance, the reader is likely to encounter novel readings that he finds unpersuasive or overdrawn. I don't wish to quarrel with any particular interpretive wager, though there were some that struck me as intricate but not necessarily intentional or inevitable readings of the text in question. The sheer breadth of the evidence marshaled in favor of Spencer's overarching claim about Nephi's and Abinadi's distinct interpretive methods, as well as the deep layering of analytic methods, overcome any objections to particular readings.

Similarly, *An Other Testament* reproduces some of the questions inherent in Book of Mormon studies broadly, particularly questions about translation and authorial intent. Spencer relies on Royal Skousen's critical text of the scripture and its tight translation model, which assumes that the text of the Book of Mormon, as it was anciently compiled, came through the nineteenth-century translation process with very little alteration. Furthermore, the nature of Spencer's argument often infers the *intention and design* of Book of Mormon authors, placing great interpretive burden on particular word choices, sentence structures, and complex allusive echoes—inferences that rely on a tight process of translation. At the same time, Spencer frankly acknowledges that anachronistic scriptural language appears in the Book of Mormon, as in 1 Nephi 10:7–8, which appears to draw on New Testament texts. That Spencer does not resolve the tension between a tight translation model and New Testament anachronism should not be held against his book.

This is an open critical question for Book of Mormon studies, and its persistence need not tether new exploration in the field.

A trickier question is that of historicity. Spencer openly affirms the ancient historicity of the Book of Mormon, not only in explicit avowal but in his every interpretive move, which depends for its coherence on the multiple ancient authorship of the scriptural books he analyzes. Yet he does not wish to alienate readers who approach the Book of Mormon with other assumptions, indeed he wishes to invite them into the investigation, and thus he attempts to disarm the contentious question of the book's historicity. He does so not by "bracketing" the question in a temporary time-out, but through more audacious attempt to deconstruct the very premise of the question.

The book's primary analytical categories, *typology* and *evental history*, are, as I have shown above, preoccupied with questions of time and historical sequence—and above all with the possibility of breaking free of history's closed syllogisms through the eruption of grace into histories both personal and collective. Most of the book applies these concepts to the theologies contained within the Book of Mormon, but Spencer briefly turns his lens on the larger historical meaning of the Book of Mormon itself. What can *anachronism* mean when the very fabric of history is subject to radical reordering? Characteristically, Spencer rejects the question as typically framed and turns it inside out. He writes:

On my argument, the Book of Mormon must be regarded as neither historical nor unhistorical, but as *nonhistorical*. This is not to suggest that the events it records did not happen. On the contrary, it is to claim that it must be subtracted from the dichotomy of the historical/unhistorical because the faithful reader testifies that the *events*—rather than the *history*—recorded in the book not only took place, but are of infinite typological importance. Any enclosure of the Book of Mormon within a totalized world history amounts to a denial of the book's unique claim on the attention of the whole world. (p. 28)

In other words, because the happenings recorded in the Book of Mormon are not merely historical incidents but sacred events that reverberate through time and reorder spiritual reality, no single historical timeline—whether ancient or nineteenth century—can fully account for the book's significance. For Spencer, this deconstruction of the question is a satisfactory resolution. "I believe," he writes, "this analysis clarifies the problem of the Book of Mormon's historicity" (p. 28).

Spencer's approach has the advantage of bringing into focus the *theological and devotional* significance of the Book of Mormon's complex temporality in a brilliantly novel manner. But I think it is unlikely to permanently clarify the historicity debates, as he suggests. After all, from the perspective of those who defend the Book of Mormon's ancient historical origin, the reason for that defense—that is, the reason for situating the Book of Mormon in the "closed" historical flow of ancient Mesoamerica at all—is precisely to defend the miraculous, eventual nature of Joseph Smith's midwifing of the book in the nineteenth century and the restoration it heralded. In other words, the apologetic work of *historicizing* the Book of Mormon narrative is undertaken in the service of "*dehistoricizing*" its eternal, spiritual significance: namely, the profoundly disruptive and transformative intervention of the divine into world history represented by the events of the restoration. While traditional Book of Mormon defenders likely agree that debates about historicity should not dominate Book of Mormon scholarship, I doubt that Spencer's critique will persuade many to cease their efforts; on the contrary, they see their efforts as an integral part of illuminating, precisely, the eventual nature of the Latter-day Saint restoration. They are already engaged in the work Spencer calls for.

Ultimately, these questions of historicity are only a momentary detour from the textual investigations of *An Other Testament*. Indeed, the book largely eschews discussion of its own metameaning in favor of intense concentration on the texts at hand—and that concentration is the reader's primary reward. What of its larger metameaning, though? Does the book implicitly summon a shift in Mormon culture or Book of Mormon studies? Inasmuch as the book sketches a narrative in which

Nephi's approach to typology is privileged over Abinadi's, one might draw from it a gentle challenge to contemporary Mormon devotional-scriptural practice, which, heir to Abinadi through Mormon's editorial intervention, tends to focus on matters of individual repentance, purity, and salvation. A return to Nephi's typology prioritizes communal spiritual welfare and Zion making over individual spiritual hygiene. It emphasizes covenant, which collectivizes sin, repentance, and redemption, over soteriology, which tends to individualize those categories. Nephi's emphasis on grace *as the substance of divine law*, and Spencer's illumination thereof, contributes to an emphasis on grace that has recently emerged in LDS preaching. Spencer's work refines and expands that notion of grace by showing that grace is implicit in fundamental notions of spiritual law and ontology, not a localized, post hoc response to sin and repentance, powerful as that response surely can be.

A return to Nephi by way of Spencer represents a return to scripture: an appreciation of scripture as *an end in itself*, rather than as an index to certain histories and predictions, and of scripture reading as spiritual practice *in itself*, rather than as a handlist to other devotional practices. This approach to scripture should not be understood to minimize scripture's influence in the real world: on the contrary, the intense concentration that Nephi applies to Isaiah's words *themselves*, and which Spencer in turn applies to Nephi's words, ultimately yields a more expansive and universally transformative vision of the Messiah than does Abinadi's application-oriented approach. As Spencer puts it, the Book of Mormon should be "read not only as a gathering of texts about the covenant, but as a singular text intertwined, in its very material existence, with the actual fulfillment of the covenant" (p. 175). A singular text, perhaps, but one that encompasses several voices—*An Other Testament* shows, through its analysis of Nephi's and Abinadi's divergent approaches, that the Book of Mormon is fundamentally polyvocal rather than univocal on crucial matters of doctrine, nudging the reader to consider a more plural, theological approach to the very question of doctrine.

These new and renewed directions are substantive, but I believe it's a mistake for readers to dwell first on the book's potential influence

beyond its covers, whatever that might turn out to be. Do not mistake this for quietism: the book is deeply consequential, but it is consequential for what it says and models about scripture, not for its location in any particular institutional or disciplinary landscape. To frame it primarily in those terms would be to trivialize its real potential and power. After all, if we read the book as it teaches us to read it—as Spencer suggests we should approach the Book of Mormon itself—our focus can finally linger only on Isaiah, not on historicity debates, culture shifts, or future directions of the discipline. It is in Isaiah—in the words of Isaiah, in the fissures and echoes between those words, in the larger theology of exodus, redemption, and writing that emerges from Isaiah—that both Nephi and Abinadi work out their prophetic roles and find their prophetic voices. Too often Isaiah is encountered by readers of the Book of Mormon as an impediment to deep engagement with the scripture. *An Other Testament* teaches us that Isaiah not only can but must be the key to understanding the prophetic voices that cry to us typologically from the dust:

Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait upon the Lord, that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, which dwelleth in Mount Zion. (Isaiah 8:16–18; 2 Nephi 18:16–18)

Rosalynde Frandsen Welch is an independent scholar and writer on all things dealing with Mormon faith and culture. She holds a PhD in early modern English literature, and her approach to cultural criticism incorporates literature, philosophy, and critical theory. Her writing has appeared in *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, *Element*, and many online venues. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband, John, and their four children.