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# Book Reviews

## A Review of the Afro-Asiatic:Uto-Aztecan Proposal

*Chris Rogers*

Brian D. Stubbs. *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan*. Provo, UT: Grover Publications, 2015; Brian D. Stubbs. *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now*. Blanding, UT: Four Corners Digital Design, 2016.

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS PIECE IS TO review the long-distance genetic linguistic relationship between languages of the Afro-Asiatic language family and the Uto-Aztecan language family suggested in Stubbs's *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan* and *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now*. While such a suggestion is not novel,<sup>1</sup> a linguistic connection between the New World and the Old World is especially appealing to readers of the Book of Mormon. Such a connection can potentially provide a way to determine specific

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1. See Lyle Campbell, *American Indian Languages: The Historical Linguistics of Native America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

cultural and social facts about the peoples and civilizations described throughout the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, when not established by rigorous methods and scientific principles, such proposals lead to the incorrect identification of genetic linguistic relationships and unfounded extra-linguistic conclusions.

Discovering cognates, identifying lexical similarities, and using the comparative method to suggest that two or more languages are related are complex undertakings (especially for long-distance genetic relationships). In this type of research, there are generally two perspectives taken: a conservative and more empirically demanding one and a liberal and more suggestive one (sometimes referred to as “splitters” and “lumpers,” respectively, in the historical linguistic literature<sup>2</sup>). Stubbs’s proposal falls into the “lumper” camp, as do the previous reviews of his hypothesis by Dirk Elzinga and John Robertson,<sup>3</sup> though Robertson does at least acknowledge the splitter perspective.<sup>4</sup> As of yet, the splitter perspective on this hypothesized linguistic relationship has not been reported. The goal of this review is to evaluate Stubbs’s proposal from this perspective. The result is that when evidence and methods are considered carefully, there is ample reason to “challenge the breadth and depth of the data”<sup>5</sup> and to remain unconvinced by the “extensive accurate data, to back up his extraordinary claim.”<sup>6</sup> The conclusion therefore is that Stubbs’s proposal is another proposal about a New World/Old-World linguistic connection that “unravels with scrutiny.”<sup>7</sup>

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2. See Lyle Campbell and William John Poser’s *Language Classification: History and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3. Dirk Elzinga, “Brian D. Stubbs: Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55/4 (2015): 172–76; John Robertson, “Exploring Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan Languages,” Review of *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan*, by Brian D. Stubbs, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2015): 103–16.

4. Robertson, “Exploring Semitic and Egyptian,” 107–08.

5. Robertson, “Exploring Semitic and Egyptian,” 114.

6. Elzinga, “Brian D. Stubbs: Exploring,” 176.

7. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 1.

## Overview of Stubbs's Proposal

Stubbs's long-distance linguistic relationship proposal is described in two complementary publications: *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztecan* and *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now*. These two books are not substantially different, though I found the latter to be a better introduction to the proposal and its motivations. Here, I refer to the materials presented as a single proposal—which I term the *Afro-Asiatic:Uto-Aztecan proposal* (or just *the proposal*). In these publications, Stubbs purports to provide some insight into the “unknowns of Uto-Aztecan”<sup>8</sup> grammar and the historicity of the Book of Mormon by suggesting a long-distance linguistic genetic relationship between the Proto-Uto-Aztecan language family and at least three languages from the Afro-Asiatic language family (two from the Semitic branch and Egyptian—itsself a unique branch of the family).

This proposal is based on a proposed set of 1,528 lexical and grammatical similarities between Afro-Asiatic languages and Uto-Aztecan languages.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, explanations regarding what these similarities might mean for the study of Uto-Aztecan languages<sup>10</sup> and the historicity of the Book of Mormon<sup>11</sup> are also presented. Other information of varying usefulness to the proposal itself, but which seems personally significant to Stubbs, is presented in the remainder of both books through a number of appendices.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear that Stubbs has invested a lot of time and energy into this proposal. However, it is so replete with disorganization, numerous assumptions, mistaken definitions or incorrect characterizations of linguistic concepts, inexact methods, pedantry, and apologetic rhetoric that the idea seems dubious, even without careful scrutiny. Stubbs frequently

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8. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 1.

9. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 65–302; Stubbs, *Changes in Languages*, 89–127.

10. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 303–58.

11. Stubbs, *Changes in Languages*, 1–31, 74–88, 128–64.

12. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 362–417; Stubbs, *Changes in Languages*, 165–89.



refers to his own reluctance and fear about the controversy that the proposal would create, but does little to assuage these fears in others in his choice of presentation and representation. In fact, the most telling critique of the entire proposal is a paraphrase of Stubbs's own words (about critics of the Book of Mormon, but highly applicable here): "Yet gullible may better describe those accepting the [assumptions] in the book than those digging in to find the facts."<sup>13</sup> However, these might be considered unfortunate, minor issues, if the content of the book did not also suffer from significant analytical and methodological issues. The remainder of this review suggests the substantive issues that exist with the proposal.

### Substantive Issues with the Proposal

A proposal for a genetic relationship between two or more languages must be supported by two types of evidence: (1) evidence that the languages discussed are in fact genetically related, and (2) evidence for the reconstruction of the common linguistic ancestor.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the proposal is problematic on both counts.

#### *Evidence for Genetic Similarities in Afro-Asiatic and Uto-Aztecan*

One of the main methodological issues of Stubbs's proposal is the omission of an explanation for why the Uto-Aztecan and Afro-Asiatic languages are being compared in the first place. Other than the Book of Mormon, which provides very little information about the languages used by its writers, there is no linguistic or extra-linguistic motivation that these languages should be related. Of course, in general terms, it can be said that the Book of Mormon provides evidence that speakers of at least one Semitic language (and possibly more) came to the Americas and intermingled with speakers of some of the thousands of spoken

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13. Stubbs, *Changes in Languages*, 1.

14. For an overview of these two tasks, see Lyle Campbell's *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); and Lyle Campbell and William John Poser's *Language Classification: History and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), or any number of introductory historical linguistics textbooks.

languages somewhere in North, Central, or South America (or all of them). However, this does not limit their contact to the Uto-Aztec languages; perhaps they intermingled with speakers of the Chibchan languages in South America (among other possibilities).

Stubbs's proposal sidesteps this issue and suggests that the putative similarities are the evidence that these are related languages, but then fails to explain why specific languages are named and used in the comparison. This move results in a circular argument: they are related because there are similarities and there are similarities because they are related. Since the only external evidence available is the Book of Mormon record, there is no reason to suggest that other language families might not be a better fit for Book of Mormon history. The only motivation for comparing Semitic languages and Egyptian to the Uto-Aztec languages seems to be Stubbs's personal investment in Uto-Aztec languages and linguistics.

#### *Linguistic Comparisons Require Like Systems*

In the main line of reasoning for the proposal, Stubbs focuses on proto-Uto-Aztec (a hypothetical reconstructed language). In other parts of the proposal, he focuses on specific Uto-Aztec languages.<sup>15</sup> Unless the type of linguistic system being compared is held constant, the result is a form of scientifically cherry-picking the data to fit the proposal. For example, consider the putative cognate sets (2) and (13) given in table 1 and table 2, respectively.<sup>16</sup> In these tables, the proposed Uto-Aztec form is given on the right, the assumed source of that form is given on the left, and the arrow, >, indicates the direction of inheritance. The asterisk, \*, indicates a hypothetically reconstructed form. Cognate set (2) in table 1 suggests similarities between two proto-languages, while cognate set (13) in table 2 suggests similarities between Hopi (a single Uto-Aztec language) and four individual Semitic languages. No matter which methodology is being used to suggest genetic similarities, the similarities identified must come from like systems, such as families, languages, or dialects. The number of putative cognates in the proposal is consequently suspect.

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15. See Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, Appendix B.

16. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 65–69.

**Table 1.** Cognate set (2) from Stubbs's *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, page 2

Northwest Semitic		Proto-Uto-Aztecan
*na-	>	*na-

**Table 2.** Cognate set (13) from Stubbs's *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, page 69

Arabic	Ethiopic	Hebrew	Assyrian		Hopi
snw	snw	šani	sinitu	>	soniwa

### *The Validity of the Putative Linguistic Similarities*

In suggesting a genetic relationship, each similarity must be rigorously proven to be both valid and reliable. Many, if not most, of the similarities in the proposal are not accompanied by the necessary explanations to make them either valid or reliable. For example, lexical similarities are often used as evidence for genetic relationships between languages.<sup>17</sup> However, long-distance relationships are less likely to include a large number of similarities. The sheer number of similarities in Stubbs's proposal is not likely for the type of linguistic scenario presented.

Rather, long-distance relationships are convincingly determined through “submerged features.”<sup>18</sup> These are obscure elements of languages that have similar forms or functions and are usually not productive, but that cannot be explained in any way aside from genetic inheritance. In general, this means that distant relationships are always based on a significantly greater amount of complexity than what is suggested in Stubbs's book. Note that Stubbs does suggest some grammatical evidence for the relationship, and if the proposal has any merit, it is in these similarities.

Lastly, when lexical similarities are used for proposals of (long-distance) genetic relationship, these are always accompanied by explanations in order to strengthen the claim. Simply listing them, and avoiding the obvious issues, is therefore problematic. Stubbs, however, makes this exact mistake. For example, consider the putative cognate sets in table 3 and table 4. Before the words in cognate set (1) in table 3 can

17. But these are far from convincing; see Campbell and Poser, *Language Classification*, 165–72.

18. Edward Sapir, “The Hokan Affinity of Subtiaba in Nicaragua,” *American Anthropologist* 27/4 (1925): 402–35, 491–527.

be accepted as evidence of genetic similarities, an explanation for why the sound [a] at the end of the suffix was lost in Hebrew and then re-inserted into Proto-Uto-Aztecan would be necessary. Similarly, an explanation for the shortening of [ii] and the presence of [i] in the Uto-Aztecan daughter languages is also necessary. Likewise, the words in cognate set (3), in table 4, need to be accompanied by a number of explanations before they can be accepted. For example, the change from [s] to [ʃ] before [i] is quite common in many languages around the world (commonly called palatalization), as is the change from [p] to [b] between vowels (commonly called voicing). The fact that the proposed changes go in the opposite direction is unusual, but not impossible, and requires some explanation.

**Table 3.** Cognate set (1) from Stubbs's *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, page 65

Semitic	Hebrew	Proto-Uto-Aztecan	Daughters
*-iima	> -iim	> *-ima	> -im, -m, -mʃ

**Table 4.** Cognate set (3) from Stubbs's *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, page 66

Northwest Semitic	Hebrew	Proto-Uto-Aztecan	Daughters
*yaʃiba	> yʃb	> *yaʃi-pa, *yasa, *yasi	> yesiva, dahiva, asiba, yasipa, daivu

### *Other Explanations of the Similarities*

Languages do not have to be genetically related to share similarities (as Stubbs correctly points out). Language similarities can be a consequence of accidents/change, borrowing, onomatopoeia and sound symbolism (or ideophones), universal traits, and genetic inheritance (or a combination of these). In a proposal of genetic relatedness, these other possibilities should also be considered, but are not presented in either of Stubbs's publications.

For example, at least 100 of the 1,528 suggested similarities in the proposal are likely due to sound symbolism. As one example, consider that cognate set (28) in table 5 is likely a similarity based on onomatopoeia.<sup>19</sup> This leaves conservatively 1,328 similarities as evidence for the proposal.

19. Stubbs, *Exploring Explanatory Power*, 72.

**Table 5.** Cognate set (28) from Stubbs's *Exploring the Explanatory Power*

Arabic	Aramaic	Akkadian	Syrian	Proto-Uto-Aztecan
<i>ṣurṣur, surṣuur</i>	<i>ṣarṣuur</i>	<i>ṣarṣuur</i>	<i>ṣiṣr-aa, ṣiṣr-aa</i>	> *tsortsor'cricket'

Similarly, as Stubbs points out, it is common practice in historical linguistics to assume that 1 to 3 percent of the similarities between two or more languages occur by accident.<sup>20</sup> Since the type of linguistic system is not held constant in the proposal (see above), the number of potential accidental similarities severely weakens the proposal (ignoring the sound symbolism similarities). Table 6 shows the calculated accidental similarities for each possible scenario of the proposal.

On one end of this calculation, 2,598 similarities are expected by change, severely weakening the strength of the proposal. Other explanations of the similarities, such as the high frequency of coronal consonants or the unmarked phonotactic constraints found in many languages around the world, would likely reveal similar problems, though of a less drastic type.

**Table 6.** Calculated number of accidental similarities in the proposal

Proposed similarities	Percent accidental	Number of UA languages	Number of AA languages	Number accidental	Number of similarities remaining
1,528	1%	1	1	15	1,513
	3%	1	1	46	1,482
	1%	1	3	46	1,482
	3%	1	3	138	1,390
	1%	30	1	458	1,070
	3%	30	1	1,375	153
	1%	30	3	1,375	153
	3%	30	3	4,126	-2,598

Lastly, when similarities due to borrowing are extensive, the result can be a mistaken conclusion of linguistic relatedness, when they are

20. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power*, 13.



unaccounted for. The potential of borrowing resulting from a scenario of contact is not systematically considered as an explanation for the similarities presented in Stubbs's proposal. That is, the similarities are not put into the context of the other languages spoken all around the Uto-Aztecan languages. Without such a comparison, it is not possible to rule out the scenario that the Uto-Aztecan similarities to Near-Eastern languages are a result of borrowing these features from other languages or from Near-Eastern languages themselves.

## Conclusion

Other issues also plague Stubbs's proposal but are not explored in any detail here. These include his reliance on the "languages in the Andes" as an explanation for assumed migrations, despite the fact that any connections between Mesoamerican languages and South American languages have been definitively disproved.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, while the Uto-Aztecan language family is one of the most studied language families in the Americas, as is the Mesoamerican cultural area, the fact that very little is done to connect the proposal back to this previous scholarship is thus odd. Lastly, Nahuan languages (of which Nahuatl, or Aztec, is the most known and from which half the name of the language family is derived) spoken throughout Mesoamerica (particularly in Mexico and El Salvador) are systematically ignored in the comparisons. These factors all significantly impact the validity of Stubbs's proposal.

The study of linguistic similarities is dependent on information about the languages involved being available. If a language does not have any records, nothing can be hypothesized about its relationships and similarities. In my personal reading of the Book of Mormon, Afro-Asiatic languages were not culturally predominant as the history unfolds. They seem instead to be restricted to a small class of priest-scribes. It is also clear from the Book of Mormon that multilingualism

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21. For an overview, see Lyle Cambell's *American Indian Languages: The Historical Linguistics of Native America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).



was the norm among the Nephites and the Lamanites (though a *lingua franca* may have been used). Add this complexity to the thousands of languages spoken throughout the Americas since well before 600 BC (including Uto-Aztec languages), and one begins to see the enormity of the problem. We simply do not have any recorded information about the language(s) being used by the people in the Book of Mormon (other than a small amount of information about the class of priest-scribes). Without that information, any suggestions of linguistic affinities are wildly speculative and should be dismissed.

**Chris Rogers** received his PhD in Linguistics from the University of Utah and is currently an assistant professor of linguistics at Brigham Young University. His research focus is the documentation, description, history, and revitalization of the languages of the Americas, with particular emphasis on Mesoamerican languages and linguistic isolates.

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Shon D. Hopkin, ed. *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise*. Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2018.

*Reviewed by Brian M. Hauglid*

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IN THE LAST DECADE OR SO, the discipline of Book of Mormon studies has gone through some significant changes. Instead of a decades-long focus on whether or not the Book of Mormon is an authentic historical text, new areas of study have emerged in an effort to reach out to a wider scholarly audience in areas such as theology, literature, intertextuality, narratology, and history.

This has been evident in several ways. First, the Mormon Theology Seminar (MTS), under the direction of Adam S. Miller and Joseph M.

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Spencer, has provided opportunities for select candidates to engage the Book of Mormon in close readings from their respective areas of study (i.e., theology, literature, history, science, etc.). Each participant produces a paper that is later published in the Proceedings of the Mormon Theology Seminar series. These books have been most influential in bringing a keen exegetical eye to the Book of Mormon.

Second, the former *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* was renamed the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (JBMS), returning it to its original title given by its first editor, Stephen D. Ricks. The format of the JBMS was completely resized and restyled to reflect its focus on approaching the Book of Mormon from various academic disciplines. Since 2014, the number of non-Latter-day Saint contributors has been steady.<sup>1</sup>

Third, BYU Religious Education created the Book of Mormon Academy (BOMA) in 2013 to similarly reflect an emphasis on taking a more academic approach to the Book of Mormon and reaching out to a wider audience.

Finally, in 2016, a group of BYU scholars, primarily from BYU Religious Education, founded the Book of Mormon Studies Association (BOMSA), which is fully devoted to an academic study of the Book of Mormon. This organization sponsors an annual conference at Utah State University.

These examples show an increased effort to take the Book of Mormon seriously as a legitimate object of study in academia, much like what occurs with other sacred texts such as the Bible, Qur'an, Tao Te Ching, Upanishads, and so on.

It is in this context that I wish to offer some thoughts on the first publication from BYU Religious Education's Book of Mormon Academy, *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise*, edited by Shon D.

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1. These include Paul Owen, professor of Greek and religious studies at Montreat College in North Carolina (2014); John Christopher Thomas, Clarence J. Abbott Professor of Biblical Studies at Pentecostal Theological Seminary (2015 and 2016); Elizabeth Fenton, associate professor of English at the University of Vermont (2016 and 2018); Susanna Morrill, instructor in the Religious Studies Department at Lewis & Clark College (2017); Adam Stokes, a member of the Community of Christ (2016).

Hopkin and published by BYU's Religious Studies Center (RSC) and Deseret Book Company. The purpose of this book is to engage "the Abinadi narrative using a different scholarly tool or lens, based on the academic training and expertise of the contributing authors" (p. vi). All the authors in this collection are professors from BYU Religious Education's Ancient Scripture Department.

From the introduction we learn from the book's editor, Shon D. Hopkin, that this book contains papers from Latter-day Saint scholars who "use academic tools and theories to produce work that takes the Book of Mormon seriously but that also seeks to be accessible to those who do not believe in the book's divinely inspired nature" (p. v).

Yet Hopkin also notes that "this study attempts to begin filling a gap in attention to those figures who could be called 'minor prophets' in the Book of Mormon, whose important teachings only span pages instead of full books but whose recorded sermons have a powerful impact on the rest of the book and its modern-day readership" (p. vi).

In general, I think the book is a step in the right direction. It has some very bright spots. But, like most edited collections, it is rather uneven; some articles are just better than others. As far as how successfully this book reaches out to both the Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint audiences, most of the articles have stayed well within the tradition's comfort zone. This is not unexpected since the publishers, the BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, are both insider venues. Perhaps a wider readership could have been better achieved if the volume had been prepared and published through a non-Latter-day Saint press.

This book is divided into four general approaches or lenses through which we might view and examine the Abinadi narrative. These lenses are then subdivided into specific areas according to the focus of the papers within that lens.

In the first section, "Literary Lenses: Narratological, Sociopolitical, Biblical," Jared W. Ludlow, in his paper "A Messenger of Good and Evil Tidings: A Narrative Study of Abinadi" (pp. 1–26), provides a summary and commentary of the Abinadi scene. Ludlow sees the narrator as Alma and the subject as Abinadi, and he presents the narrative as a clear



juxtaposition between good (God and himself) and evil (King Noah, his priests, and his people). This means that each character in the Abinadi scene plays a one-dimensional role as either good or evil. Thus, Ludlow's analysis of the scene never ventures beyond this dichotomous, dualistic form, choosing rather to keep things at an uncomplicated, simplified level. As such, this may be a welcoming paper for those less familiar with the Abinadi narrative.

In "The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity" (pp. 27–66), Daniel L. Belnap succeeds in adding a sociopolitical dimension to the Abinadi scene. He provides much more context to the scene by exploring the social and political makeup of Zeniff's expedition as "Nephite elite associated with the military," with Ammon identified as possibly the "highest-ranking Mulekite," which, Belnap argues, denotes an "ongoing policy of integration" in the land of Zarahemla (p. 34). Belnap also describes Zeniff's son Noah as a "canny, competent king" who recognized "the value of renovation in the establishing of communal identity" (p. 37).

Belnap notes that Noah's people were living a kind of prosperity gospel in which they equated their prosperity with righteousness (p. 38). This observation adds an interesting layer to the future contest between Abinadi and Noah's priests. However, regarding Isaiah 52:8, Belnap veers away from more traditional interpretations of the text. Instead, in his interpretation, the priests equate the land of Nephi with Zion and see the "two towers built in Nephi and Shilom as fulfilling Isaiah's promise of seeing 'eye to eye'" (p. 39).

Belnap proposes that, after each Nephite migration, "a sense of abandonment, isolation, and loss of identity" set in, "which both Nephi and Jacob attempted to alleviate by establishing a relationship between their people and God as their Redeemer" in a more physical restoration (p. 42). He makes a distinction that "Abinadi does not refer to redemption as a physical redemption" but as a cosmic redemption "concerned with the eternal dimension" (p. 43). I found it interesting that Belnap sees a decided relationship between King Benjamin's discourse and the narrative of Zeniff's colony (pp. 47, 50–52). He argues for rather striking

similarities in language between the King's discourse and Zeniff's narrative, which is something that should be seriously considered.

Frank F. Judd in "Conflicting Interpretations of Isaiah in Abinadi's Trial" hones in on the priests of Noah and their twisted interpretation of Isaiah 52:7–10, especially in their thinking that the "good tidings" Isaiah mentioned were directed to them. However, Abinadi's Christocentric message contradicted their interpretation. Judd first provides a contextual setting for the Abinadi scene and then does the same with the Isaiah verses.

However, Judd shies away from the complexities of the Deutero-Isaiah problem (i.e., Jacob and Abinadi's quotations from Second Isaiah [chaps. 40–55] that are dated after Lehi's family procured the brass plates and left the Old World in 600 BCE). He maintains, for the most part, a position within the common Latter-day Saint apologetic assumption that the scholars are wrong and that "the ancient prophets knew and wrote about future events" (p. 72). This move is disappointing. I would like to see a more sophisticated engagement of this issue from our Religious Education scholars. I agree with Grant Hardy that "Latter-day Saints sometimes brush such criticism aside, asserting that such interpretations are simply the work of academics who do not believe in prophecy, but this is clearly an inadequate (and inaccurate) response to a significant body of detailed historical and literary analysis." According to Hardy, "a more promising avenue for the faithful, it seems, is to acknowledge that we probably know less about what constitutes an 'inspired translation' than we do about ancient Israel. Once one accepts the possibility of divine intervention, the theology can accommodate the (always tentative) results of scholarship."<sup>2</sup>

Judd's coverage of the priests' interpretation of Isaiah 52:7–10 is, in my view, less compelling than Belnap's version. Judd focuses primarily

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2. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69. Joseph M. Spencer has provided a quite promising start with his brief theological analysis of the Deutero-Isaiah problem in *Another Testament on Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 58–59.



on the notion that since Noah and his armies had defeated the Lamanites prior to Abinadi's arrival, they viewed the Isaiah passages as confirming that their military victory contributed to their "living the life of prosperity" (p. 76). This may be so, but a military victory would still be only a part of the more textually accurate equating of their self-righteousness to prosperity.

Although Judd effectively notes that the priests of Noah knew from the Law of Moses that if a prophet speaks and the Lord did not command him, then "that prophet shall die" (p. 78), a rationale that provides some depth to the priests' treatment of Abinadi, overall I found his treatment of the Noah/Abinadi scene somewhat lacking in substance.

The second section, "Intertextual and Intratextual Lenses: The Book of Mormon and the Bible," deals with the textual relationship between words and phrases in the Book of Mormon and the Bible (intertextual) and the "relationship between various words and phrases within (i.e., intratextual) the Book of Mormon" (p. 96), according to John Hilton III in his "Abinadi's Legacy: Tracing His Influence through the Book of Mormon." In this study, Hilton examines the Abinadi scene and extracts certain phrases and words from Abinadi's speech that he traces throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon (pp. 94, 96).

Generally, the idea of intertextual studies centers around the determination of how similar words and phrases in one text and context can be applied in another text in a different context, which oftentimes yields newer and novel meanings from the original text or even differences in the primary motivations of the speaker. This can be true for an intratextual study as well. However, an intratextual study of the Book of Mormon is quite different from a similar study done with the Bible. The Bible is much more diverse in its textual makeup than what we find with the Book of Mormon. The biblical world is also so rich in cultural, archeological, linguistic, theological, and literary material that an intratextual study can yield many layers of context that can uncover many new meanings. Although the Book of Mormon is rich in new contexts, the similar words and phrases that appear in multiple contexts generally

result in fairly identical meanings. If the Book of Mormon was securely tethered to a particular cultural (such as Mesoamerican), theological, or literary tradition, then, perhaps, the fruits of an intratextual study could be much more nourishing.

Hilton focuses more on similarities between words and phrases and less on finding novel meanings in newer contexts, although he sometimes addresses the differences in motivations behind the various speakers. Yet Hilton's main purpose all along, according to his conclusion, has been to argue (unconvincingly, in my view) that "Abinadi's speech came first," probably thirty years before King Benjamin's address and that Abinadi's influence can be seen in Alma, Amulek, Alma<sub>2</sub>, and Mormon. Hilton's take on this material contradicts the common assumption (with which Belnap agrees on p. 50) that King Benjamin precedes the Abinadi narrative.

In "If Christ Had Not Come into the World," Nick J. Frederick brilliantly and deftly analyzes Mosiah 16:6–11 and finds intertextual linkage to 1 Corinthians 15:12–19 and 53–55, John 1:4–5, and John 5:29. Frederick displays a firm grasp of intertextuality in providing the contextual background of the New Testament passages and the re-contextualization in Abinadi's discourse to the priests of Noah. And he is the first to do so (cf. p. 134n4). His purpose is to show "that intertextuality plays a valuable role in reading the Book of Mormon critically" (p. 117).

For example, consider Frederick's work on Mosiah 16:7–8, which he cites: "And if Christ had not risen from the dead, or have broken the bands of death that the grave should have no victory, and that death should have no sting, there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection, therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ." He then cites 1 Corinthians 15:55: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" In his analysis, Frederick also supplies the Greek and notes how "Paul adopts the theme of 'victory' over 'death' from Isaiah 25:8, and the personification of 'death' and the 'grave' with its 'sting' from Hosea 13:14, and adapts them into his own theological statement on the impotence of death in a post-Christ world. . . . Paul's primary

point is to emphasize the impotence and sheer powerlessness of death now that the Resurrection has happened” (pp. 122–23).

Frederick asserts that “Abinadi details the magnitude of Jesus’ Resurrection through his lengthy protasis [the “if” construction]: ‘*If* Jesus had not been resurrected; ‘*if* the bands of death would not have been broken; ‘*if* the grave would have its victory;’ and ‘*if* death would still wield its sting.’ However, *because* Jesus will be resurrected, none of these potentially damaging events will be realized” (p. 124; emphasis in original).

Frederick also notes further differences between Paul and Abinadi.

Instead of taunting death, as Paul does, Abinadi explores the seriousness of a world in which Jesus would not conquer death. This may be a reflection of different temporal contexts. Paul can taunt death because the Resurrection was an event that lay in the past, but for Abinadi, Jesus’ resurrection lay nearly 150 years in the future. Abinadi can challenge the priests of Noah to seriously consider a reality in which the Resurrection does not exist because, at this point, it does not, although Abinadi chooses to speak of the Resurrection and other future events “as though they had already come.” (p. 124)

In his conclusion, Frederick surmises that the Book of Mormon is a confident text—meaning that it does not just plagiarize the biblical text, but instead, provides a biblical feel that is a “basis for the success of the Book of Mormon in securing an audience” (p. 132). He also calls the Book of Mormon a demanding text—meaning that “by carefully weaving the words of the Bible throughout its own passages, the Book of Mormon requires readers to utilize both texts together if they are to fully grasp the Book of Mormon’s nuanced and intricate message” (p. 132). Frederick’s careful reading here accomplishes such nuanced work. In my view, this is the best essay in the book and would likely be of interest to non-Latter-day Saint textual scholars interested in the Book of Mormon.

Shon D. Hopkin, in “Isaiah 52–53 and Mosiah 13–14: A Textual Comparison,” seeks to identify variant words and phrases in the Abinadi

discourse that originate in Exodus and Isaiah. He provides textual commentary that considers why these words or phrases vary between Exodus and Isaiah. He then compares these variants with similar variants from the Great Isaiah Scroll. He also analyzes italicized words to discuss their problematic nature in the KJV and entertains possible interpretations of their use. Finally, he proposes various lessons and insights taken from his analysis.

As promised, Hopkin assiduously analyzes phrases from Exodus and Isaiah, but he treats the Hebrew quite differently than Frederick treats the Greek. Frederick uses the Greek to show variant wording in the Greek of Paul as opposed to the Greek in the LXX, demonstrating that Paul replaces two words in order to adopt “the theme of ‘victory’ over ‘death’ from Isaiah 25:8, and the personification of ‘death’ and the ‘grave’ with its ‘sting’ from Hosea 13:14” (p. 123). However, Hopkin, in identifying variant wording and phrasing, compares the KJV English to the Book of Mormon English, but supports the Book of Mormon English variant by nuancing the Hebrew text. I find this approach quite problematic. How do we, or even could we, know that the Hebrew text corresponds accurately enough with the Book of Mormon original language to declare any nuancing?

Additionally, in most cases, Hopkin highlights minor variant readings of relative clauses (i.e., “things which” in Mosiah 12:36 vs. “that is” in Exodus 20:4 [pp. 142, 145]) or variants of singular vs. plural (i.e., “iniquities,” “generations” in Mosiah 13:13 vs. “iniquity,” “generation” in Exodus 20:5 [p. 145]). Again, Hopkin invokes the Hebrew text to arbitrate the changes in the Abinadi narrative. The one area in which Hopkin could have elaborated is how these minor variant readings may reflect theological differences and understandings.

The methodology used here is spurious because we do not have the Abinadi narrative in its original language to compare with the Hebrew. And this methodology is further complicated by the fact that the Book of Mormon claims to be originally written in reformed Egyptian, an unknown language that may be wholly unrelated to the Hebrew Bible in its nuancing.



Hopkin also grapples with the English translation of the Book of Mormon when he reviews portions of David P. Wright’s “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” an essay in *American Apocrypha: Essay on the Book of Mormon*.<sup>3</sup> Hopkin does not overtly polemicize his handling of Wright’s arguments, but does inject a soft apologetic in statements such as “Wright’s conclusions are not necessarily refuted, but neither are they strongly supported,” and the “portions quoted by Abinadi again do not strongly support his contention, although that is not necessarily the case in other portions of the Book of Mormon” (p. 158).

Hopkin provides a rather major concession to Book of Mormon critiques in agreeing that “the translation into English matches the King James Version renderings so consistently—including English idioms and grammar used in 1611, specific word choices, and italicized words that are not actually found in the Hebrew text—that it could not have occurred by accident. . . . The Book of Mormon prioritizes the King James Version in every line. This prioritization even includes problematic translations and word choices” (p. 160).

In his conclusion, Hopkin waxes overtly apologetic in saying that he understands how someone like Wright could conclude that the Book of Mormon “is a modern work by Joseph Smith or others” (p. 160) or that the “King James renderings of the Book of Mormon clearly indicate its secondary, modern nature” (p. 161). Hopkin responds that “it is clear that the reliance upon the King James Version was purposeful. That purposeful choice can be attributed either to Joseph Smith or to God (via the divinely inspired translation process)” (p. 161). This kind of proposition would likely not work within a non-Latter-day Saint academic setting.

The next section is titled “Cultural-Historical Lenses: Mesoamerican and North American.” In my view, one would be hard-pressed to find a Mesoamerican scholar as knowledgeable and competent as Kerry Hull.

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3. David P. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah,” in *American Apocrypha: Essay on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 157–234.

In his essay, “An ‘East Wind’: Old and New World Perspectives,” Hull investigates the use of the phrase “east wind” in Mormon 7:31 (Limhi’s use of it) and Mosiah 12:6 (Abinadi’s use of it). Hull spends a lot of time, perhaps too much, discussing the “east wind” within a biblical context, particularly as it relates to Palestine, as a destructive wind. Hull notes that, in cases where the phrase “east wind” is used in areas outside of Palestine, later translators such as the Septuagint translators and St. Jerome tried to correct the usage by either taking out the phrase or renaming the wind the “burning wind” (pp. 178–80). Of course, a biblical geographic context for “east wind” does not comport with and may be somewhat counterintuitive to the usage of the phrase in the Abinadi scene. In fact, Hull does not use any of the biblical context to reframe Abinadi’s prophecy that “it shall come to pass that I will send forth hail among them, and it shall smite them; and they shall also be smitten with the east wind; and insects shall pester their land also, and devour their grain” (Mosiah 12:6; p. 181). Instead, Hull quickly shifts from the biblical world to the Mesoamerican world with its implications that the “concept of a punishing east wind” resonates with those in the New World (p. 182).

As expected, Hull provides a top-notch, exhaustive survey of what the “east wind” meant to Mesoamericans, particularly during the Classical Mayan period (AD 250–900). Of course, the proverbial elephant in the room is whether, in reality, this Mesoamerican context for “east wind” could or should be applied to the Book of Mormon narrative. Hull only momentarily addresses this question at the end of his essay: “If the geographical context of the Book of Mormon were Mesoamerica, a punitive ‘east wind’ would be readily understood” (p. 194). The issue here is whether there is enough evidence of Mesoamerican context in the Book of Mormon to justify the inclusion of Mesoamerican papers in a book that hopes to reach both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint audiences.

In the second essay in this section, “Ethnohistorical Sources and the Death of Abinadi” by Mark Alan Wright and Kerry Hull, we see an interesting argument that Abinadi was not burned at the stake, but, instead, by a “sinister means of torture and execution widely practiced in Mesoamerica and among North American Native American groups: death by beating with firebrands” (p. 211).



Wright and Hull present a good case that Native Americans often employed firebrand torture against their enemies or prisoners with the stated goal of putting off death for as long as possible (p. 215). When applied to Abinadi, this fact seems a rather more useful connection than their argument that firebrand torture occurred among the Mesoamericans, which setting, as noted before, cannot be confidently tied to the Book of Mormon with any amount of certainty due to the lack of physical evidence.

Wright and Hull assert an intriguing point that Abinadi's execution "was certainly more horrific than many assume. . . . Abinadi likely suffered for hours if his death conformed to standard ethnohistorical accounts" (p. 224). The authors appear quite confident in their assertion that "textual details on Abinadi's manner of death given in Mosiah 17:3 echo perfectly what we find in these ancient traditions" (p. 224).

In my view, both Mesoamerican chapters display excellent scholarship but show an overconfidence that a Mesoamerican setting fits best with the Book of Mormon, especially since, at this point, no real material evidence exists to support that interpretation.

The final section, "Theological Lenses: Historical and Philosophical," includes two very good papers. In the first, Amy Easton-Flake offers us a peek into how nineteenth-century debates concerning infant baptism and salvation fit into Book of Mormon theology. She does so by providing a helpful summary of views on infant salvation from Presbyterianism, Methodism, Baptists, Restorationists, and Universalism during the early nineteenth century. Of course, the views from these protestant traditions exhibit the then theological divide between Calvinism (Presbyterianism) and Arminianism (the rest), that is, Calvinism's rather acerbic imputation of sin to infants as opposed to the Arminian-inspired notion that infants are not moral agents and are therefore incapable of sin. Easton-Flake notes that the Book of Mormon resonates "most closely" with Baptist and Restorationist (i.e., Arminian) thought concerning children's lack of moral agency and their inability to sin, thus arguing against infant baptism (pp. 250–51). For Easton-Flake, the Book of Mormon invokes the atoning grace of Christ as the central issue in the debate (p. 252).

Easton-Flake concludes with an excellent point that

the Book of Mormon does not prescribe to or endorse any one of the dominant theological positions in early nineteenth-century America. Instead, the book clearly resonates with different aspects of various denominational thought while also offering a more concise rationale for infant salvation and maintaining a focus on Christ's grace that is not seen in other denominations' treatises on the subject. Its ability to touch on many of the most pressing issues within the nineteenth-century debate, while constructing its own unique teaching on the subject as a whole, suggests a theological sophistication that has not often been granted to the Book of Mormon. (pp. 252–53)

Easton-Flake provides a well-written and well-thought out essay worthy of attention, regardless of one's views on the Book of Mormon as a nineteenth-century text.

The final paper, Joseph M. Spencer's "As Though": Time, Being, and Negation in Mosiah 16:5–6," offers readers a challenging and rewarding read. Using philosophical tools, Spencer guides us through a theological study of Abinadi's use of just two phrases: "as though (not)" and "as though" in Mosiah 16:5–6. Do not let the fact that Spencer focuses on a mere two verses lead you to think his contribution is limited and small. Quite the contrary, Spencer is at his best in demonstrating how a close reading of just a few lines of text can bring us to newer and higher levels appreciation and understanding.

Spencer notes that "this paper asks whether the Book of Mormon might be as rich a philosophical resource as the Bible has been recognized to be. And, it will be seen, I believe, that the answer to this question must be positive" (p. 263). Spencer finds "philosophical significance in the fact that the negative formula 'as though not' appears in the part of the Abinadite passage that focuses on questions of being, while the positive formula, 'as though' appears immediately thereafter where the text instead focuses on the question of time. . . . [He] conclude[s] that the use of the two formulas in Abinadi's words helps to draw a distinction between time and being in the operation of the atonement"

(p. 265). The move to examine the atonement through the relationship between time and being grounds a central doctrinal concept within the theological work accomplished through philosophical precision.

As an example of this precision, consider Spencer's explanation that

the faithful are those "speaking of things to come as though they had already come." The faithful live out their faith by bringing the distant future directly into the present through their speech—that is, by assuming in their speech that what remains to come has in some sense always already come. The rebellious *replace the actual with the merely possible*. Like the faithful, they are attuned to the possible, but unlike the faithful, they in no way open the actual onto the possible, instead they close off the actual entirely by insisting that what is really only merely possible exhausts the actual. . . . They simply equate the actual and the possible in such a way that the latter entirely supplants (or closes) the former. (pp. 279–80)

In this reading, Spencer makes the argument that sin closes off the world from its most important possibilities, trusting too quickly in the simple continuity of the way things are. Faith, by contrast, watches for real possibilities that might interrupt the way things are and make space for redemption. Although Spencer's writing can sometimes be rather dense, one must be patient; working through Spencer is well worth the effort on both a theological as well as an academic level.

The last part of this book, "Appendix 1: The Abinadi Narrative: Mosiah 11–17," includes what editor Shon Hopkin calls a "critical text of Mosiah 11–17" (p. xii). In terms of the New Testament, the critical text is an eclectic text compiled by a committee that compares readings from a large number of manuscripts in order to determine which reading is most likely to be closest to the original. The textual study in this book is not precisely a critical text in that sense. It does provide the 1840 edition as the base text since it represents the last edition edited during Joseph Smith's lifetime. And it also traces the mostly minor variants that preceded the 1840 edition. But, out of the 726 notes to these chapters, the majority provide textual-centered commentary that cross-references certain words or phrases to the Bible or other areas of the Book of Mormon. Some notes

were quite helpful in pointing out unique characteristics to the Book of Mormon narrative while others were rather speculative and, in my view, not essential to the narrative. I do applaud the editors in assiduously staying textually centered and avoiding doctrinal commentary. The result is a useful tool for lay Latter-day Saints who want to delve more deeply into the textual contours of the Abinadi narrative.

All in all, after reading through this book, I was left with the impression that its well-intentioned goal to speak to both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint audiences works for some chapters and for others not so much. However, given the publishers of this book, few if any outsiders will pick it up anyway. This is something the Book of Mormon Academy will need to consider. Perhaps, for the next volume, the Academy could look into publishing with a university press. For the Latter-day Saint audience, I think this book is a major contribution to studying the Abinadi narrative, and I recommend it to Latter-day Saints interested in both the topic and the various approaches represented within this volume. I hope the Book of Mormon Academy will continue to pursue similar studies.

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*Reviewed by Scott Hales*

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in March 1889.<sup>1</sup> Installments of Julia A. MacDonald's *A Ship of Hagoth: A Tale of Ancient America* began appearing in the *Young Woman's Journal* in 1896.<sup>2</sup> The genre did not gain in popularity, however, until a century later, after the scholarship of Hugh Nibley, John L. Sorensen, and others had greatly expanded Latter-day Saint understandings of the Book of Mormon, its setting, and its peoples. Robert H. Moss, Chris Heimerdinger, Clair Poulson, David G. Woolley, and H. B. Moore have been among the most prolific authors of Book of Mormon fiction, but countless others have taken literary inspiration from the book as well. Perhaps the most creative adaptation of the Book of Mormon has been Orson Scott Card's *Homecoming Saga* (1992–1995), a nationally published series of five science fiction novels that borrows heavily from the plot, characters, and themes of the early books of the Book of Mormon, particularly 1 Nephi.

Mette Harrison's *The Book of Laman* is another contribution to the genre. Though Harrison began her writing career as an author of young adult fantasy, she first attracted national attention with her best-selling 2014 mystery novel *The Bishop's Wife*, which introduced readers to her protagonist Linda Wallheim, a Latter-day Saint housewife turned amateur detective living in present-day Draper, Utah. Harrison has since written three additional Wallheim novels—*His Right Hand* (2015), *For Time and All Eternities* (2017), and *Not of This Fold* (2018)—which have garnered similar acclaim from the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and other respected periodicals. These novels have polarized Latter-day Saint readers who disagree over Harrison's portrayals of the contemporary Church and debate the merits of her heavy-handed way of explaining Latter-day Saint religious and cultural practices to outsiders. But Harrison's willingness to tackle such issues as gender inequality in the Church, the status of LGBTQ members of the Church, and the legacy of

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1. *The Contributor* serialized *Corianton* from March 1889 to July 1890. For the first installment, see B. H. Roberts, "Corianton," *The Contributor* 10/5 (1889): 171–76.

2. *A Ship of Hagoth* appeared in the *Young Woman's Journal* from October 1896 to September 1897. For the first installment, see Julia A. MacDonald, "A Ship of Hagoth: A Tale of Ancient America," *Young Woman's Journal* 8/1 (1896): 17–22.



polygamy means that her fiction is relevant to some of the most critical conversations happening in Latter-day Saint circles today.

On the surface, *The Book of Laman* is a complete departure from the suburban setting of the Wallheim mysteries. The novel opens in Jerusalem just prior to the Babylonian captivity, and readers of the Book of Mormon instantly find themselves on familiar ground. Laman, the novel's first-person narrator, informs readers that his visionary father, Lehi, "preaches day and night" that "the Jews are wicked and they are going to end up being carried off to Babylon until they repent." But then Laman surprises readers with a startling revelation about the past. "When I was a kid, do you know what my father preached then?," he asks. "Drunkenness, adultery, and gluttony." Readers learn that Lehi, the beloved figure from 1 Nephi, abandoned his wife, Sariah, when Laman and his younger brother Lemuel were boys, lived in filth and drunkenness on the streets, and wasted six years of his life before reforming and returning to his family. "You wonder why there's a big age gap between me and Lemuel and our younger brothers Nephi and Sam?" Laman states. "Well, that's why" (p. 1).

Harrison's decision to give Lehi a profligate past is a brilliant device for introducing the central conflicts in *The Book of Laman*. In the Book of Mormon, Nephi accounts for Laman's and Lemuel's characteristic murmuring and "stiffneckedness" by observing that "they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them."<sup>3</sup> The "dealings of God" mystify Harrison's Laman and Lemuel as well, but readers soon learn that their ignorance stems in large part from Lehi's poor example and failure to teach them about God when they were younger. Having never learned to pray or study the scriptures, Laman and Lemuel feel alienated from God and his love. Furthermore, both men resent their righteous younger brothers, Sam and Nephi, who were born after Lehi returned to Sariah, repented, and devoted his life to God and family. For Laman and Lemuel, Sam's and Nephi's religious education and piety are painful reminders of what they, the older brothers, were denied as boys. Laman sees access to God as a privilege that he was denied because of

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3. 1 Nephi 2:11–12.

his father's wickedness and negligence. And he deeply associates this privilege with divine favor. Since he cannot feel God in his life or receive answers to his prayers, he assumes that God does not care for him. "If God hears prayers, it is only the prayers of His favorites, as far as I can tell," Laman states. "The rest of us, He ignores because we're not important enough to bother" (p. 3). Yet Laman also recognizes that Nephi's privileged place might not simply be a matter of God playing favorites. "I hated Nephi, though I knew I shouldn't," he tells the reader. "Was it his fault that God had chosen him or was it mine?" (p. 71).

Uncertain about his place in Lehi's family and his standing before God, Laman is much like the Linda Wallheim character in Harrison's mysteries, particularly in how Linda frequently feels out of place in her predominantly Latter-day Saint community and conflicted in her relationship with God. Personal tragedies have left both characters with deep spiritual wounds, which have led them to question the fundamental beliefs and assumptions of the religious worlds they inhabit. Yet, while Linda and Laman frequently struggle to make sense of God, they remain sensitive to the rare moments when his presence manifests itself. Neither character is past feeling, and Laman especially has moments of profound vulnerability and introspection. After the angel of the Lord prevents him and Lemuel from beating Nephi and Sam on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Laman reflects:

I knew that God had chosen my younger brother over me. I knew why. I didn't have to look far to feel my own weaknesses. I wasn't worthy to be the eldest son, the one Father entrusted the care of all his family to. No wonder Nephi had been put in charge of this mission [to retrieve the brass plates]. No wonder I had been made to be a servant to him. (p. 99)

Early in the novel, the moments when Laman is trying to work out his place in the family and his relationship to God are interesting. They become less interesting, however, as the novel progresses and Laman changes very little as a character. He often reminds readers that God doesn't love him and that God doesn't speak to him, striking the same

note again and again without letting these feelings evolve, erode, or otherwise take on complexity. By the end of the book, Laman is a different character than the man we meet in the first chapter, but only because he does more changing in the last four pages of the novel than in the first 233. And even then his changes are not remarkable. In the final chapter, Laman observes that he and Lemuel “were the ones who were selfish and above ourselves . . . the ones filled with evil who would not listen when truth was spoken” (p. 235). The statement is meant to be a profound epiphany, but it falls flat because Laman has made similar confessions before. As a character, he is never absolutely certain that he is right or wrong, or that he knows more or less than anyone else in the book. He lacks the conviction necessary for a good character arc.

Nephi is even worse. Good protagonists need good antagonists who counterbalance their attributes to generate interesting conflict and moments that explore thematic complexity. Unfortunately, Harrison rarely treats Nephi as a fully fleshed-out human character. He is wooden, unfeeling, and rigidly obedient to God’s will. He spouts gospel platitudes in stilted, vaguely scriptural language. And he seems too emotionally and spiritually shallow to be the author of 1 and 2 Nephi. He is more caricature than character, and Laman and the novel suffer for it. Harrison wants to make Nephi a type for blindly obedient Latter-day believers who approach their faith uncritically, perhaps to understand why God seems to favor them over those, like Laman, who struggle with a more complicated faith. But *The Book of Laman* never gives readers a satisfying sense for why God blesses with success someone as unbending, insufferable, and ultimately unchristian as Harrison’s Nephi. Nephi keeps the letter of the law, heedless of its spirit, and the Lord simply rewards him for it.

Obedience to God is a central theme of 1 and 2 Nephi, to be sure. “If ye shall be obedient to the commandments, and endure to the end,” Nephi promises at the end of the first book, “ye shall be saved at the last day.”<sup>4</sup> But Nephi’s message is also deeply grounded in Christian love,

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4. 1 Nephi 22:31.

inclusion, and goodwill. In 2 Nephi 26, Nephi identifies love as a defining attribute of Jesus Christ, urges all people to have Christian charity for one another, and invites them to come unto Christ and partake freely of salvation. Nephi's Christ is not dogmatic, elitist, or particularly exclusionary. "Hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of His goodness?" Nephi asks. "Nay; but all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden."<sup>5</sup> He famously teaches that "all are alike unto God," that Christ "doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men," and that he "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female."<sup>6</sup>

This teaching is essentially the lesson Laman learns at the end of *The Book of Laman*—that "no one is ever too far from God to repent"—and it is unfortunate that Harrison does not do more to connect Nephi even ironically to its message of grace (p. 237). Moreover, in reducing Nephi to a stereotype, Harrison misses an opportunity to explore possible tensions or contradictions in Nephi's teachings and self-representation in the Book of Mormon. In *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*, Grant Hardy argues that readers can get a fuller picture of who Nephi is and what he knows by reading between the lines of 1 and 2 Nephi to examine what his writings do and do not reveal about him.<sup>7</sup> Harrison's novel rarely takes readers between the lines, offering them little more than the surface of Nephi. In a sense, she does what Hardy suggests that Nephi does in his characterization of his brothers: she flattens him in order to more readily illustrate certain themes.<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Laman* is not meant to be Nephi's story, to be sure, but Laman never reaches his potential as a protagonist because Nephi is a weak antagonist who never really challenges his older brother to grow and mature as a character.

In the novel, Laman and Nephi share only one honest moment together—and it is the one time Harrison allows Nephi to be more than

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5. 2 Nephi 26:28.

6. 2 Nephi 26:33.

7. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 33.

8. See Hardy, *Understanding*, 33–36.



a stereotype. While constructing the ship that would take them and their families to the Promised Land, Nephi tells Laman that he does not hate God for commanding him to kill Laban. Rather, he hates Laban for “the evil in [his] heart that made him care more about the value of the Brass Plates in coin than in their value in changing the hearts and lives of others.” Laman recounts:

Then I realized what Nephi was saying. “You think that God would have offered to let Laban come with us. If he’d asked. If he’d given us the plates and then said he believed that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed.” He could have come instead of Ishmael. Laban had many daughters and sons, as well. Was Ishmael God’s back up plan?

“I would have welcomed him as my brother,” said Nephi. (p. 185)

The exchange presents a small window into Nephi’s soul, offering readers the briefest of glimpses into what *The Book of Laman* could have been, had Harrison taken Nephi seriously as a character. Indeed, the novel ends with Laman seeing a vision of his descendants beholding the Savior and creating “a world of peace” (p. 237) with the descendants of Nephi, an allusion to the events of 3 and 4 Nephi in the Book of Mormon. The passage is a beautiful moment, full of significance and grace, which could have been even more moving, had Harrison taken the time to develop the brothers’ troubled relationship into something richer, more emotionally gripping, and more heartbreaking. At one point in the novel, Laman says that he loves Nephi (p. 191). But he is unconvincing. What is there to love?

The shortcomings of *The Book of Laman* are disappointing, especially considering the novel’s strong first chapter and its promising cast of characters, including Naomi, Laman’s wife, who acts as a kind of Lady Macbeth throughout the narrative. The book reads like a good first draft, and readers may wish that Harrison had taken more time to develop her characters and themes and had received stronger editorial guidance. While the prose is generally good, the novel seems rushed

at times, particularly near the end. It also introduces characters, like Zoram or the belligerent sons of Ishmael, then promptly discards or underutilizes them. (Zoram entirely disappears from the narrative after his first appearance, and the sons of Ishmael are never given names.)

Furthermore, the novel's timeline is sometimes confusing, particularly in respect to the second generation of Lehites. Laman informs us that the voyage to the Promised Land takes two months, start to finish (p. 203). While on the ship, Laman suspects that his wife, Naomi, is expecting another child, suggesting that she is in the early stages of her pregnancy (p. 192). But we learn ten pages later that she gives birth "only days before" their voyage ends (p. 202). While such is not beyond the realm of possibility, it seems unlikely that Naomi's pregnancy could go unacknowledged or undetected for seven months. Laman's oldest son is also born in the land of Nahom before the births of Jacob and Joseph, Lehi and Sariah's youngest sons (pp. 164, 166, 168). Yet Jacob and Joseph seem to age much faster than the other children in the novel. At one point, the novel implies that the boys are at least eight years old when Nephi begins to build the ship, an impossibility since it had only been that long since Lehi's family left Jerusalem (p. 173).<sup>9</sup> Later, a "few months" after the family's arrival in the Promised Land, Naomi notes that Jacob and Joseph are "old enough to marry," although neither brother could be older than nine. She also indicates that her children would soon be old enough to marry as well, even though her oldest son is older than both Jacob and Joseph (p. 211). Nephi also seems to have a daughter and son at one point, but then we learn that he has only one child, presumably the daughter (pp. 218, 225). Then ten years pass, and Nephi's wife, Rachel, gives birth to a son, apparently their first. And when Nephi and his family separate from Laman's family, Laman mentions only one of Nephi's children, a son, in his list of people who left (pp. 226–28, 232).

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of *The Book of Laman*, however, is its general lack of engagement with the Laman of the Book of

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9. See also Mette Harrison, *The Book of Laman* (Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2017), 169, 185, 189, 192, 195.

Mormon. Admittedly, Laman is little more than a stock villain in 1 and 2 Nephi, and Harrison's sympathetic efforts to round out his character in her novel are laudable. Yet she fails to engage with two prominent elements of Laman's story. First, in 1 Nephi 3, Laman and his brothers cast lots to select "who of [them] should go unto the house of Laban" to get the brass plates. The lot falls on Laman, and he goes alone to Laban's house, where he is accused of being a robber and chased out of the city.<sup>10</sup> This is the only time in the Book of Mormon when Laman acts independently of Lemuel, but Harrison does nothing to explore this moment in her novel. Instead, Laman and Nephi go to Laban together, and Laman hardly has a role in the scene (pp. 73–77).

The second key element of Laman's story that Harrison largely ignores is the Lamanite curse, which Nephi first mentions in 2 Nephi 5. According to the Book of Mormon, God caused a "skin of blackness" to come upon Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, their wives, and their descendants so that "they might not be enticing unto [Nephi's] people."<sup>11</sup> Since the curse remains one of the most controversial aspects of the Book of Mormon, and since its precise nature remains a matter of dispute among scholars, it seems like the sort of thing a novelist like Harrison would be eager to explore, especially since she is not one who shies away from addressing Latter-day Saint controversies in her fiction. Was the "skin of blackness" literal? Or was it something more figurative or emblematic, like a self-inflicted mark? Did it originate with God? Or was it something Nephi's prejudices projected onto his brothers? Harrison ignores the issue entirely, although, at the end of the novel, Laman suggests that his children have been cursed because he has lived a wicked life and has driven off Nephi (pp. 232–33). But even this way of thinking about the curse remains underdeveloped in the novel.

*The Book of Laman* is a missed opportunity. Harrison has already proven herself to be a timely voice in contemporary Latter-day Saint fiction, but this contribution to her impressive body of work feels half-formed. The fact that she took significant liberties with Laman's story is

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10. 1 Nephi 3:11–14.

11. 2 Nephi 5:20–23; Alma 7:6–7.

not what makes the novel fall flat, although more engagement with the Book of Mormon text might have given it the depth it currently lacks. *The Book of Laman* simply reads like something that was published too soon in the writing process. Much more attention to the plot, characters (particularly Nephi), themes, and basic continuity could have made the novel a significant—even groundbreaking—work in Book of Mormon fiction.

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