



2018

## Book Reviews

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Joseph M. Spencer

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Thomas,, John Christopher reviewer and Spencer, Joseph M. (2018) "Book Reviews," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 27: No. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol27/iss1/13>

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## Book Reviews

Joseph M. Spencer. *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record*. Contemporary Studies in Scripture. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016.

*Reviewed by John Christopher Thomas*

*Response by Joseph M. Spencer*

*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 27, 2018, pp. 226–239  
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THE UNIQUE ROLE AND FUNCTION of the book of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon has rightly been of interest to a variety of readers, both scholarly and popular. A quick review of a portion of the literature reveals something of its ongoing appeal.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, these studies have focused on explaining the reason for the extensive quotations of Isaiah

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1. H. Grant Vest, "The Problem of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1938); Wayne Ham, "A Textual Comparison of the Isaiah Passages in the Book of Mormon with the Same Passages in the St. Mark's Isaiah Scroll of the Dead Sea Community" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1961); William L. Riley, "A Comparison of Passages from Isaiah and Other Old Testament Prophets in Ethan Smith's View of the Hebrews and the Book of Mormon" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1971); Gary L. Bishop, "The Tradition of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1974); Wesley P. Walters, "The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Mormon" (ThM thesis, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1981; Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Mission, 1990); John A. Tvedtnes, "Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah and the Prophets: Inspired Voices from the Old Testament*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 165–78; David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City:

in the Book of Mormon and/or offering a rationale for the numerous differences between the text(s) of Isaiah cited in the Book of Mormon and the text(s) of Isaiah found in a variety of other places including the King James Version of the Bible. Often these studies have been related to the larger issue of Joseph Smith's involvement in the production of the Book of Mormon. Though a number of these studies are fascinating and merit careful reading, what has been missing, in my estimation, is a sustained treatment of the topic from the perspective of a close theological reading of the text. In other words, most of these studies have focused on the production end of the question—What did Joseph Smith or Nephi use and what may be learned by the actions of the author?—while much less attention has been focused on the product end of the question—specifically, What theological role and function do the Isaiah quotes (and their variants) play in the Book of Mormon, and what might be learned by a careful literary and theological examination of them? Thanks to the work under discussion, considerable progress has been made toward filling this lacuna.

The contributions of Joseph M. Spencer to constructive and innovative readings of the Book of Mormon are becoming more and more widely known to serious students of this book that functions as scripture for his own faith tradition—the Latter-day Saints family of Churches. Part of Spencer's strength as an interpreter is the ability to offer readings that are *pro nobis*, for his believing community, whilst at the same time avoiding many of the pitfalls associated with such “believing” readings. This is to say, though clearly an insider, he writes in a fashion that welcomes engagement from insiders and outsiders alike—in that way not unlike the work of Grant Hardy.<sup>2</sup> In one of his earlier monographs,<sup>3</sup> Spencer lays out a Book of Mormon reading strategy that is

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Signature Books, 2001), 157–234; Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61–86; and Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb, eds., *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: Reading 2 Nephi 26–27* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011).

2. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

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

self-consciously informed by and grounded in the Book of Mormon itself. Such a bold methodological move reveals that it comes from someone who is unafraid to start from the ground up as it were, asking basic interpretive questions while offering creative reflections that show the faithful location from which these endeavors originate and the confidence that Spencer has in the text under examination. My last word of prolegomenon—finally a book by Joseph Spencer that I can understand!

### The Vision of All: Characteristics and Contributions

First, as its subtitle conveys, the book itself is structured around a series of lectures. The tone is popular, “informal, even chatty,” as Spencer confesses (p. viii). This means the author avoids footnotes—though various scholarly works are referenced and even evaluated—and that he has to get to the point quickly, while avoiding as much as possible unnecessary technical language. While one might be tempted to see this genre as somewhat off-putting, distracting, or a sign that the work is lightweight, it is in point of fact an effective and enjoyable genre, where even the vestiges of the lecture format are found to be orienting rather than disorienting. It is also a remarkably clean volume. I found only four typos, all of which, strangely enough, were located on even-numbered pages—not sure what the hermeneutical significance of this is!

Second, Spencer helpfully highlights his intent in this project early in the first chapter (p. 2) by raising the question, “What’s Isaiah doing in the writings of Nephi?” The simple question reveals two things about the project. First, it reveals that despite the appearance of Isaiah in other places in the Book of Mormon, this inquiry is devoted to the more narrow focus of Isaiah in 1 and 2 Nephi, in part because Isaiah appears for the first time in the writings of Nephi within the larger volume and, consequently, should have an impact on how the use of Isaiah here informs later uses. Second, it reveals the fact that Spencer is convinced that Isaiah is doing something in Nephi, noting that it is wrong to “divide Nephi’s investment in Isaiah from his desire to tell his own life’s story or from his emphasis on the dreams and visions he and his father had” (p. 2).



Third, the context from which the work proceeds focuses on the appearance of “a book” that contains “many of the prophecies of the holy prophets” (p. 3), the purpose of which is to clarify the status of the Abrahamic covenant. This Jewish book is to be particularly useful to the Gentiles—the Christian Bible, of which the early nineteenth-century North Americans (the Gentiles of the New World) are the intended audience. In the transfer from a Jewish to a gentile audience, the abominable Church perverts the Bible so that many plain and precious parts are lost—one of which and perhaps the most important, according to Spencer, being the virtual disappearance of the Abrahamic covenant. The appearance of the Book of Mormon is, then, “the solution to the problem posed by the Bible’s history of reception,” which is produced by refocusing Christianity on its Abrahamic foundations. It was this desire “to save Christianity from itself” that led Nephi to Isaiah (p. 11). Thus, “Nephi used Isaiah in his writings for very particular reasons” (p. 15).

Fourth, a number of chapters are spent bringing the readers up to speed for the task ahead. For example, the second chapter explores the structure of Isaiah and some of the challenges that contemporary biblical scholarship poses for the Book of Mormon, while pointing out that there are some surprising discoveries that might challenge at least some of the results of such scholarship. For example, the author notes in italics: “The Book of Mormon never quotes, not even once, from the writings scholars today trace back to the so-called third Isaiah,” concluding that there is “reason to believe that the Book of Mormon wants us to believe that Isaiah 56–66 was in fact missing from the brass plates that Lehi’s family carried with them into the wilderness” (p. 22)—though one wonders if Jacob 6:4, which bears a striking resemblance to Isaiah 65:2, should not qualify such a claim at least in part.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the general lay of the land, Spencer seeks to allow the differing theological emphases of Isaiah 1–39 and 40–66 to have their say before importing overt messianic meaning to the book.

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4. Cf. Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 156, n.b, who cites Isaiah 65:2 as a cross-reference not mentioning Romans 10:21, which is dependent on Isaiah 65:2, as a cross-reference.

Fifth, in addition to the structure of 1 and 2 Nephi discernible from the book divisions, Spencer sees a more fundamental division around what the text calls “the more sacred things” and what he calls “the less sacred things.” The latter consists of 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 5, 31–33, while the former consists of 2 Nephi 6–30, divisions that are supported by various pieces of literary evidence, with the core of Nephi’s message being the section that focuses on Isaiah. This is the most important part for Spencer. When considering the structure of 1 Nephi, he follows the original seven-chapter divisions of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon and places the contents into two parts, chapters 1–9 and 10–22, with the former being paralleled by the latter in terms of balancing stories and content.

Sixth, a key theological conviction of Spencer’s study is that while Lehi can interpret Isaiah to illuminate the past, Nephi sees in Isaiah a specific theological program, which Nephi accomplishes by “likening” the text by means of adopting and using Isaiah for his own purposes! “For Nephi, Isaiah’s writings are to be likened in a way that’s often and intentionally at odds with a simple historical interpretation of the old-world prophet’s words” (p. 73). This, according to Spencer, can be seen especially by the way in which Isaiah 48 and 49 are used, with the former “unlikened” and the latter being “likened,” revealing that God’s purpose is not simply the redemption of Israel but the redemption of the whole world—in other words, a vision of all! Such a methodological move gives Spencer the space to treat the variants between the KJV’s Isaiah and the Book of Mormon’s Isaiah not as being in need of explanation on the basis of other manuscript traditions, but as theologically significant variants that come, at least in some instances, from Nephi’s own hand. Taking the variants as being from the hand of Nephi, from a narrative vantage point, opens up a whole range of meaning, especially if narratively, Nephi’s own prophetic experience is at least in part responsible for the textual modifications. This move clears much ground for conversations about the current shape of the text of the Book of Mormon and its theological significance. All the while, Spencer relentlessly builds his case for the crucial role the Abrahamic covenant plays in these variants. One of the results

of such a move is that for Spencer, Nephi comes to view his visions as a lens by which to view Isaiah, or for that matter, the whole of the Bible!

Seventh, the lion's share of the book is devoted to a very careful, extremely close reading of the text of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. All manner of fascinating observations result, almost all of which are connected in one way or another to the issues mentioned above, but especially to the Abrahamic covenant and his vision of all. The readings are fresh, intriguing, and sometimes provocative, but nearly always serve as invitations for further reflection on the portion of the book in question. There are literally scores and scores of worthy insights contained within the volume that will generate many conversations for years to come that, for the most part, will come about because Spencer almost always asks the right questions. It should perhaps also be observed that he offers an especially concise summary of his reading near the end of the book (p. 247).

### Contributions, Questions, and Dialogue

When I was invited to review this volume, I specifically requested that the book review editor, Janiece Johnson, invite the author to respond in order to generate additional dialogue about this helpful work. As a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of JBMS, I have further suggested that at least one such dialogical review be included in each issue. With a view to the current dialogue, I think it not insignificant that an irenic academic exchange between an outsider and an insider about the Book of Mormon appears in this issue of JBMS, perhaps staking out the beginning of a trajectory for future engagements between reviewers and authors. Given the vitriolic tone of certain exchanges between outsiders and insiders about the Book of Mormon in various contexts (and sometimes even between insiders as well!), I think it especially important to offer this genre of dialogue as one of the ways in which JBMS seeks to advocate and advance such academic engagement in the future.<sup>5</sup> I am

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5. On a personal level, I find that reviewers tend to be fairer to and more sober in dealing with a work under consideration if they know that the author might be invited to respond to the review!

most happy to be involved in this particular dialogue and would like to thank the Book Review Editor for advocating for its inclusion.

With this said, in the rest of this review essay, I should like to engage a couple of issues from the book that I think are especially significant and to raise a few questions to extend a dialogue with Spencer on this topic.

First, as noted above, Spencer makes a couple of innovative proposals regarding structure: one for the overall structure of 1 and 2 Nephi and another being a concentric proposal for that of 2 Nephi (p. 168). Regarding structural issues, perhaps a few brief comments are in order for the sake of clarity. One of the reasons why I tend to think of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi as literary wholes is that they both seem to have distinct, discernible structures on their own. The three “and thus it is. Amen” phrases that appear in 1 Nephi (9:6; 14:30; 22:31) literarily serve as structural markers, suggesting to me a tripartite structure designed to establish Nephi as Spirit-inspired spokesperson, while 2 Nephi seems to have a very nice structure on its own, falling into a rather clear thematic pattern, as I sought to outline in my monograph.<sup>6</sup> These both seem to me to have a firm literary basis in the text and, at least at that level, make additional kinds of divisions in light of plates or theme seem to be moving a bit too quickly. But I have to admit that the chart on page 168 has suggested to me that a more nuanced approach to the structure of 2 Nephi that takes into account Spencer’s advocacy of a tripartite treatment of Isaiah has great potential and caused me to think about it all in more detail, though I still am not entirely convinced that this division of Isaiah is one that arises naturally from the text of 2 Nephi or if it is one that arises from Spencer’s own thinking! In the light of the above, I wonder if thinking of the structure in a more three-dimensional way might not make room for plate and thematic divisions that function at different levels alongside the literary marker level. Perhaps this could

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6. On these points cf. John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2016), 31–37, 39–46, respectively.



be thought of as not unlike the way the countdown to the final Passover in John 11:55, 12:1, 13:1, 19:14, and 19:42 provides continuity at one level in the Fourth Gospel, which clearly falls into two major parts: the Book of Signs (1–12) and the Book of Glory (13–21). My suggestion—if I could be so bold—would be not to think of this as an all-or-nothing proposition with regard to structure, but perhaps think a bit more about how to accommodate all the structural indicators as they overlap with one another, at different levels. As the reader may be able to discern, I have enjoyed chewing on this with Spencer and look forward to his further thoughts.

Second, one of the most significant contributions of the book is Spencer's work on "likening." This whole issue I think is one that seems to find a basis in the text and yet has not received anything like the attention it appears to deserve, Spencer's earlier monograph notwithstanding. Perhaps one of the reasons for such a lacuna is owing to the fact that, as far as I can tell, every use of "likening" vocabulary in the KJV clearly has reference to a comparison of some sort (Isaiah 40:18, 25; 46:5; Psalms 89:6; Jeremiah 6:2; Lamentations 2:13; Matthew 7:24, 26; 11:16; 13:24; 18:23; 25:1; Mark. 4:30; Luke. 7:31; 13:20). It appears that outside of 1 and 2 Nephi, Book of Mormon references to "likening" are consistent with those found in the KJV (cf. Jacob 5:3; 6:1; 3 Nephi 14:24, 26). This philological evidence raises the question, What is the reader to make of the fact that this rather significant hermeneutical approach, found near the beginning of the Book of Mormon, appears to be (completely?) ignored in the remainder of the book? One could, of course, conclude that since 1 and 2 Nephi are among the last books to be "translated"—owing to the 116 lost pages and the recommencement of translation work with Mosiah—it was not until this time that Joseph Smith "divined" this distinctive idea of "likening." While such an assessment might well answer this historical question, my own interests are more theological in nature. Specifically, owing to the fact that the Book of Mormon narrative attributes primary editorial oversight of the project to Mormon and Moroni, what does the narrative shape of the book reveal about the impact that the role of "likening" would have on



the implied reader? Does its significant narrative location infer that it is a—if not the—dominant hermeneutical approach? On such a view, would the reader be inclined to take other approaches that appear in the Book of Mormon as subsumed under this one? Would they see these other approaches as modifying this “early” model of interpretation? Would they interpret other approaches as being a critique of the “likening” model? Would later approaches indicate that a variety of Book of Mormon hermeneutical approaches are appropriate ways to engage scripture? Or would later approaches be taken to displace an earlier model implying that it had proven to be insufficient as a model of scripture interpretation? All of this is complicated—so it would seem—by the editorial role attributed to Mormon and Moroni, at least suggesting that such approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But the question remains: What are we to make of all this, narratively and theologically? I look forward to Spencer’s thoughts on this intriguing issue.

Third, in his discussion of the Hebrew of Isaiah 7:14 (p. 209), I was surprised to see that when Spencer made the point that no one would think of translating “alma” as virgin, he did not mention the fact that the LXX does indeed translate the term as “virgin” (*parthénos*), anticipating Matthew (Matthew 1:23) by several hundred years. Does this not have some kind of implication for Spencer’s point here?

Fourth, I was a bit surprised that when Spencer describes the translation of the Book of Mormon as “séance”-like (p. 266), he does not mention the seer stone in his discussion. It seems like a perfect example of the point he seems to be making. Does he see this as a possible line of interpretation worth pursuing?

Fifth, does Spencer sense any tension between the fact that, on the one hand, Nephi encourages a reading of Isaiah that pays attention to “the things of the Jews”—some sort of historical contextualization, I think he calls it—and, on the other hand is the almost disembodied (could one say “ahistorical”?) reading approach encouraged regarding the Book of Mormon: “Read it, don’t look for proof” (p. 271)? Does this phenomenon have any hermeneutical implications?

Finally, I wonder if Spencer would care to comment on what I consider to be a fascinating hermeneutical proposal that emerges near the end of the book, much of which I cite here.

What if we were to take Nephi's use of Isaiah as giving us a picture of what *we* ought to do with scripture? What if we too were to seek the spirit of prophecy, and then were to read the Book of Mormon closely and inventively enough to see the latent possibilities at work in this text? What if we were to read as faithfully *and* as inventively as Nephi? Does that sound paradoxical? I think it is. But I think it's precisely what we ought to be doing in our close study of scripture. *Real* fidelity to the text also turns out to be creative in a certain sense. We have to read scripture so closely that we see the crosscurrents of meaning that organize the fluid mechanics of the text. There's no one definite meaning. At the same time, we can't make the text say whatever we want. Somehow, we have to read so faithfully that we can see the ways the text calls us to read it against its own grain. That requires more work than we're used to giving to scripture study, *and* it requires more grace than we're used to receiving as we study. (pp. 276–77; emphasis in the original)

Is this, perhaps, the subject of Spencer's next monograph?

### The Vision of All and the State of Book of Mormon Studies

As can be surmised, I believe that Joseph Spencer has produced by far the most helpful examination of the theological significance of Isaiah within the Book of Mormon—in this case, 1 and 2 Nephi—to date. As an outsider, it is refreshing to see a substantial work that, for the most part, bypasses the hypothetical reconstructions that allegedly lie behind the text and avoids approaching the topic with overtly apologetic motives in hopes of proving or disproving the Book of Mormon's authenticity. Spencer's approach, though plainly that of a true believer, clears enough space for those inside and outside the Latter-day Saint family of Churches to engage the kind of theological evidence here

uncovered. It seems to me that this book goes some way toward making more honest conversations about Isaiah's use in the Book of Mormon possible.

Of course, with such an innovative work, there will likely be many places where readers—including this one—will disagree with the analysis offered. Such disagreements hardly need to be enumerated here. However, even major disagreements on various interpretive points should not overshadow the clear significance of this book for Book of Mormon studies. In the emerging field of distinctively theological readings of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Spencer has made a major contribution, suggesting that conversations about the Book of Mormon are far from over.

### A Response by Joseph M. Spencer

I deeply appreciate Christopher Thomas's review of *The Vision of All*. Thomas is a marvelously generous reader, and I am honored by his words of praise, as well as by his points of (gentle) criticism. At his request, I am happy to outline a few responses to his "questions for the purpose of dialogue." I hope some engagement between us might help to further careful study of the text of the Book of Mormon.

Thomas address six questions directly to me. I will respond to them in order.

First, I am quite happy with the suggestion that we think about textual structure in something like a "three-dimensional way" that might allow for different sorts of textual organization to "function at different levels." I have been impressed with—and in certain ways consistently bothered by—Thomas's comments regarding the repetition of "and thus it is, Amen" at three points in First Nephi. But a kind of three-dimensional view of structure, where a tripartite development within the text can be laid on top of other discernible structures in First Nephi, seems to me to allow the complexity of the text to make itself manifest. In the end, it is probably right that we should not be looking for *the* structure of any particular text within the Book of Mormon, but for various structural

features of the text that might have real hermeneutic significance. Every structure that helps us to read the text better, and in more literarily and theologically productive ways, deserves to be considered alongside others.

Second, I am thrilled with Thomas's questions about likening and its fate in the Book of Mormon. Frankly, these questions deserve a whole essay by way of response. In outline, however, my response would be as follows. I think that careful readers of the Book of Mormon are most likely to have one of two responses to the robust treatment of likening in Nephi's record and its general absence thereafter. On the one hand, one might well feel that the clear period of decline after Nephi's time led to a kind of loss or corruption of Nephi's hermeneutical project, with the result that the remainder of the book never rises to the same heights as Nephi's record. To some extent, that is the argument of my earlier book, *An Other Testament*, to which Thomas refers.<sup>7</sup> Such a reader might well see Noah's priests and their (implied) understanding of Isaiah to signal the corruption of Nephi's project, which then requires a new hermeneutical (and specifically Christological) project to emerge with Abinadi and the church organized in his wake by Alma. Such a reader might also see Jesus Christ's return to Isaiah in Third Nephi as a kind of subtle endorsement of Nephi's hermeneutical project, although the word "likening" does not re-emerge there, and it probably should be said that Christ's own hermeneutical methods do not exactly align with Nephi's. On the other hand, one might feel that Nephi's hermeneutical project—perhaps because of the general inaccessibility of the small plates—was largely unknown among the Nephites, coming to Mormon's attention too late to have a serious impact on the narrative he was constructing, but early enough to shape Moroni's thinking about what it means to read texts. Unfortunately, Moroni's contributions to the final record provide him too few opportunities to revitalize Nephi's method of likening, even if other traces of Nephi's writings in Moroni's record make clear how much he is indebted to him. This second sort of approach has come to make increasing sense to me. And there are, of

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7. See Spencer, *An Other Testament*.



course, other possible ways to read the data as well. Mostly, I am happy to just to have made the possibility of asking this question real.

Third, Thomas has rightly noted that it is extreme to say, as I do in *The Vision of All*, that “no one” would translate Isaiah 7:14 by using the word “virgin” without an eye to Matthew’s use of the text. My intention was, however, more modest than it appears. I did not at all mean that no one, at all, ever in history, would translate the Hebrew with a word strictly meaning “virgin.” As Thomas rightly points out, someone *did* do that, producing the Septuagint text. I meant only to say that no modern Hebrew scholar, aiming at a strictly literal translation, would render it that way without an eye to the Christian appropriation of the text. It is obvious that I should have been clearer on this point. And the Septuagint translation of the text remains a fascinating thing. Why should someone, more than century before the rise of the Christian movement, translate the Hebrew term with a Greek term that does, in fact, mean “virgin”? That deserves more attention than it is often given.

Fourth, looking back over the text of *The Vision of All*, I am a bit surprised, like Thomas, that I did not mention the seer stone in connection with Nephi’s use of Isaiah 29. When I teach 2 Nephi 27 in my classes at Brigham Young University, that is precisely where I introduce the seer stone to my students and talk about the translation process. It seems to me *emphatically* a line of interpretation worth pursuing. I suppose that I did not mention that connection in *The Vision of All* itself simply because I was so focused on the direct uses of Isaiah in Nephi’s record that, since Isaiah does not himself use any stone imagery, I did not bother to go too far down that path. But I think the connection is obvious and worthy of pursuing further.

Fifth, Thomas nicely points out a tension between Nephi’s insistence that historical knowledge can help in interpreting scripture and Nephi’s rather more vehement insistence that historical knowledge would be a distraction from reading the Book of Mormon. That is a real tension. I suppose I would want to say that I—along with many others—have taken some liberties with Nephi’s references to “the things of the Jews,” taking this too quickly to imply that readers of Isaiah ought to demystify



the text a bit by turning to reputable scholarly resources on the history, the language, and the context of the Book of Isaiah. It is crucial to note that although Nephi acknowledges the possibility of using intellectual tools to get to Isaiah's meaning, he spends far more time talking about how to access Isaiah's meaning through what he calls "the spirit of prophecy." That heavier emphasis on spiritual interpretation does not, of course, eliminate the tension Thomas mentions, even if it does lessen its impact in certain ways. The tension is real, and I think every careful reader of scripture—every devotional reader, and every academic reader—should be aware of the dangers of strictly historical (and historicizing) readings. Scripture ceases to be scripture to the extent that it becomes a fully historical or historicized text. Every resource for understanding should be utilized appropriately, but the real possibility that resources might crowd out the existential force of scriptural texts must be acknowledged. The tension Thomas points out, in short, is one that every reader of scripture must live with, and ought to be aware of.

Sixth, I am grateful that Thomas points to the lengthy passage he has quoted from the end of my book. It may be the subject of a monograph I will write some day. In many ways, however, it is the indirect subject of everything I write. All of my theological work on scripture aims to embody the proper balance between fidelity to the text and creativity with the text. That is, in the end, what good theological reading does. And perhaps I have no real need to write a treatise directly on this subject, since I can point readers to an essay by Paul Ricoeur that rather brilliantly argues all the points I think I would want to make about this issue. I refer to his essay titled "The Bible and the Imagination," included in a collection of essays titled *Figuring the Sacred*.<sup>8</sup> For reflections on many of the same themes, but from a more strictly Latter-day Saint perspective, I might refer to the essays making up James Faulconer's book *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Paul Ricoeur, "The Bible and the Imagination," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 144–66.

9. See James E. Faulconer, *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2010).

It is not every day that an author has a chance to respond so quickly and so publicly to a review of her or his work. I wish to express my gratitude to Thomas for offering me this opportunity. I hope I have clarified a point or two, but most especially I hope I have made clear that Thomas has fixed on the issues in my work that seem most important to me. That gives me some confidence that I am myself interested in the right questions. That matters more to me as a philosopher and a reader than whether I give anything like the right answers to the questions. It is enough just to settle on the right questions that call for our attention.

**John Christopher Thomas** (PhD, University of Sheffield) is Clarence J. Abbott Professor of Biblical Studies at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, and Director of the Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies in the School of Philosophy and Religion at Bangor University in Bangor, North Wales, UK. He is the author of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* (2016), and he serves on the editorial advisory board of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*.

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Renee Angle. *WoO*. Tucson, AZ: Letter Machine Editions, 2016.

*Reviewed by Kylan Rice*

*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 27, 2018, pp. 240–246  
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EXPERIMENTATION LIVES AT THE HEART OF Mormon praxis. Alma encourages his followers to “experiment” on his words—to “experiment

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*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 27, 2018, pp. 240–246  
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EXPERIMENTATION LIVES AT THE HEART OF Mormon praxis. Alma encourages his followers to “experiment” on his words—to “experiment

to know.” If they follow through on Alma’s invitation, believers are able to obtain divine knowledge for themselves: empirical, positive surety is theirs for the taking. Like Alma, Moroni exhorts readers of the Book of Mormon to act in order to obtain knowledge for themselves about “the truth of all things.” Both Alma and Moroni divest themselves of epistemological responsibility, mantling it instead on the shoulders of the average individual. For Mormons, faith in and knowledge of the divine become essentially practical, applicable, and user-oriented. It is routed through the immanent, the daily, and the local.

A handful of cultural idioms have cropped up expressive of Mormon experimentalism. Invocations and benedictions for sacrament meetings or Sunday school often include the rote supplication: “Please help us apply these things to our daily lives.” Quotidian application takes a discursive turn in scripture study; Mormons are encouraged to “liken” scriptural content to themselves. Growing up in the Church, I was encouraged by teachers to swap out the specific names in the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Doctrine and Covenants with my own name. Narrative texts that featured particular biographical details relevant to Nephi or Oliver Cowdery became frameworks for personal reference. Joseph Knight became a floating signifier—a voidable vessel I could fill with myself.

Under such a pavilion, everything becomes relatable, pragmatic, and relocated to the frame of personal experience. “All things” are up for grabs. But this approach also means that all things have to be made from scratch. Nothing is, until I engage with it. As a result, I experience radical immanence; I am up to my elbows in an essential materialism. For Mormons, perhaps more so than for those of other creeds, practice is worship. As King Benjamin advises, “if you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10). Faith is doing. Things, all these things, are actions.

In *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology*,<sup>1</sup> the Mormon philosopher Adam Miller interprets Bruno Latour in order

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1. Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).



to describe a material metaphysics consonant with Mormon materialism. Miller explains how Latour begins from the deduction that there exists in the world “an original multiplicity.” If the world is made up of many things instead of one essential absolute thing, then nothing can be totalized. With this claim, Latour avoids the reductionism that takes place (and takes the place of things) when making metaphysical generalizations, and thereby does justice to the inherent complexity of any given object. Latour seeks to ground us phenomenologically and materially in objects at hand. The truth of a thing is not ideal, but real.

Latour calls this the “principle of irreduction,” where “nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else”;<sup>2</sup> objects “can’t be accounted for in advance,” but they also aren’t in and of themselves.<sup>3</sup> Miller recapitulates and breaks apart the principle of irreduction into the two sub-concepts that define it: “Given an original multiplicity, (1) no object can be entirely reduced without remainder to any other object or set of objects, and (2) no object is *a priori* exempt from being reducible in part to any other object or set of objects.”<sup>4</sup> Irreducible but multiply arrayed, objects accord in a “messy” network where constitutive interaction happens on an ontologically level playing field. In other words, “if an object exists, then it exists as the only provisional unity of an only partially compatible set of relationships.”<sup>5</sup> Miller observes some of the theological consequences that attend this worldview. Where there is nothing Absolute or totally Other, otherness is multiplied. Insofar as otherness is the predicate for transcendence, transcendence is multiplied too: “Transcendence isn’t lost when the One is banned, it multiplies like loaves and fishes. Blessed, divided, and shared, transcendence is more real, substantial, and ubiquitous than it has ever been—but the price is its purity. The hands of the multitude are dirty.”<sup>6</sup> As Miller elaborates in more colorful terms, “the principle of irreduction is nothing

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2. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 37.

3. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 38.

4. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 38.

5. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 39.

6. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 44.



if not an industrial-grade blender that emulsifies heaven and earth, the global and the local, the human and the nonhuman, into a single, messy, metaphysical pulp.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, transcendence, especially the transcendence of grace, becomes material, relational, real, hands-on, intimate, and, above all, immanent. Applied to Mormonism, Miller offers an “experimental” metaphysical account of the immanence so central to Latter-day Saint praxis.

The messy, networked immanence of Miller’s metaphysical materialism is also one way of conceptualizing Renee Angle’s *WoO*, a poetic emulsification of heaven, earth, and Mormonism in the industrial-grade blender of language. In her inflection of one kind of Mormon experience, Angle levels the transcendent, the occult, the sacred, the material, heretical, cultural, personal, physical, banal, and obscene into a polyglottal smorgasbord of prose poetry. Nothing is not up for grabs:

Nashing men necklace an abacus of each new rule. But trees to pulp and place as a poultice for poverty. Which means nightgowns hover over the mouths of every should. Through a crotch rot cemetery, after bathing suits kept on all day, a new skin safer. Inside a child a softer bomb. A nautilus, one man’s book expressed in fish. Because the rim party could descend into the canyon once they shot him. Because the ever-living liver mythifies trouble in tomb light. Off cambered backs comes bare knowledge. To split the mound like a coconut and tailor its lace. Of sorcery’s bonnet, brothers’ betrayal. (p. 22)

*WoO* is intentionally fragmented and fragmentary. It claims to be a reconstruction of the 116 lost pages of the Book of Mormon from fragments of biography, heritage, legend, and extant scripture. Near the end of her long introduction to the book, Angle announces, “I have reconstructed the text that follows based on these fragments. It is Joseph Smith’s *WoO*, *Werke ohne Opuszahl*. My title is derived from a German catalogue listing used to denote musical compositions surviving only as fragments” (p. 16). The acronym *WoO* evokes another: OOO,

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7. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 42.

denoting the Object-Oriented Ontological tradition in which Latour and Miller engage. To compare *WoO* and *OOO* is productive, I believe, since Angle foregrounds material and texture, aggregating the discursive debris of life imbricated in Mormon culture and hailed by its history: “Krill bashed her squash blossom necklace, but enter Hofmann’s & ‘Thou may’est see the burn marks yet.’ ‘Thou may’est’ papyri-sty climb. Bald headed cap swim. Benson excommunicato staccato. Bejesus and Beelzebub filled up that O in holy. Cheating tap water of its chlorine. Kamikaze body red dot splat. With peepstone 26 beat stomata” (p. 47). Squash blossoms, necklaces, papyri, tap water, and peepstones abound. In one of her more lucid passages, Angle observes: “Objects are outside the soul, of course; and yet they are also ballast in our heads” (p. 70). No matter how idealistic in their outlook, people are conditioned by material circumstances. As part of the real world, taken as real, theology also is “intimate, messy, hands-on, [and] adaptive.”<sup>8</sup> Angle’s book is messy and uncouth. For someone like Adam Miller, such messiness is essential.

Angle’s collage of discourses, time frames, and experiential textures puts her into conversation with the poets and artists of Dada. More specifically, she engages in language with the “ready-made” tradition. In the opening pages of *WoO*, where Angle gives a narratological manifesto on truth, lineage, identity, and artistic process, she screams off into a passage that shines a light onto some of her aesthetic forebears:

Of Joseph’s spiritual pursuit involving the commonplace. Sleet is what they call it though I have barely seen it. He was turning a urinal into a baptismal font. When he lost 116 pages of his original draft of *The Book of Mormon* he was ‘no good’ and said so when referring to the product of his mind. The day is about its pace. What could the alternate question be? A valise full of souvenirs, at bottom reactionary. Of course the question isn’t whether or not Joseph existed, but if he actually talked with god and ‘translated’ or ‘transcribed’ the record of Mormon, or if he readymade the story. (p. 7)

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8. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 76.

Angle's text is "ready-made" or assembled, pieced together, in the tradition of Joseph Cornell. But she also approaches her source text—and, indeed, all texts—as if ready-made. For better or worse, Angle reminds the Mormon reader of the contingent, immanent, and adaptable character of their faith tradition: "Their ornaments. Their manner of curing the sick. The burial of their dead. Their mourning for their dead. Their raising seed to a deceased brother. Their change of names adapted to their circumstances and times. Their own traditions" (p. 34). But the monoliths of tradition so often begin as *ad hoc* responses or solutions to problems. Tradition, like scripture, flows from revelation, which is prompted by circumstance. A book is a living book. Scripture is living scripture. Angle extrapolates from contingent revelation a writing process:

The text is anterior to the composition, though the composition be interior to the text. By means of the Urim and Thummim. The continual sequence of pages—the bioscopic book . . . . But the world is peopled with objects. Most religions offer a system or a few tips for exploiting the theos. There is no harm in this. . . . Grammar appeared after languages were argument. But Daddy took the lamb away. Now it's a parchment on her wall. (pp. 42–43)

Angle's two totems of adaptability and ready-made resilience include the stem cell and the amphibious (Hofmann-esque) salamander, which creeps across the book as a symbol of unfettered regeneration: "Go back and brood the back of the band, hand breed, like the salamander who can regenerate its limbs, its tail, its upper and lower jaws, the lens and retina of its eye, and its intestine. . . . What paper do I speak of?" (p. 59).

The lineaments of composition comprise a central theme of *WoO*—not only in the aesthetic as well as metaphysical material sense, in which "the world is peopled with objects," but also in more physical, even bodily terms. Angle foregrounds the body and its identity as multiple, multiplying entities. Under the big tent of object-oriented theology, the body is reaffirmed as the most important implement available for the

construction and maintenance of a workable epistemology, a practical faith. The speech and language that we use to articulate, ratify, and later act on or materialize belief is literally felt and experienced in the body: “Palpate the tongue and feel the hyloid arch within it” (p. 41). Elsewhere, Angle routes “The HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE . . . / The HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE” (p. 68). Angle acknowledges the discursive component, or “the grammar of affirmation” (p. 16), involved in realizing and maintaining any kind of knowledge, including faith.

For all its irreverence and Dada glossolalia, *WoO* gives an insightful angle into Mormonism as a veritable bishop’s storehouse of cultural and discursive wealth—some of it tithed, some of it plundered and grave-robbed. Mormon readers are reminded of the pragmatic, constructivist paradigms at the historical heart of their tradition. Additionally, I read Angle’s book as an unintentional representation of the experimental metaphysical materialism that Adam Miller describes in *Speculative Grace*. Angle’s development of metaphysical materialism applies its multiplicitous, recombinative, and contingent ontology to authorship in a world where everything is written and writing. In Miller’s account of Latour’s philosophy, “to be an object is to be a politician.”<sup>9</sup> When we read Angle, we realize that if an object is a politician—negotiating for itself and others in an open, immanent, and representative network of chaotic relationships—then it is a politician of a decidedly nineteenth-century stripe. The object is a mid-west stump-speecheer, soap-boxer, half-conman, half-reformer, a Bible in one hand, the Bill of Rights in the other, a Bowie-knife between the teeth, all draped about in the banner of heaven, Smith & Rigdon ’44.

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9. Miller, *Speculative Grace*, 20.



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Julie M. Smith, ed. *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Listening to the Various Voices of Scripture*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016.

*Reviewed by Andrew C. Smith*

*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 27, 2018, pp. 247–255  
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JULIE M. SMITH'S EDITED VOLUME, *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Listening to the Various Voices of Scripture*, represents an important contribution to Latter-day Saint secondary literature on the scriptural canon, particularly as directed at and intended for a believing, lay audience. The underlying presupposition that there are divergent and contradictory voices apparent in the scriptural canon is a fact that must be accepted and wrestled with if the Latter-day Saint community desires to truly attain a more than superficial level of scriptural literacy. The notion that the scriptural canon is always in total agreement (on any but the broadest of doctrinal considerations, such as the existence of God) usually does not survive a non-superficial or careful reading of scripture. As Smith specifically notes, "not all scripture texts agree with each other. . . . The casual reader may never notice these divergences, but the closer reader surely will" (pp. 1–2). Smith's introduction is a good overview of the scholarly and intellectual understanding of why and how these divergent opinions can be understood within scripture. She succinctly lays out the issues that surround understanding the human influences within the construction of scripture, including basic issues such as their fallen or imperfect stature, the difficulties and boundaries of language, as well as differences inherent in historical context and cultural perspectives. This understanding does not in any way detract from the potential for inspiration among the scriptural authors; indeed, Smith cites various prophetic luminaries of the Latter-day Saint tradition such as Joseph Smith, Mormon, and Moroni, each of whom actively bemoaned such limitations and warned against such inherent weaknesses in their writings despite



their claims to spiritual inspiration and revelation. Given these realities of the humanly authored word, Smith states: “We are being unfaithful to the scriptures when we treat them as if they were perfect, and one natural result of their imperfections is that various texts will not agree with each other” (p. 2).<sup>1</sup>

Moving beyond such a recognition, the introduction by Smith herself and the full volume of essays speak to the issues of how we respond to the contradictions inherent in scriptural texts written in vastly differing geographical areas and/or historical periods. A first vital step for the community is to recognize that “of course, current cultural assumptions shape interpretation today and are perhaps all the more dangerous because they go unrecognized” (p. 2). Beyond this epistemological recognition, however, is the important next step concerning how the Latter-day Saint community actively engages with such differences. The point of this volume is to get away from standard interpretive norms of either glossing over recognized differences as unimportant and/or distracting to faith or constructing elaborate theories to explain the divergence in superficially palatable or doctrinal terms. In the case of the latter, Smith is correct to point out that such is the hallmark of scriptural engagement in communities adhering to theological commitments of scriptural inerrancy, something to which Latter-day Saints are not beholden. (This, of course, does not mean that such approaches are not sometimes assumed among Latter-day Saint readers or even leadership.) Rather, the point of this volume is to attempt to chart a different course: using these divergences as points of exploration and meaning creation, and indeed as potentially intentional within the inspiration provided by the divine guiding hand behind the construction of scripture. “Our goal was to explore those differences, not to explain them away. . . . What if these are not wrinkles to be removed but rather an intentional texture to be appreciated?” (p. 5).

The method of exploration in this volume also stands out as slightly outside of the norm for Latter-day Saint engagement with scripture. In

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1. Of course, this statement can be critiqued based on our notions of “perfection.” It is clear that Smith is using this in terms of “without flaw or contradiction.”

an effort to highlight the differences observed, Smith and her contributors have taken a creative and dialogical approach, designing fictional dialogues and meetings between characters of scripture and/or history. With quite a bit of leeway, the contributors explore “the various voices in scripture by placing two different characters in dialogue with each other, attempting to remain faithful to how each person is represented in the scriptural text” (pp. 4–5). What results is an edited volume that could both subjectively appeal to or repel readers in a number of different ways. Of course, some of the entries will be of more interest than others to each reader, based in a variety of subjective measures (writing style, incorporation of scholarly material, etc.). However, the collected essays are also somewhat irregular in ways that directly undermine the described intent of the volume itself. Some of the entries follow this intent by engaging with distinctly unanswerable questions and irreconcilable viewpoints, but still discuss them in a way that prompts important thoughts for the reader. In my opinion, others are less effective in this regard as they do not highlight or explore differences as much as they simply put people together with similarities of theme to see what results. Some of the essays engage and wrestle with morally difficult issues, while others simply act as introductions to basic issues of biblical or scriptural composition. Likewise, while it was the stated intent to be creative and fictional while also basing the viewpoints “as closely as possible on what the scriptural records suggest that the people involved would have actually believed . . . to highlight what is there without substantially changing it or adding to it” (p. 5), some of the essays reach for interpretive heights that significantly and substantially *do* change or add to the characterization of the scriptural characters. While this is fine within the confines of creative interpretation, in its extremes it may turn off some readers as it involves a distinct rewriting of the scriptural characters and stories. In some of the essays, these moves are within the realm of responsible exegesis or accepted interpretive analysis, while others involve interpretive moves that go far beyond the text. In some cases this approach results in simply turning their viewpoint characters into stand-ins for certain modern ideological positions; in others it

results in a distinct re-writing or misreading of either the characters or their stories. It is clear that such an approach can be considered either a strength or a weakness (or both) of the volume depending upon the viewpoint of the reader: what may seem fresh and innovative to one may seem anachronistic and stultifying to another.

As far as subject matter goes, the essays range far and wide within the confines of the Latter-day Saint canon. However, they are generally focused on the contradictions and issues seen in what may be termed “ancient scripture,” and generally avoid delving into issues that may or may not be present in the Doctrine and Covenants, for instance. While one essay presents an ancient author in conversation with a modern prophet (Jacob the son of Lehi and Joseph Smith), the rest of the essays all deal with biblical or Book of Mormon characters. An interesting facet of the presentation of the essays is that numerically, essays dealing with divergences found in the Bible dominate. Only six out of the seventeen essays deal with the Book of Mormon, and of those, only two essays deal distinctly with perceived differences or contradictions found within the pages of the Book of Mormon itself. The others all compare Book of Mormon characters to either biblical characters or, as mentioned, Joseph Smith. Given this venue, we will concern ourselves through the rest of this review with only those essays dealing with the Book of Mormon, while noting that the biblically oriented essays are of distinct value as well.

The essays in the volume that take up the Book of Mormon present an eclectic mixture. In my opinion, while all supply thought-provoking dialogues, some are more successfully rendered than others. Mark Decker offers a discussion between Jacob (son of Lehi) and Joseph Smith on polygamy that is intended to raise questions regarding dealing with rules and their exceptions, particularly within the context of doctrines of continuing revelation and shifting socioreligious landscapes. The essay is effective in this regard, but the characterization of Jacob’s day and the position of polygamy with the Mosaic Law did fall slightly flat and could have been better dissected or presented. Heather Hardy’s piece discusses notions of intra-familial rivalry and reconciliation

through the contrast of Joseph (of Egypt) and Nephi and their relationships with their brothers. It raises important questions about issues of cause and effect regarding the favor of God and afflictions that can follow in its wake: “Does the Lord’s favor cause the afflictions that follow in its wake, or does it somehow prepare its recipients for other events to come?” (p. 37). This entry, however, reads much more didactically and devotionally than other essays (which may fit the characters, particularly Nephi) while also not exploring distinct contradictions within the scriptural record as much as having two people with similar but different experiences discuss their experiences and potential take-aways from them. This type of dialogue is also found in the piece by James D. Holt, who imagines a discussion between Alma the Elder and Abinadi, which again doesn’t highlight any distinct contradiction or difference. While the author recognizes and understands that (for some) this essay “does little to draw out the tensions that may exist between Alma and Abinadi,” he does hope that “others will see the inner turmoil of Alma as he struggled to reconcile his faith as a priest of Noah with the message of Abinadi” (p. 63).

The last two contributions dealing with the Book of Mormon, from Joseph Spencer and Walker Wright, are in my opinion two of the strongest essays, not simply within this category but also within the volume as a whole. They both wrestle with aspects of the scriptural texts as well as, in some ways, real moral and philosophical problems that are just as pertinent to modern readers as they would have been to ancient audiences. Spencer’s piece involves a discussion between Alma the Younger and Amulek concerning the ways they are teaching the Atonement. Spencer undertakes his characteristic close reading of the text in order to create a fictional discussion between the two that takes place sometime between the Zoramite mission (Alma 31–35) and Alma’s discussions with his own sons, particularly Corianton (Alma 36–42). The dialogue is a place where Alma is depicted as refining the positions and doctrines he will present to Corianton (Alma 39–42), specifically in that he thinks the method Amulek is using to teach the Atonement has contributed to Corianton’s confusion with regard to the



Gospel and teachings of the Atonement (and his illicit actions contrary to the commandments). In the end of the dialogue, Alma and Amulek conclude that there might not be too much of a difference between the way they are presenting the Atonement, a result that may open Spencer to accusations of manufacturing a difference that is not present in the text and was not necessarily real. However, one of the real strengths of this theological (not necessarily moral) wrangling is to illustrate the power and position of metaphors, images, and symbols. In many ways, how one describes the theological realities of the Atonement can be as influential on one's audience as the fact that one believes in its efficacy. Metaphors, images, and symbols as models or representations meant to illustrate a part of a greater whole matter more than we might initially think, influencing understanding, impacting discourse, and determining the potential actions of a community.

Walker Wright's contribution highlights the tensions surrounding issues of riches and materialistic success within a religious and otherworldly perspective. Specifically, he constructs a dialogue between Mormon and Israel/Jacob in which Mormon highlights the inescapable pride of riches and the resulting inequality as a source of conflict, while Israel (as an individual) defends his being lauded (in the book of Genesis) for his prosperity and pursuing or obtaining wealth at the expense of others as a blessing from heaven. This essay was one of the best examples in the volume of the power involved in presenting two nearly irreconcilable viewpoints from scripture that are derived from positive, righteous examples within scripture. Wright ends without a clear answer to the issue, and thus ends up shining a light on the productive tension between the two positions. In the end, it is clear that Mormon's position can easily create a theology that ignores or is unconcerned with earthly matters and realities, while Israel's can easily shift into a problematic prosperity gospel. Such discussions are a perennial need for those attempting to live an ethical and religiously motivated life in a world where one can, at the least, be tempted to attempt to buy anything with money.

For all of its warts, this volume represents a sincere effort to influence and improve the Latter-day Saint laity in their understanding,

appreciation, and engagement with their scriptural canon. It is a volume that can provoke deep thinking and new insights. As such, it is a very important piece that should be taken seriously by its Latter-day Saint audience, not as a fully academic undertaking (though there are academic aspects and approaches utilized), but as an artistic or creative endeavor promoting the broadening and deepening of interpretation and analysis of Mormon scripture. It should likewise be viewed as an important secondary work on Latter-day Saint scripture by scholars (LDS and non-LDS) interested in Latter-day Saint scripture and theology, as well as scholars interested in the ways and means by which Mormons interpret and understand their canon. Certainly this volume represents an opening foray into these types of discussions as the tip of the proverbial iceberg, and there is much more left to explore. In this regard, what was left unsaid by these Mormon authors is just as important as what they say.

To wit, while it is hard to fully extrapolate from a single data point such as this, it is telling that when a notable group of intellectual Latter-day Saint scholars (with impressive pedigrees of learning and experience with LDS scripture) are given *carte blanche* leeway and are allowed to pick *any* aspects of contradiction or divergence within the Latter-day Saint canon, their aggregate work focuses mainly on the Bible (and not on the essentially Mormon parts of the scriptural canon), and largely retreads ground discussed in many other venues and by other biblically oriented traditions and scholarship. While introducing such discussions to a lay Mormon audience is, in itself, laudable, for our interests in this venue, an important question to ask is: What does this say about the way that the Latter-day Saint intellectual community (and by extension, lay Mormonism) treats and understands the Book of Mormon? Tentatively, it could be concluded that this result may imply that Mormons are more comfortable finding contradiction in the Bible, but are less comfortable with moral or theological contradictions found in “the most correct of any book on earth.” If this is the case, this volume takes on even greater value in the way that a number of the essays *do* point to such issues within Mormon scripture. It could also be pointed out that this

discomfort may extend in other directions as well: none of these essays in any way deals with contradictions or divergences connected to Jesus and his teachings specifically. This may be another bridge too far for many Mormons in the way they engage with their scripture.

Another influencing factor in this regard could be a perceived “univocality” within the text of the Book of Mormon due to Mormon’s overarching editorial influence, which arguably could have removed a lot of the potential for types of divergence or contradiction that emerged in the diachronic development of the biblical texts. If such univocality were commonly perceived (consciously or unconsciously) by Mormon intellectuals, it may lead to their overlooking or failing to recognize contradictions when they do appear in the Book of Mormon. However, it is clear that even Mormon’s editorial influence is not completely without its contradictions. For instance, he will categorically state (somewhat contradictorily) that “the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished” (Mormon 4:5), while also having recounted as a central linchpin of his treatise on the manifestation of Jesus as the Eternal God to the Nephites, a story in which *the Righteous One* punishes the wicked (see 3 Nephi 8–10).

But it could likewise be concluded that the lack of focus on contradictions internal to the Book of Mormon text stems largely from the fact that Book of Mormon scholarship is still in its extreme infancy relative to biblical studies. There is plenty of low-hanging fruit that has been discussed before but which could only benefit from new creative interpretation, for instance, the contradictions between the first two generations of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in their attitudes to war and killing. But there are plenty of other possibilities internal to the Book of Mormon, let alone via a comparative framework. How do we understand Mosiah’s rationale for dissolving the Nephite monarchy in light of the Davidic Covenant or even the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus as King of Israel? What do we do with the positive portrayal of Moroni and Teancum’s actions *vis-à-vis* the kingmen and Amalickiah (see Alma 51) in light of Jesus’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount/Temple? Or perhaps even more trenchant: How does one understand the positive

portrayal and lauding by Mormon of (captain) Moroni (see Alma 48:17) when his (Moroni's) overt anger (see Alma 51:14; 54:13) is seen in the light of Jesus's denunciations of anger as endangering individuals at the Judgment (3 Nephi 12:22)? Such contradictions, whether superficial or deeply rooted, should be recognized and plumbed, both academically and creatively. In this regard, it can be hoped that this volume will prompt deeper engagements with the Book of Mormon to identify and promote scholarship and creative endeavors in a similar (if not the same) vein. The hope here would be that such undertakings not only locate issues of contradiction, but also revel in them as occasions to swim in the currents of intellectual engagement and theological or doctrinal wrangling.

**Andrew C. Smith** earned his doctorate in Religious Studies from Claremont Graduate University, emphasizing Qur'anic studies and the Hebrew Bible. He specializes in comparative scriptural studies and discourse formation, especially as seen in Qur'anic-biblical intertextuality as well as comparative approaches to the Book of Mormon. He is visiting assistant professor of Ancient Scripture at BYU.

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Royal Skousen. *Grammatical Variation*. In *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, Vol. 3: Parts 1 and 2. Book of Mormon Critical Text Project. Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and Brigham Young University Studies, 2016.

*Reviewed by David Calabro*

*Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 27, 2018, pp. 255–263  
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THE TWO TOMES HERE REVIEWED COMPRISE the first two Parts of the penultimate Volume of Royal Skousen's monumental undertaking,



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THE TWO TOMES HERE REVIEWED COMPRISE the first two Parts of the penultimate Volume of Royal Skousen's monumental undertaking,

the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project. This project, which is now about to enter its fourth decade, aims to make accessible to the public a complete account of the textual history of the Book of Mormon, including the original dictated text (as far as it can be reconstructed from the available sources) as well as the variation in the text through the manuscripts and printed editions. The project's editor, Royal Skousen, is a Professor of Linguistics and English Language at Brigham Young University. Volumes 1 and 2 of the project, published in 2001, contain typographical facsimiles of the two Book of Mormon manuscripts: the original manuscript (which Oliver Cowdery and other scribes wrote from the Prophet's dictation and which is now about 28 percent extant) and the printer's manuscript (from which John Gilbert set the type for the first edition in 1830 and which is now extant in its entirety). The next Volume to be completed was Volume 4, the analysis of variant readings in the manuscripts and printed editions, which appeared in six Parts from 2004 to 2009. Volume 3, of which the work under review is the first installment, is entitled *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*. It is authored by Skousen with the collaboration of Stanford Carmack, an independent scholar of historical linguistics. The preparation of this Volume was purposely delayed due to its logical dependence on the findings presented in Volume 4. Volume 3, like Volume 4, will eventually include six Parts. Parts 1 and 2 together comprise the analysis of grammatical variation among the manuscripts and printed editions of the Book of Mormon. As Skousen says in the introductory matter of Part 1 (p. 7), the remaining four Parts will be entitled as follows:

- Part 3: The Original Language
- Part 4: Spelling in the Manuscripts and Editions
- Part 5: The Transmission of the Text
- Part 6: Book of Mormon Textual Criticism

As is clear from Skousen's remarks (p. 12), the title of Part 3 refers to the English text of the book and not the ancient language(s) from which

it was translated. The final Volume of the project will be Volume 5, *A Complete Electronic Collation of the Book of Mormon*.

Parts 1 and 2, *Grammatical Variation* (hereafter *HTBM: GV*), begin with two lengthy forewords at the beginning of Part 1, which orient the reader to the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project as a whole (pp. 3–10) and to the subject matter of these two Parts (pp. 11–34). A comparatively brief introduction, entitled “Editing the Nonstandard Grammar of the Book of Mormon” (pp. 35–43), reviews Joseph Smith’s own grammatical editing of the Book of Mormon text, which, according to Skousen, demonstrates (1) that the original English language of the text was foreign to the prophet’s native dialect, and (2) that the grammatical changes made by the prophet himself (as well as those made by later editors) are not part of the original revealed text. On pages 45–95, there is an essay by Stanford Carmack entitled “The Nature of the Nonstandard English in the Book of Mormon,” adapted from Carmack’s article “A Look at Some ‘Nonstandard’ Book of Mormon Grammar.”<sup>1</sup> This essay shows that many of the so-called “errors in grammar and diction” (quoting B. H. Roberts, see p. 47) in the earliest Book of Mormon text are also found in formal Early Modern English writings (late fifteenth to mid-eighteenth century). There follows (pp. 99–109) a “Survey of the Contents” of Parts 1–2, which lists various parts of speech and grammatical categories discussed in these two Parts, with selected examples of textual change and the corresponding sections in which these subjects are discussed. This survey serves as a rudimentary index of these two Parts. The remainder of *HTBM: GV* consists of the analysis of grammatical variation, organized into sections named after the grammatical features of the original text (such as “Adverbs,” “Come to Pass,” “Conjunctive Repetition”). These section headers are arranged in alphabetical order, so that the organization of these two Parts resembles that of a reference work on grammar.

Skousen clearly states the purpose of *HTBM: GV* in the first sentence of the “Foreword to Grammatical Variation” (p. 11): “to describe all the

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1. The article was originally published in *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 209–62.

cases of grammatical variation in the history of the Book of Mormon text.” He continues: “Basically, these first two parts deal with the non-standard English in the original text and how it has been grammatically emended over the years, not only by editors but also by scribes and type-setters in the early transmission of the text.” In this objective, the work succeeds admirably, living up to the reputation for thoroughness that Skousen has earned through the previously published Volumes of this project. The work undertaken in this Volume fills a clear gap in Book of Mormon studies. We have never had, until now, a comprehensive account of the grammatical changes that have been made in the transmission of the Book of Mormon text from the original dictation of the text down to the present edition. As Skousen notes (p. 11), much of the material presented in *HTBM: GV* has been deferred from the analysis of textual variants in Volume 4, so readers can finally see the thorough discussion of evidence on which some conclusions in that Volume were based.

As an example of Skousen’s thorough approach, the discussion of “Historical Present” is seventeen pages long (pp. 410–26). At the beginning of the section, Skousen explains that the historical present is the use of a present-tense verb in a narrative past-tense context. He discusses the presence of this phenomenon in the King James Bible and other earlier English Bible versions. Then he presents “the many examples of Joseph Smith’s editing of *saith* to *said* where the subject is in the third-person singular and directly precedes the verb *saith*.” The list is about four full pages long, in small type. Near the end of the section, after presenting and discussing numerous other descriptive details, Skousen points out that an opposite process, the secondary creation of historical present forms, has also occurred in the transmission of the text: “There has also been a strong tendency in the history of the text to replace the past-tense phrase ‘and thus ended <a period of time>’ with the present-tense ‘and thus endeth <a period of time>.’” He gives the six examples of this, all of which occur in printed editions of the early 1800s. Finally, Skousen notes a difference between the Book of Mormon’s use of the historical present and that of the King James Bible: in the latter, the historical present of the verb *come* is common, especially



in the Gospel of Mark, but the historical present of this verb does not occur in the Book of Mormon.

As far as this reviewer has been able to find, the quality of the scholarship in *HTBM: GV* is impeccable, again fulfilling the expectations raised by the high quality of the previous Volumes of the Critical Text Project. The large dimensions, cloth binding, and elegant typeface accord with the high quality of the scholarship and bespeak reverence for the divinely revealed text of the Book of Mormon.

There are, however, a few broad issues with *HTBM: GV* that signal room for improvement. These issues are particularly worthy of mention because there is opportunity to address them in the remaining Parts of Volume 3.

The first issue is that of audience. The title, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, together with the subtitle that includes the noun *variation*, is likely to attract readers interested in a historical account of the ways in which different manuscripts and editions have diverged from the original text over time. The adjective *grammatical* in the subtitle may not be enough to prepare such a readership for what is, in fact, primarily a book on grammar. The organization is by grammatical categories, and one does not get an overall picture of the characteristics of any one manuscript or edition. The linguistic analysis presupposes familiarity with terms like *determiner*, *relative clause*, and *subjunctive*; rather than just undergirding the conclusions as in Volume 4, this analysis is the focus. Skousen's clear writing style goes a long way toward making *HTBM: GV* accessible to a general readership; even so, the discussion occasionally gets quite technical (see, for example, the discussion of "after" under "Subordinate Conjunctions" [pp. 1019–27]). A recent review of these two Parts by Grant Hardy confirms this impression: Hardy compares them with grammar books, like Gesenius's grammar of biblical Hebrew and Wright's grammar of Arabic, not with works on textual history or textual criticism.<sup>2</sup> Yet these two Parts are not a grammar of the Book of Mormon either. Rather than covering the grammatical features of the earliest text

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2. Grant Hardy, "Approaching Completion: The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57/1 (2018): 177–78.

in general, the examples and discussion center exclusively on instances of variation in the history of the text.

What, then, is the intended audience of *HTBM: GV*? The exacting grammatical approach seems to imply a very specific scholarly audience: a cadre of Book of Mormon philologists who are interested in approaching the English text of the Book of Mormon from a linguistic standpoint, with the same rigor that biblical philologists apply to the Hebrew Bible or the Greek New Testament. But this audience is currently narrow, consisting only of Royal Skousen and Stanford Carmack themselves. A handful of others, such as Grant Hardy and this reviewer, are interested in the exegetical and historical results of this kind of analysis, but stand outside the highly technical forum that this work presupposes. Philologists of the Bible and of other world scriptural traditions are generally unqualified to speak authoritatively in matters of English historical linguistics, while English philologists have not generally worked with the Book of Mormon and may lack the necessary familiarity with biblical languages. Thus, the audience that will benefit the most from this work may be a future generation of scholars. To borrow a phrase from another review by Grant Hardy, this is truly “scholarship for the ages.”<sup>3</sup> However, Skousen and Carmack could help to cultivate and grow this audience by self-consciously laying out the fundamentals of their grammatical approach. It might be useful to compare other textual histories of scripture in this regard. Würthwein, for example, in his textual history of the Old Testament, includes chapters on the aims, methods, theological significance, and tools of biblical textual criticism.<sup>4</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, in their similar work on the New Testament, give a chronological account of the development of New Testament textual criticism, including a description of the current stage of scholarship in which their own work takes place.<sup>5</sup> Measures such as

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3. Grant Hardy, “Scholarship for the Ages,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 43–53, 71.

4. Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

5. Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

these may help the rising generation of scholars to recognize the field that Skousen and Carmack have opened up and to equip themselves with the tools they will need.

The second issue has to do with the authors' view of the nonstandard language of the original text. *HTBM: GV* represents a departure from Volume 4 regarding the stance on this matter: whereas Volume 4 simply employed principles of textual criticism without adhering to any particular model of the original language of the text, *HTBM: GV* shows a definite commitment to such a model. As stated in Carmack's essay (pp. 45–95) and by Skousen in several places throughout the text, they understand the original language of the Book of Mormon to be Early Modern English and thus to emanate from a period at least one century prior to Joseph Smith. They support this view through numerous quotations from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Early English Books Online, and other sources. However, Skousen also allows for influence from the ancient language(s) from which the Book of Mormon was translated. He thus includes an extensive section on "Hebraisms" (pp. 361–409). Some sections discuss nonstandard grammatical constructions that could be from Early Modern English or from Hebrew, such as "Resumptive Repetition" (pp. 808–53; esp. 837–38). Nowhere, however, does Skousen or Carmack discuss criteria for determining which constructions are Early Modern English and which are Hebraisms. In general, the authors seem to assume that a given construction is Early Modern English except when it cannot be found in English, in which case it may be a Hebraism. An example of the latter is the "extra *and* after an initial subordinate clause" (pp. 362–76), which includes the "if-and" construction known in Hebrew studies as the "*Waw* of apodosis." However, a Hebrew or Egyptian explanation could apply to more cases than they acknowledge. Andrew Smith has argued, for instance, that many cases of nonstandard subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement could reflect Classical Hebrew grammar.<sup>6</sup> Some of these grammatical features are discussed in

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6. Andrew Smith, "Deflected Agreement in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 21/2 (2012): 40–57.

*HTBM: GV* (see “Subject-Verb Agreement” [pp. 880–915]), but I could not find any discussion of Smith’s article.

The appeal to Early Modern English also seems, to this reviewer, to be somewhat imprecise. It would be good to know, for example, whether the many citations from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Early English Books Online come from a single dialect of Early Modern English or from many. If they are from many, one wonders whether the net is cast too wide to support a specific Early Modern English origin for the book’s language. Given the diversity of nonstandard phenomena in Early Modern English dialects as a whole, are there many English texts whose nonstandard grammar could *not* be found in Early Modern English? Further, one may wonder whether Joseph Smith’s upstate New York dialect has really been ruled out as the origin of the book’s nonstandard grammar, since the authors do not survey Joseph Smith’s writings nor other sources from upstate New York nearly as extensively as they survey Early Modern English (at least, if these other surveys have been made, they have not entered as prominently into the published analysis). An older article by Royal Skousen, “The Original Language of the Book of Mormon: Upstate New York Dialect, King James English, or Hebrew?,”<sup>7</sup> indicates that at least some of the nonstandard language of the original text was also used by Joseph Smith and Willard Richards. This includes the use of “for to” instead of “in order to” preceding an infinitive, which Skousen discusses in *HTBM: GV* (pp. 310–13). Skousen shows that Joseph Smith used this construction in his own writings in the early 1830s and that his editing of the construction for the 1837 Kirtland edition postdated his familiarity with Samuel Kirkham’s *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures*, which labels the construction as a dialectal feature of English in New England or New York and prescribes against it. Skousen considers the use of this construction in the Book of Mormon to be “archaic” and traces it to Early Modern English, although he ascribes Joseph Smith’s editing of the construction to his

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7. Royal Skousen, “The Original Language of the Book of Mormon: Upstate New York Dialect, King James English, or Hebrew?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 28–38.



familiarity with Kirkham's book. Here, as elsewhere, Joseph Smith's editing of the nonstandard grammar may be due to his own increased exposure to prescriptive grammar in the mid-1830s rather than to the original text being foreign to his native dialect. Skousen mentions in *HTBM: GV* the role of "improved databases" in his discovery that the vocabulary as well as the grammar of the book dates "from the 1540s up to about 1740" (p. 35). Yet it is not clear if these databases cover nineteenth-century upstate New York sources as extensively as they cover the dialects of Early Modern English; if not, then the data could be skewed. Part 3 of this Volume, which will be devoted specifically to the original language of the Book of Mormon, would be an appropriate place to address these issues.

Finally, the value of Volume 3 (as well as of Volume 4) would be greatly enhanced if it included an index of the scriptural verses cited and a subject index, so that one who has a question about an issue while reading the Book of Mormon might easily locate the relevant resources in the Critical Text.

These issues notwithstanding, Skousen (and Carmack) have advanced Book of Mormon scholarship significantly by the publication of these two Parts. We may look forward with excitement to the remaining installments of the Project.

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