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Death, Time, and Redemption: Structural Possibilities and Thematic Potential in Jacob 7:26

Jenny Webb

And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi, wherefore, I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a [wild] wilderness,¹ and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days. (Jacob 7:26)

READERS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON know Jacob for several things: he is the younger brother of Nephi, born in the wilderness after the family fled Jerusalem; he, with Nephi, served the Nephites as a priest and teacher in the promised land; he provided us with a detailed presentation of Zenos's parable of the olive tree in Jacob 5; and he is often associated with a sense of sadness and nostalgia. This final characteristic is derived in part from a particular verse in chapter 7 of the book of Jacob—verse 26—in which Jacob reflects both on his own distinct mortal experience as well as on the tenor or tone in which the Nephites

1. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Two, 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 1069–70, for discussion as to the original appearance of the phrase *wild wilderness* and reasons for the exclusion of *wild* in the subsequent published texts.

themselves lived their lives in their new home. While verse 26 is reasonably well known, it has not, as of yet, received any particular interpretive focus in its own right, be it exegetical, hermeneutic, historical, or theological. The following note is designed not to produce the final word on Jacob 7:26 but rather to provide impetus for further engagement both with Jacob 7:26 and with the words of Jacob more generally.

The difficulty with verse 26 appears to be due in part to the poetic nature of the second half of the sentence. Virtually all critical sources, when they treat the verse at all, tend to make the observation that Jacob has used some very pretty words to characterize his sense of loss and nostalgia and that those words are emotionally moving.² While such observations are true, the very force of the verse's lyricism and emotional tone obscures other ways in which the text works. The verse presents a complex set of clausal structures and relationships that ultimately direct the reader toward an individual, reflective interiority that is the first part of a thematic pair, the second being a return to a universal exteriority in verse 27. This tension between the internal and the external provides a useful thematic vantage point from which to view the subsequent book of Enos as well as the entire project of the Book of Mormon itself.

It is important to recognize that the first part of the sentence here contains an unfinished thought: "And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi, wherefore, I conclude this record." Jacob skips what it is exactly he meant to say about the large plates. Are they also somehow "old" like Jacob? Was this continuation meant to be a comparison between

2. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:578; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Jacob through Mosiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 92; Hugh Nibley, "A Time for Reexamination," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 17; Nibley, "The Flight into the Wilderness," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 142; Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 1* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 409; and Joshua M. Sears, "'We Came Out from Jerusalem': The Holy City's Influence on Book of Mormon Peoples," in *Selections from the Religious Education Student Symposium 2007* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007), par. 6, 7.

writer and record? Did he intend to finish the thought by indicating that he was running out of room on the small plates and needed to conclude, only to realize that he mistakenly referred to the large plates, which (possibly) still had plenty of room, and therefore he abandoned the thought altogether and moved toward his farewell? Is there simply something he unintentionally left out, perhaps something indicating that the large plates needed to be finished, so he had to wrap up the small plates? Whatever the author's original intent, the effect of this incomplete thought is somewhat cognitively jarring and potentially confusing. The problem with such dissonance is that many readers will simply read *through* the text in an effort to find the concluding thought that would make sense of the text.

To counteract such skimming, let us look more carefully at the structure of this verse. While certain forms of structure are created by unique and interesting words and phrases throughout the verse, and while there is evidence of a carefully woven thematic structuring, let us first take a look at the clausal relationships of the text itself. The following setting of the verse operates on the principle of placing subordinated sections of the text underneath and to the right of the prior or preceding sections. The result gives us a visual approximation of not only the relational structure of the verse, but also the ways in which the logic of the verse both breaks off unexpectedly and begins again.³

- 1 And it came to pass
- 2 that I,
- 3 Jacob,
- 4 began to be old;
- 5 and the record
- 6 of this people
- 7 being kept on the other plates of Nephi,
- 8 wherefore,
- 9 I conclude this record,

3. I have numbered the lines here in order to facilitate the discussion of specific phrases further on.

10 declaring
 11 that I have written
 12 according to the best of my knowledge,
 13 by saying
 14 that the time
 15 passed away
 16 with us,
 17 and also our lives
 18 passed away
 19 like as it were unto us
 20 a dream,
 21 we being a lonesome
 22 and a solemn people,
 23 wanderers,
 24 cast out from Jerusalem,
 25 born in tribulation,
 26 in a [wild] wilderness,
 27 and hated of our brethren,
 28 which caused wars
 29 and contentions;
 30 wherefore,
 31 we did mourn out
 32 our days.

The clausal structure here is both subordinated and relational. It appears that Jacob starts the verse with one (unclear) intention (lines 1–7), falters (line 8) and changes direction (lines 9–12), but is then almost distracted by an increasingly interior and subjective reflection (lines 13–29) before abruptly turning (line 30) and placing the summative coda on his reflections (lines 31–32).

Those final words—“wherefore, we did mourn out our days”—provide a specific thematic orientation for the entire verse: the verse is structured around a triple repetition of the themes of death and time, interwoven with the themes of pilgrimage and solitude. We see this triple repetition of death and time in the phrases “began to be old” (line 4), “and also our lives passed away” (lines 17–18), and “we did mourn out our days” (lines 31–32). In each of these phrases, time is perceived as

in motion—*passing*, as Jacob says⁴—and that motion is firmly oriented toward the inevitability of the future: the end point of time is death. This forward temporal orientation contrasts strongly with the reflective or backward temporal orientation present in the verse (what is often characterized as the verse’s sense of nostalgia). Jacob is, of course, looking *back* on his life, and yet his grammar evidences this tension between his looking ahead toward death and his looking back on life as it shifts curiously through present, past, and progressive tenses.

This tension between past and future with its overtones of death’s determined approach echoes another scriptural text concerned with death’s entrance: Adam and Eve, their fall, and their eventual departure from the Garden of Eden. In fact, the effects of the fall itself—entering mortality, being cast out of the Garden, being cut off from God—connect with surprising thematic strength to Jacob’s words in verse 26. Jacob, too, reinforces the certainty of death as we have discussed, but he also speaks of his people’s solitude (line 21) and their pilgrimage (line 23). He even goes so far as to frame their departure from Jerusalem in terms highly reminiscent of the fall itself: they have been “cast out” (line 24) into a “wilderness” (line 26), just as Adam and Eve were made to leave all they had ever known.⁵

The thematic solitude of Adam and Eve being cut off from God’s presence is further reinforced by Jacob’s forceful description of his familial bonds in line 27: “hated of our brethren.” This phrase demonstrates the deep-seated familial fracturing under which Jacob has lived

4. Several questions regarding the term *passing* are worth considering here. Is the passing away that occurs with time the same sort of passing away that occurs with lives? The underlying connection to death in both phrases provides a particularly subjective ground from which lived temporality is measured. The phrase “time passed away with us” appears to link the passage of time to the event of a life lived; that is, if there is no life being lived, does time *pass*? Does it *pass away*? Consider how temporality and lived experience are related in this passage: does this relationship appear elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, and if so, under what guise and in what context?

5. By recalling the story of Adam and Eve, Jacob’s words align Jerusalem with the Garden of Eden in the Nephite mythos. Thus, it is possible to read the nostalgia that we see expressed throughout the Book of Mormon for Jerusalem (see Sears, “We Came Out of Jerusalem,” par. 6; Nibley, “Time for Reexamination,” 17) in light of the long and varied theological, aesthetic, and philosophical traditions surrounding mankind’s longing for Eden.

his entire life. While this description is, of course, applicable to the Nephites of Jacob's time as a whole, it is certainly also intensely personal to Jacob. While Nephi knew and lived with Laman and Lemuel prior to their departure from Jerusalem, Jacob's entire life has been characterized by an ever-widening familial schism. Jacob likely holds no memories of Laman and Lemuel ever interacting with him in a brotherly fashion; it is probable that they always treated Jacob as "the enemy." While Nephi's experience was one of wanting to be reunited with his family members, Jacob's would more likely have been one of wanting acceptance. As a young child, Jacob would not have been able to understand why Laman and Lemuel rejected him so completely; this unprovoked and totally personal family rejection would, I believe, create psychological resonances throughout Jacob's life and ministry, and perhaps it explains his continued insistence that the Nephites not only find a way to live with the Lamanites but that the religious breach be healed and a family sealed up together again.

The powerful pathos created by Jacob here is due in part to the low point on which the verse ends: "we did mourn out our days" (lines 31–32). The connections between "mourn" and the themes of death and time provide a nice thematic return to and link with the beginning of the verse (Jacob's old age and implicitly near death) and the middle (the manner in which time and lives passed away). Ending with mourning enacts a third repetition of these main themes. It is also almost jarringly depressing, given the preceding narrative in the chapter, in which Jacob claims an answer to his prayers as something akin to victory (see Jacob 7:22). The power and poignancy of this verse that is so often remarked upon results, I believe, from this concentrated triple repetition of the interconnected themes of time and death. Their power lies in their universality (everyone lives in time, and everyone dies at the end of their time) as well as in their intimacy: Jacob's mourning is the result of a very specific familial split—a wound that shapes his entire life and which he fails, at least from his perspective, to heal.

When Jacob then passes the plates to his son Enos in verse 27, the text follows the gesture, moving through a series of increasingly external referents (Nephi, the commandments, and so forth). Interestingly

enough, Jacob ends verse 27 oriented toward not just the external but an extreme form of the external: the universal. His final hope is “that many of my brethren may read my words” in some undefined, possibly distant future. In other words, even in the depths of the subjective, internalized mourning that we find in verse 26, Jacob holds faith (and hope and charity) that the sealing power will be enough at some point to allow him to speak to his family and unite them at a later time.⁶ While verse 26 reflects on the past, verse 27 points toward the future, specifically a future of family relationships. These verses encapsulate the journey that Enos will take in the following chapter: an increasingly reflective, subjective, and interior prayer that ultimately turns outward toward the redemption of his fractured family and people.⁷

This reading has (hopefully) only served to heighten our awareness of the complex structural and thematic issues that underlie this well-known verse of scripture. There remains, of course, much work to be done, both on verse 26 and on Jacob’s writings in general. I have pointed toward several additional directions, connections, and questions in the footnotes and am well aware that they are not exhaustive by any means. The lyrical grace of this verse is matched and even exceeded by the theological grace in Jacob’s writings, both here in the book of Jacob as well as in 2 Nephi. It is an enticing invitation—one I urge us not to resist.

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6. The thematic connection here between records/reading/writing and sealing/family is one that deserves much more careful consideration.

7. Enos’s journey, of course, follows the same trajectory of the Book of Mormon itself: words that will become literally “interior” as they are buried in the earth before becoming universalized in their latter-day translation and dissemination.