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Arno Schmidt among Comic Commentators on the Book of Mormon

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The Book of Mormon

Arno Schmidt (translated by Hans-Wilhelm Kelling, John Durham Peters, and Joseph M. Spencer)
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A Book of Mormon Bibliography for 2018
Alma the Younger’s missionary journey to Ammonihah is one of the most disturbing episodes in the Book of Mormon: scriptures are burned (Alma 14:8); converted males are “cast out” and stoned by former friends (Alma 14:7); Amulek, a respected citizen, and Alma, high priest of the church and retired chief judge, are spit upon, mocked, imprisoned, stripped naked, humiliated, starved, and beaten (Alma 14:4–22); and innocent women and children are “cast into the fire” and burned to death (Alma 14:8). Alma and Amulek are “carried . . . forth to the place of martyrdom,” and forced to “witness” (Alma 14:9) the “pains of the women and children” as they are “consuming in the fire” (Alma 14:10). These events, the Ammonihahite disregard for human life, and the fire are horrifying and extraordinarily cruel.

Trying to unravel why Ammonihah happened is not a new topic of inquiry; the array and quantity of approaches highlights the ongoing struggle to locate causes, much less the effects of this tragedy. Scholars have blamed broad-based political or social structures as well as religious disagreements, and these macro-level arguments explain some

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all references in this paper to “Alma” refer to “Alma the Younger.”

aspects of the plot. Previous scholarship has also focused readers on Mormon, his goals, and his editing process; or on to Alma and the doctrines he preaches. Yet Ammonihah remains baffling. Fully comprehending the violent end of Alma’s mission may be impossible, yet further consideration from a literary perspective demonstrates that the “impact of what the Book of Mormon says often is created through how it is said.” As Charles Swift argues, a literary approach is much more than finding “decorative add-ons included by the prophets to make reading the book more interesting.” Considering how things are said adds insight into what is said, and why and when it is said, as well as additional insight into the person who is speaking or writing.


Approaching Ammonihah from this perspective emphasizes Mormon's use of literary techniques. As others have suggested, editor and sometimes-narrator Mormon seems to have a goal or "imperative" of bringing readers to Christ, and he relies on "narrative theology" to teach a faith-promoting lesson of prophecy and fulfillment in Ammonihah. His effort largely succeeds: he accurately portrays a story of miraculous fulfillment of prophecy and deliverance using a variety of methods to keep readers focused on this narrative. Yet Mormon does not sidestep more difficult issues, such as the people's hostile and reactionary responses; the unbalanced plot those unprovoked responses create; Amulek's losses; the inconsistent, even conflicting characterization of Alma; and the deaths of innocent women and children. Focusing on these narrative aspects shifts the narrative into a disturbing and disruptive story, one that threatens to escape its boundaries and potentially undermine faith; Ammonihah devolves into a disaster of epic proportions for which neither the broad-based proposals nor the self-contained story that Mormon frames can adequately account. Mormon seems to blame Nehor for the tragedy, but the Ammonihahites blame Alma himself—a surprising, but not unreasonable allegation. While the text insists that Alma was "not hurt" when he "came forth out of the prison" (Alma 14:28), this article argues that the experience left Alma with significant psychological and emotional wounds. What Alma says in his speech to Amulek in front of the fires may portray the side of Alma that John Welch calls "Judge Alma," an unflinching sinner-turned-prophet

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6. According to Grant Hardy (Understanding the Book of Mormon [New York: Oxford University Press, 2010]), narrative theology is "showing how theological points are manifest or illustrated in particular events" (91). Hardy argues that Mormon might use "prophecies and their fulfillments to persuade his readers that God is directing history" (91) or to use "stories to convince readers of the power of God, the consequences of sin, the reality of prophecy, and so forth" (119).
with a “strong sense of justice and accountability.” Yet textual evidence suggests that these events at Ammonihah impact him throughout the rest of his life. Moreover, despite writing hundreds of years after Alma and purposefully attempting to “show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” Mormon seems to acknowledge Alma’s pain and the tragic consequences of the fires at Ammonihah.

Mormon’s Imperative and His Editorial Techniques

How readers understand the Ammonihah story is suggested and even urged by “Mormon’s imperative,” the phrase S. Kent Brown uses to explain Mormon’s stated purpose of helping his readers “repent and come to Christ.” As Brown, Hardy, and others suggest, Mormon’s aim to “convince readers of the power of God” leads him to tell his stories in a way that foregrounds faithful narratives and de-emphasizes or “partially obscures . . . political and other issues.” This is a natural process; Leland Ryken claims that “every person is the protagonist” in his or her own life story, struggling to make sense of the “situations that test him or her.” Ryken argues that Christianity in particular “highlights the narrative quality of life” and that believers—and authors—“organize” and “understand” life “in narrative terms.” Readers should “avoid customary abstractness” and instead “do justice to this narrative quality.” Adriane Leveen, biblical scholar and student of the noted Robert Alter, argues that “biblical stories aim to have an effect on the reader,” and thus wise readers should “learn to recognize the techniques” writers and

editors use to create that impact.\textsuperscript{14} Like Leveen, Brigham Young University religion professor Eric Huntsman suggests that readers should ask "what" the author or editor was "trying to teach or emphasize" when he decided to tell "the story the way he did," noting that questioning why the passage was included and why it was written in that genre are important, as those choices will "produce different effects on the reading audience."\textsuperscript{15} To convey Alma's mission to Ammonihah, Mormon chooses to write a narrative. His use of framing techniques and repetitive diction create a story arc that focuses readers on the themes of fulfillment of prophecy and deliverance.

Mormon uses frames\textsuperscript{16} to circumscribe the story, effectively placing "metanarrative" markers to denote the "beginning and ending or opening and closing formulae of narrative" and to set off this smaller segment from the ongoing narrative.\textsuperscript{17} For example, after Alma establishes the church in Gideon, he "return[s] to his own house at Zarahelma to rest himself from the labors which he had performed" (Alma 8:1) before going to Ammonihah; after Ammonihah, Alma "administers" and "strengthens" the devastated Amulek in the same place—in Alma's "own house" in the "land of Zarahemla" (Alma 15:18). Thus, Alma's


\textsuperscript{16} Eric Berlatsky notes that "one of the most difficult and confusing of narratological concepts is that of 'narrative frames,'" arguing that the "definition remains elusive" in part because of the "sheer quantity of concepts and ideas" that different scholars have referred to as "frames" (Eric Berlatsky, "Lost in the Gutter: Within and Between Frames in Narrative and Narrative Theory," Narrative 17/2 [2009]: 162–87, quote: 162). Despite the narratological complexity, Michael Ryan claims that a "frame story" can be defined simply as a "story within which another story is told" (Michael Ryan, ed., Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction [Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2017], 127). Ryan points out that such stories tend to "invite reflections on psychological interiority, the way the mind exists apart from the world, or the way the mind harbors within it unconscious feelings, thoughts, and urges" (127).

home becomes a frame. It acts as a specific geographic space that initially marks the ending of Alma's mission to Gideon and the simultaneous beginning of the missionary story to Ammonihah, and then marks the ending of Ammonihah (and the beginning of the Lamanite mission of the sons of Mosiah), bringing natural closure to the Ammonihah episode.

Interestingly, Mormon uses oddly placed naming references to set off a slightly different story with a slightly different ending. This frame moves the Ammonihah conclusion past the respite in Alma's home and into Alma 16, the chapter in which readers learn that Ammonihah is renamed "Desolation of Nehors" because "[the people] were of the profession of Nehor" (Alma 16:11). While the information initially seems extraneous, it balances an equally odd interruption regarding names that begins the story. Relating Alma's journey from Gideon to Melek to Ammonihah, Mormon suddenly halts the story to tell readers about the Nephite "custom" of naming "their cities, and their villages, yea, even all their small villages, after the name of him who first possessed them" (Alma 8:7). Readers should ask themselves why, out of all places in the Book of Mormon that this information could be shared, did Mormon decide to include it here. Taken at face value, Mormon's intrusion disrupts the plot's forward motion with a random detail. Even more disruptive is the verse's onomastical message, which problematically alludes to a non-existent person: there is no one named "Ammonihah" in the Book of Mormon.18 Yet what seems to be a confusingly random

18. While Paul Y. Hoskisson appropriately cautions against assuming that the "ihah" suffix indicates "son of," the Book of Mormon Onomasticon concludes that -ihah can be "son of," and Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper (John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, "Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration History 9/1 [2000]: 41–51) think it could possibly be a Hebrew hypocoristic name. It seems possible that Ammonihah is named after and settled by Ammon, himself, or possibly his son, though the Book of Mormon never indicates that the sons of Mosiah have children of their own. Interestingly, when Alma leaves Ammonihah the first time, he "journey[s] towards the city which was called Aaron" (Alma 8:13). Perhaps it is merely coincidental that Ammon-ihah and Aaron are next to each other, and that it is here—of all places in the entire Book of Mormon—Mormon chooses to comment on Nephite naming tendencies and draw attention to the
comment acts to create a separate frame that overlaps but is not congruous with the frame formed by the specific references to Alma's house. These textual interruptions regarding acts of naming bookend the story within another frame, setting it apart from the ongoing plot while indicating that names are meaningful—but changeable—signifiers of origin, identity, and destiny. Mormon's use of this doubled framing sets Ammonihah off as a story within a story, highlighting the way a single narrative event can contain various beginning and ending points, each of which then presents a slightly different conclusion, foregrounding the multiple ways in which the editor has read the story and bringing those distinct readings to his readers' attention, thus highlighting the conclusion(s) that the editor wants readers to understand.

In his work on narrative framing, William Nelles explains that “every embedded narrative” has the “strong potential for structural, dramatic, and thematic significance” simply by virtue of being embedded. He quotes eminent literary theorist Gregory Bateson, who succinctly states that “a frame is metacommunicative” and who further argues that “a frame, ipso facto gives the receiver instruction or aids in his attempts to understand the message within the frame.” The superscription above Alma 9, possibly written by Mormon or perhaps by practice, but perhaps not. (See Paul Y. Hoskisson, “It's OK Not to Have Every Answer: The Book of Mormon Onomastic Ending--(i)hah,” Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration History 18/1 [2009]: 48–55.) Hoskisson points out that while “it might be tempting to posit that -(i)hah could mean ‘son of’ since Moronihah was the son of Moroni (Alma 62:43). However, because no father is named for Nephihah, Ammonihah, Zemnarihah, Onihah, Mathonihah, Limnah, or Cumenihah, it cannot be concluded that these names are patronymic. The existence of both Mathoni and Mathonihah as names of brothers (3 Nephi 19:4) also works against the meaning ‘son of.' Otherwise, there would be one son called ‘Son of Mathoni’ and the other son would be ‘Mathoni,’ the same as his father’s name. In other words, Mathoni’s sons would be called ‘Son of Mathoni’ and ‘Mathoni,’ causing multiple confusion when referring to any one of the three” (Hoskisson, “It’s OK,” 49). See also Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. “Ammonihah,” https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php/AMMONIHAH (accessed April 9, 2017).


Alma himself,\textsuperscript{21} is likely the strongest frame of this story. It prepares readers to view the narrative as "the words of Alma, and also the words of Amulek, which were declared unto the people who were in the land of Ammonihah. And also they are cast into prison, and delivered by the miraculous power of God which was in them, according to the record of Alma."\textsuperscript{22} This "preface" to the story focuses readers on the "words" the men declared, rather than on the effect those words had, and on Alma and Amulek's deliverance from prison "by the miraculous power of God," rather than on the believers' non-deliverance when they are cast into the fire. The next superscription occurs before Alma 17 and provides a strong metanarrative clue indicating that the story of Ammonihah begins in Alma 9 and ends in Alma 16, regardless of smaller chapter breaks.

The superscription seems to work as the theorists predict, predisposing readers to see exactly what they were told they would see. For example, in his article about Alma's record, Fred E. Woods breaks up the text using the superscriptions to guide him; he then argues that Alma 9–16 is about the "Law of Witnesses unto Life or Death." Of course, Woods recognizes that people were "burned by fire," yet he argues that this story is one in which "the people of Ammonihah sealed their imminent destruction when they shed the innocent blood of ... the few remaining repentant and righteous Saints." Woods notes the tragedy, but does so in order to highlight how the prophecy of destruction was fulfilled—evidence that the superscription has power to influence

\textsuperscript{21} Referring to the fact that superscriptions only exist over chapters 1, 5, 7, 9, 17, 21, 36, 38, and 39 of Alma, Sidney B. Sperry argues that "the fact that they [the superscriptions] are found over the chapters enumerated and over no others would seem to indicate that Mormon took them from Alma's original text" (quoted in Fred E. Woods, "The Record of Alma: A Prophet Pattern of the Principles Governing Testimony," in The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. [Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992], 305–20, https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/book-mormon-alma-testimony-word/19-record-alma-prophetic-pattern-principles-governing [accessed April 10, 2017]).

\textsuperscript{22} Superscription above Alma 9, Book of Mormon, 228.
one to view the story in a particular light.\textsuperscript{23} Where the story begins
and where it ends not only circumscribe the narrative, making it seem
complete, but also give readers an understanding of what the story is
about and how they should read and interpret thematic elements.

Word echoes and repetitions, specific dates further underscore
themes of deliverance and prophecy. In Alma 9:19, Alma declares that
the Lord will allow “that the Lamanites might destroy all his people” if
his people become wicked (Alma 9:19). Seven chapters later, in Alma
16:2–3, Mormon reports the fulfillment of that prophecy with wording
that echoes Alma’s original statement, declaring that the “Lamanites”
attack Ammonihah and “slay the people and destroy the city” (Alma
16:2). Alma prophesies of “utter destruction” (Alma 9:18), and Mormon
reports that the Lamanites destroy “every living soul of the Ammoni­
hahites” (Alma 16:9). The resonance is understated but unmistakable:
Alma’s prophecy is fulfilled. Ironically, Mormon draws attention most
directly to the unwittingly prophetic words of the Ammonihahites. The
people tell Alma that they will not believe him if he says that their “great
city” will be “destroyed in one day” (Alma 9:4)—wording so precise
that it seems possible that Alma might have prophesied that God could
destroy their great city in one day. In this instance, the resonance is not
subtle or understated; in Alma 16:9–10, Mormon reminds his readers
that the Ammonihahites said God could not destroy their “great city”
because of its greatness, yet that city is “in one day . . . left desolate.”
The word echoes should be enough to remind readers that this event
was predicted, and yet the text further emphasizes the fulfillment of
prophecy by explicitly noting that “they said” God could not destroy
the city.

Mormon also uses a rather obvious “duplication”\textsuperscript{24} of dates to
emphasize his theme of prophecy fulfillment: readers are told the pre-


\textsuperscript{24} Duplication is “a figure of speech that features a word or expression that is twice
repeated in an immediate sequence” (Donald W. Parry, “Glossary of Poetic Forms,” in
\textit{Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon} [Provo, UT: Neal A Maxwell Institute for
Religious Scholarship, 2007], xlv; s.v. “duplication”). Alma 16:1 provides a clear example
cise date of the fulfillment not once but twice in the same sentence, so there is no doubt that the prophecy is fulfilled in the “eleventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, on the fifth day of the second month” (Alma 16:1). Bounded by the date inclusio, the notion of “much peace” matches the phrasing of “no wars” in a short, chiastic-like structure that accentuates and draws attention to the precise day on which the Lamanites destroy Ammonihah, just as Alma prophesied they would. Mormon’s editorial choices are powerful: the frames tell readers where this narrative begins and where it ends, the superscription tells readers what to see within that frame, and the repetitious diction reinforces the message of prophecy that readers were told they would find.

Unruly Literary Elements and the Resulting Tensions

The story arc framed within Alma 9–16 (with its predisposed themes of prophecy/fulfillment and deliverance) does not prepare readers to notice literary elements that do not fit the theme or narrative structure. Therefore, readers may overlook unbalanced plot development, unresolved subplots, and unprovoked violence in Ammonihah. Notably, Mormon does not emphasize the elements that undermine his imperative. For example, in Alma 25, long after the original prophecy-fulfilling portrayal of the town’s destruction (Alma 16), Mormon divulges the politico-militaristic explanation: the prophetic “Lamanite” army (that is actually comprised of far more Nephite apostates than Lamanites25) is propelled to war against the Nephites “because [the Nephites] had slain their brethren,” the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. In their wrath, they “swear vengeance upon the Nephites” (Alma 25:1), cross into Nephite territory, and slaughter the townspeople (Alma 25:2). Hardy points out that the original and politico-militaristic explanations seem “equally valid,”

and contends that "Mormon, as a historian as well as a moral guide, is interested in promoting both perspectives."26 While Mormon does acknowledge both sides, the second explanation's diction is straightforward and terse, devoid of poetic expression such as the chiastic structure that Mormon employs to highlight the other version of events. Mormon does not hide the Lamanite/Amalekite/Amulonite motivations for killing the entire citizenry as they unintentionally administer God's justice and fulfill Alma's prophecy, but he delays it for chapters, does not include it within the framed story arc, does not emphasize it with a specific date, and does not use word echoes to remind readers of the original prophecy or his previous report of fulfillment.

Another problematic narrative feature is an apparently faith-promoting subplot that crumbles into a troubling conclusion—a subplot so disturbing that Charles Swift's discussion of the "Reticent Narrator in the Story of Alma and Amulek" focuses almost wholly on the "Amulek narrative."27 When Alma approaches Amulek and asks for food, Amulek agrees to feed him, asserting that an angel told him to do so and also told him that Alma would "be a blessing unto me and my house" (Alma 8:20). Amulek confirms this to the people of Ammonihah, drawing attention to the angelic visit with a specific date ("fourth day of this seventh month, which is in the tenth year of the reign of the judges" [Alma 10:6]). He also draws attention to the "blessedness" promise by again quoting the angel, who told Amulek that Alma would "bless thee and thy house; and the blessing of the Lord shall rest upon thee and thy house" (Alma 10:7). This plot seems balanced when Amulek proclaims to the Ammonihahites: "Behold, [Alma] hath blessed mine house, he hath blessed me, and my women, and my children, and my father and my kinsfolk; yea, even all my kindred hath he blessed, and the blessing of the Lord hath rested upon us" (Alma 10:11). The narrator emphasizes what is said—a promise of blessedness and a statement of its fulfillment—with the use of polysyndeton.

However, the story is not over; Amulek leaves Ammonihah with nothing, having “forsaken . . . all of his gold, and silver, and his precious things” and having been “rejected by those who were once his friends and also by his father and his kindred” (Alma 15:16)—an ironically complete listing of loss that encompasses everything Alma and the angel originally blessed. The notable exception is Amulek’s “women” and “children.” If they are alive, they apparently rejected him as well, since he did not leave with them. If they are not alive, then, according to Swift, Amulek not only saw “the martyrdom of many innocent women and children” but also the horror of “his own wife and children . . . being burned alive, one of the most torturous ways to die.” 28 As they are not listed as rejecting him nor ever mentioned again, it seems most likely that they were burned. The angelic promise of blessedness initially appears fulfilled, but the subplot actually ends with Amulek despised for his faith and deprived of family, friends, financial wealth, and home. Rather than blessed, readers may wonder if Amulek feels cursed. Was the angel wrong? The Book of Mormon is silent, leaving an unsettling subplot imbalance.

The main plot is rife with similar asymmetry. At both times when Alma enters Ammonihah, the text merely summarizes that Alma “began to preach,” bland phrasing that quotes no first-person rhetoric and, surprisingly, does not even summarize the content of that preaching. Though readers know Alma spoke, he is textually silent. 29 The people’s answer to textual silence is aggressive: to ensure Alma knows that he has no ecclesiastical or political power over them, they assert: “We are not of thy church,” and “Thou art not the chief judge over us” (Alma 8:11, 12). The text balances a lone speaker against “the people,” and Alma’s textual silence against the people’s antagonistic direct speech. The result is a lopsided story line in which the people’s responses seem unwarranted and overly dramatic—a pattern that recurs continually. Though Alma’s rhetoric escalates, the people consistently respond in

29. See Alma 8:8; 9:1.
overly dramatic, disproportionately hostile, and even physically violent ways.\(^{30}\)

The pivotal plot marker that precedes the fires is Zeezrom’s initial step toward repentance and conversion. The proverbial “last straw” is when Zeezrom switches allegiance and vows that he is “guilty, and these men are spotless before God” (Alma 14:7). A balanced response might be to tell their former cohort that he is wrong and try to convince him to recant, but the people respond irrationally and aggressively, gathering together “all the men who believed” and “cast[ing] them out and send[ing] men to cast stones at them” (Alma 14:7). More than another unmerited overreaction, the stoning appears to be a personal mockery of Amulek; he warned the people of God’s displeasure if they “cast out the righteous from among” them (Alma 10:23), and they did it anyway. The stoning is apparently a deliberate display of contempt for Amulek and a strong message concerning the people’s disbelief in Amulek’s God and his God’s punishments.

The lawyers and judges of Ammonihah are “also angry;” and they want to “put” Alma and Amulek “away privily” (Alma 14:3). With angry “people” and angry “lawyers and judges,” readers cannot be certain

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30. Alma’s rhetoric becomes much stronger as his speeches in Ammonihah continue. He calls the people “lost and fallen” (Alma 9:30) and a “wicked and perverse generation” (Alma 9:8), and prophesies that they “shall utterly be destroyed from off the face of the earth” (Alma 9:24). Instead of angrily calling him names in return, the people try to “lay their hands upon [Alma], that they might cast [him] into prison” (Alma 9:32). There is only a remote chance that Alma pontificated belligerently or angrily about Melchizedek and the holy order of God in Alma 13, though he concludes his speech by “stretch[ing] forth his hand unto them and [crying] with a mighty voice” that the people must repent (Alma 13:21) or be “bound down to by the chains of hell” (Alma 13:30). A counterbalanced response might be yelling back in a “mighty voice,” threatening in return, and possibly imprisoning Alma and Amulek. If the people’s accusations of blasphemy and reviling are accurate (see Alma 14:2, 5), the judges may be justified in sentencing the men to death according to the Law of Moses (see John W. Welch, “Sherem’s Accusations against Jacob,” in Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne [Provo, UT: FARMS, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 1999], https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1121&index=23). However, the response of stoning the men and killing innocent women and children is still extreme.
which group decides to burn the women and children and which group decides to take Alma and Amulek to the burning (Alma 14:10). What is clear is that “they” take the missionaries “forth to the place of martyrdom” and cause Alma and Amulek to “witness” the “pains of the women and children” as they are “ Consuming in the fire” (Alma 14:9, 10; emphasis added). Though directly quoted speech is recorded in the present verb tense in this chapter, the rest of the story is in the past tense. This phrase stands out as one that is not directly spoken but is still in the present tense—a simple yet horrifying verb tense change that leaves no ambiguity: Alma and Amulek are not brought to the scene as the fires die down and forced to see “bodies” being “consumed,” as one could assume from verse 14, but, rather, they are present as the women and children are in the process of dying.

Charles Swift argues that by not describing “the sounds, the smells, the heat, the crying”31 the “reticent narrator” of this story “opens up the opportunity for [readers] to imagine” the scene, which makes this moment “much more experiential” and “powerful.”32 Swift may be entirely accurate about a reticent narrator allowing readers the opportunity to imagine the scene. Alternatively, the “narrator” of this event may, like Mormon at the end of the Book of Mormon, be uncommunicative about “the suffering of our women and our children” because “tongue cannot tell” and “neither” can the truth of such moments “be written”; perhaps, as in their time period, Mormon and Moroni do not describe such horrific events because such words would “weigh” readers “down unto death” (Moroni 9:19, 25). Whatever motivated the exclusion of vivid sensory details, the narration continues the lopsided plot development. Alma and Amulek’s words provoke an unjustified and shockingly disproportionate reaction among the Ammonihahites: throwing innocent women and children into a fire.

Amulek cries out, “How can we witness this awful scene?” and declares, “Let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God . . . and save them from the flames” (Alma 14:10). The response

seems natural, considering the likelihood that he is watching personal friends, and likely his own wife and children, die a grisly death. Alma, apparently not doubting his ability to save the people, refuses, explaining:

The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day. (Alma 14:11)

Alma explains his refusal with a reference to the Spirit’s “constraint,” a word that implies a compulsion bordering on “force,” not a simple feeling or prompting. Yet, unlike every other time the Spirit constrains someone in the Book of Mormon, Alma is not compelled to act but, rather, compelled not to act, something that seems to require explanation. The rest of the sentence expounds the reasoning for the inaction—but does so in unsatisfactory ways.

From a literary perspective, Alma’s speech is oddly uncharacteristic in terms of doctrine, audience awareness, and emotional style. As a former unbeliever and repentant reprobate, Alma is, according to Richard Rust, someone who “repeatedly sets forth alternatives” and who believes that “people . . . [can] choose their destiny.” Yet Alma’s doctrine of choice falls short in Ammonihah, both in universal applicability

34. See 1 Nephi 4:10; 7:15; 2 Nephi 4:14; 9:46; 28:1; Jacob 2:9; Alma 60:34; Helaman 8:11; 4 Nephi 1:48.
35. Rust, Feasting, 131.
36. Rust, Feasting, 131. See, for example, his sermon in Zarahemla with its fifty rhetorical questions and underlying assumption that the people of Zarahemla have the ability to choose whether they “trample the Holy One under your feet” or “follow the voice of the good shepherd” (Alma 5:53, 57).
as well as in genuine efficacy. The questions of who has the ability to choose and how much power they have to enact those choices becomes a life or death issue—for some. Alma seems to recognize the problematic nature of agency and attempts to explain. He states that God “doth suffer that [the women and children] may do this thing;” possibly implying that God “suffers” or “allows” the women and children to die even though he does not want to, or possibly implying that God allows the women and children to choose to die as if they “may” or may not do so. Perhaps realizing that statement is inadequate, Alma explains that “the people” “do this thing,” clarifying that the women and children are not choosing to die, but are being killed. The explanation is that, in allowing the murders, God is ensuring that “the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just” (Alma 14:11). While the doctrine of the righteous suffering at the hands of the wicked is not without foundation in the Book of Mormon, it is especially disturbing in Ammonihah. Those who are “innocent” have no choice but to be victims, so that their “blood” can “stand as a witness against” the people of Ammonihah. Despite his reputation as a “man of many words” whose “rich and timeless” words are arguably the “doctrinal epicenter of the Book of Mormon,” Alma preaches difficult doctrine in Ammonihah. A decade later, Alma teaches his son that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 42:10), but readers may wonder if righteousness is happiness either. The women and children are burned as the people exercise their agency, and God “suffer[s]” the women and children to be burned with his agency, but the women and children are

37. See, for example, the women in Jacob 3 whom God will “console” in their “afflictions, and he will plead [their] cause, and send down justice upon those who seek [their] destruction” (Jacob 3:1); or the people of Alma (Senior) who are captured by Lamanites, persecuted by Amulon, and “put to death” if they are found “calling upon God” in prayer (Mosiah 23–24; Mosiah 24:11); and Jacob, the brother of Nephi, who “suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of [his] brethren” (2 Nephi 2:1).


victims—killed by the people of Ammonihah with God’s allowance—a rather merciless and choice-less positioning for the righteous. Robert Rees’s study of Alma leads him to conclude that Alma is unmatched in “intellect, learning, complexity and rhetorical sophistication,” but Alma has no pithy insights in front of the fire; the “profound” or “penetrating” doctrinal statements that Robert Millet argues are typical in Alma’s words are absent here.

Nevertheless, Amulek seems to trust Alma implicitly; there is no indication that he questions Alma’s refusal to intervene or his reasoning. And yet, one wonders whether Amulek will be consoled to know that God “doth suffer that [the women and children] may do this thing” (Alma 14:11). Given the setting—literally watching loved ones burn to death—will Amulek be comforted by Alma’s clarification “or that the people may do this thing unto them”? The explanation seems rational, even clinical, considering that Alma is addressing a friend suffering the greatest catastrophe of his life in the moment it is happening. Although S. Kent Brown implicitly argues that Alma is adept at adapting his message, and John W. Welch estimates that Alma is a sensitive rhetorician who “knows his audience and tailors his words to meet their particular needs and circumstances,” Alma seems uncharacteristically unaware of his audience and does little to “tailor his words” to Amulek’s “needs and circumstances” while


41. Millet, Encyclopedia of Mormonism.

42. Though technically focused on the various conversion motifs that Alma incorporates into his public and private sermons, S. Kent Brown (“Alma’s Conversion: Reminiscences in His Sermons,” in The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. [Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992], https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/book-mormon-alma-testimony-word/9-almas-conversion-reminiscence-his-sermons) consistently notes the differences in presentation, even the absence of the motifs, depending upon whether Alma’s audience is, for example, his “faithful friends” at Gideon, the “contentious conditions in the city of Ammonihah,” or the “audience of the poorer classes of the Zoramite people.”

watching people burn in the fires. To have said these words at this time to a good friend is callous at best.

Alma’s rhetoric also seems unlike the “impassioned, personal” speech he typically delivers. Of course, it is possible that Alma’s statement in front of the fire was highly emotional; Alma may have been enraged, yelling that “the judgments which [the Lord] shall exercise upon them in his wrath” are “just.” Alternatively, he could have been despondent, weeping when he said that “the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day” (Alma 14:11). However, the statement seems calm. As a believer, Alma rightly obeys the “Spirit” telling him he “must not stretch forth [his] hand,” but his pause to offer an explanatory clause in regard to who is doing what to whom (“or that the people may do this thing unto them”) appears rational, a self-corrective aside in the middle of a crisis. The convoluted phrasing with its clarifying clauses seems flat, possibly even apathetic. Swift notes that Alma’s words juxtapose sharply with Amulek’s emotional pain and argues that the contrast between “Amulek’s plea” and “Alma’s faithful but very logical response” increases audience “awareness of the emotions Amulek is feeling.” In Swift’s estimation, “Amulek cries out in agony, but Alma responds with doctrine.”

Notably, the text records that Alma simply “said” these words in contrast to his speech’s conclusion, in which he “stretched forth his hand unto them and cried with a mighty voice” (Alma 13:21). The Alma who bellows “now is the time to repent” is consistent with the one who wakes from a three-day coma with flamboyant verbs and colorful comparisons on the tip of his tongue, declaring that “after wading through much tribulation” and “repenting nigh unto death,” he has been “snatched” from an “everlasting burning” (Mosiah 27:28). The Alma who speaks in front of the sacrificial fires in Ammonihah seems rhetorically rational rather than verbally intense or metaphorically evocative and effusive;

44. Rust, Feasting, 119.
he does not seem like the person Robert Rees describes, whose “ultimate strength” is his “emotional power.” 46

The uncharacteristic speech is presented as a direct quotation, though that is highly improbable. Written by Alma and edited by Mormon, the Ammonihah story weaves back and forth between embedded documents, Alma’s first-person account and Mormon’s summarizing of Alma’s account. Alma 14 appears to be Mormon’s summary of Alma’s firsthand account, except for the dialogue, which is presented as direct quotation. Nevertheless, it does not seem possible that Alma or Amulek could watch converts being burned to death and simultaneously take notes on their conversation. Even if the men were emotionally capable of such an act, it would have been impossible, since Alma and Amulek were “bound with strong cords” in verse 4—well before the fire was started; are still “bound” in verse 14 while the fires finish burning; and remain “bound with strong cords, and confined in prison” (Alma 14:22) until the day of the prison collapse. Moreover, verse 9 indicates that the men must be “carried” to the fire, suggesting that their feet are bound as well as their hands. It is likely that this speech was written after the prison collapse, possibly months after it occurred. There is a break in structure between Alma’s short answer (“The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand” [Alma 14:11]) and the much longer doctrinal statement explaining that answer. This break may suggest that Mormon or someone else added the clarification as an afterthought—something that would make Alma’s speech here even more uncharacteristic.

However, assuming that it is Alma who speaks and that the recorded words are accurate, then the Alma who speaks before the fire does not seem as doctrinally insightful, rhetorically inventive, audience-aware, or emotionally dramatic as readers have come to expect from him. Were this speech the beginning of a permanent rhetorical decline, readers would assume that Ammonihah impacted Alma. However, Heather Hardy points out in her study of Alma’s teachings to the Zoramites that his “general teachings on faith become increasingly focused on Jesus

Christ” and his doctrine increasingly “draws upon scriptural witnesses,” while his “rhetoric” is “expertly and gracefully” applied after careful contemplation of “audience and situation.”47 The events at Ammonihah seem to shock Alma into momentary platitudes and insensitivity, but the hallmark features of his great talent remain intact or even increase in power. Were Alma’s speech the only unruly literary element in this story, readers could be lulled into misunderstanding the events as heart-breaking but not tragic; difficult, but not life-changing. But Alma’s break in characterization, the unresolved subplot, the unprovoked violence, and the unbalanced plot development work together to challenge any simplistic explanation of this story.

The fires are the most unbalanced, violent, and reactionary aspect of the plot, distinctly disturbing because they are a pointed and per­verse mockery of Alma. As is typical of his rhetorical style, Alma used vivid imagery in speaking to the Ammoniahites; he warned the people that they were risking the “second death,” explaining that those who die this “spiritual death” shall find “their torments shall be as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever” (Alma 12:17). Bound at the “place of martyrdom” and witnessing the last of the “bodies” be “consumed,” the “chief judge of the land” slaps Alma and Amulek and asks: “After what ye have seen, will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?” (Alma 14:14). The chief judge is obviously equating Alma’s doctrinal fire with Ammonihah’s literal fire.

As with Amulek, the people are portrayed as reacting to Alma in a personalized and violent manner, but their extreme reaction is far beyond that of a people mistakenly making a scriptural metaphor literal. The people do not merely threaten to kill or try to kill Alma and Amulek, nor do they simply kill the converts, nor do they kill the converts in a random but vicious way. Instead, they use Alma’s “words of God” and twist them into a method of mass killing that will cause the victims acute suffering before death. They then choose not to inflict

this manner of death on the adult male converts, but on those converts’ “wives and children” and “whosoever believed or had been taught to believe,” wording that encompasses not only anyone who “believed,” but also those who merely “had been taught to believe,” a group that potentially included some who were taught to believe, but chose not to (Alma 14:8). Not yet satisfied, the people ensure that Alma does not learn retrospectively about the fire but, instead, witnesses it with his own eyes, and they furthermore ensure that he knows his words ignited the micro-genocide he is witnessing while he is standing before the smoldering fires. This violence alone would make Ammonihah one of the darkest moments in the Book of Mormon; instead, it becomes almost indescribably horrific: premeditated violence perpetrated on innocent victims in a manner specifically designed to mock, humiliate, and cause intense physical, emotional, and psychological pain to the victims and to those forced to watch.

Nehor’s Alleged Culpability and Alma’s Overlooked Responsibility

The excessive violence makes the plot lopsided and confusing, especially since the people’s depravity is not a sweeping hatred of humanity or a generalized anger toward their Nephite society, but rather an intense and mystifying animosity directed at Alma. Moreover, the literal deaths of innocent believers are thematically inappropriate. Mormon risks much by including these elements, since they could overpower the plot, disrupt the story arc, and undermine the faith of readers. If the editor of this troubled story had wanted to tell a smoother narrative, he could have skipped the fires with little disruption. In the narrative arc framed by Alma 9–16 and told in what may have been “artistic structuring” created by “deliberate editing,” the fire is merely a stepping stone in the rising action. Though it is obviously a crisis point fraught with physical, emotional, and psychological complexity of its own, it is not the climax. The series of steps in the rising action, such as Alma’s initial visit and rejection, the angel’s

48. Grant Hardy, Understanding, 111.
intervention, Alma's return to Ammonihah, the people's hostile reception, and Zeezrom's questioning lead to this crisis, but the martyrdom is downgraded to a conventional plot twist leading up to Alma's and Amulek's miraculous deliverance and to the Lamanite destruction of Ammonihah.

Even with a strong frame and a narrative arc that does not emphasize the fires, the burning episode is powerful. Perhaps still concerned that including this element could undermine faith, Mormon explicitly labels the people of Ammonihah as "Nehorite," vilifying them as followers of Nehor, the "first" person to practice "priestcraft" and "enforce it by the sword" (Alma 1:12). Mormon chooses to share that information at a critical moment. When the chief judge slaps Alma and Amulek and taunts them about being powerless to help the women and children, the judge insists that God did not save them "because they were of thy faith" (Alma 14:15). Then—after hitting them again—he demands, "What say ye for yourselves?" This moment is charged with tension, yet instead of a dramatic answer to the question or a continuation of the stressful rising action, Mormon suddenly informs readers that "this judge was after the order and faith of Nehor, who slew Gideon" (Alma 14:16). Readers should ask themselves if they needed to know this. And if they did, did they need to know it right now? Mormon's decision to label the judge as a Nehorite shifts the focus to Nehor, and the ill-timed intrusion ensures that readers will notice.

Thomas Valletta generalizes the personal accusations, arguing that the "enmity" evident at Ammonihah is the "age-old confrontation between priestcraft and true priesthood," 49 namely, Alma's priesthood and Nehor's "false priesthood." Valletta is likely basing this argument on Mormon's labeling of the Ammonihahite judge and on Mormon's three other comments about Nehor in the Ammonihah story. 50 Mormon

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50. See Alma 14:18; 15:15; 16:11. Similar to the "Nehor" reference in Alma 14:16, these other references to Nehor are intrusive, bizarrely placed, and confusing. After Alma 14:16, Mormon interrupts the story line again in Alma 14:18, reiterating a mere
claims four other groups as devotees of Nehor: the dissenters during the first year of the reign of the judges; Amlici and his followers; and the Amalekites and Amulonites.\(^\text{51}\) Daniel Belnap questions this apparent pervasiveness, arguing that “the presence of ‘Nehor’ had become the Nephite explanation behind any and every misfortune, whether historically accurate or not.”\(^\text{52}\) J. Christopher Conkling similarly concludes that “not all apostates in the book are the same,”\(^\text{53}\) even while arguing for a broad-based Nehorite contingent.

two verses later that the “lawyers, and judges, and priests, and teachers” of Ammonihah are “of the profession of Nehor” (Alma 14:18). Again, a chapter later, he explains that, despite Alma and Amulek’s miraculous escape from prison, the people refuse to repent “for they were of the profession of Nehor” (Alma 15:15). It seems impossible that readers could miss the interruptions and forceful linking of Ammonihah to Nehor, but Mormon concludes the Ammonihah episode by telling readers that the destroyed city is renamed “Desolation of Nehors” because the “[the people] were of the profession of Nehor” (Alma 16:16).

51. See Alma 1:16 (first-year dissenters); Alma 2:1 (Amlici); Alma 21:4 (Amalekites); and Alma 24:28 (Amulonites). In his insightful article, “Alma’s Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” J. Christopher Conkling argues persuasively that the Amlicites and the Amalekites are the same group of people (see Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 14/1 [2005]: 108–17, 130–32, esp. 110–13).

52. See footnote 35 in Dan Belnap, “And It Came to Pass . . .: The Sociopolitical Events in the Book of Mormon Leading to the Eighteenth Year of the Reign of the Judges,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 23 (2014): 101–39; quote: 128. Belnap’s arguments make sense. Even if two of the four are the same group, the connection between Nehor and these dissenters is somewhat baffling. For example, unlike Nehor with his priestcraft, Amlici seems wholly interested in gathering political power and becoming king. The text intimates that he would use his kingship to “destroy the church of God” politically (Alma 2:4), but that has no real connection with Nehor challenging the church doctrinally. Mormon's hint that Amlici is “after the order of the man that slew Gideon by the sword” (Alma 2:1) seems to be the totality of the connection between Nehor and Amlici. Even though Mormon interrupts stories, interjects with labels that explicitly villainize Nehor, and claims that Nehor’s death “did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft” (Alma 1:16), his reasoning for claiming these dissenters are “Nehorite” is unclear.

53. Conkling argues that “the record of Alma’s ministry (Alma 1:1–45:19) begins and ends in the same place, embroiled in problems resulting from the apostasy of Nehor and the Amlicites,” yet he hesitates to establish Nehorite philosophy as monolith because “not all apostates in the book are the same” (see footnote 4 in Conkling, "Alma’s Enemies,” 131).
Proving conclusively that the people in Ammonihah are or are not Nehorite is unlikely, since the text brushes past Nehor’s beliefs in a mere two verses while magnifying their supposed effects. Nehor’s philosophies appear to be somewhat similar to the philosophies of the people in Ammonihah and to the other dissenters. Yet Nehor tries to “establish a church after the manner of his preaching” (Alma 1:6), while Nehorism in Ammonihah presents as a “profession” of “lawyers and judges, and priests, and teachers” (Alma 14:18). Moreover, Nehor is alien to Ammonihah geographically and temporally, as well as spatially in the text. Mormon’s interruptions implicate Nehor, but the people never mention their supposed leader, his doctrine, his church, nor his death. Mormon condemns the Ammonihahite chief judge as someone “after the order and faith of Nehor,” but the people never mention Nehor. It is unlikely that readers would connect Nehor and Ammonihah were it not for Mormon’s labels.

Interestingly, whether readers believe Nehor is the cause of the Ammonihahites’ violent tendencies or believe the label of “Nehor” is a red herring, they are pushed beyond the bounds of this city’s story in search of explanation. The only other story about Nehor occurs in the first year of the reign of the judges when Alma, as chief judge of the Nephites, condemns Nehor to die for priestcraft. Perhaps Alma’s decade-past condemnation of their leader triggers the fires rather than Alma’s words, Amulek’s words, or Zeezrom’s defection. Conkling pushes Nehor’s story further into the past, arguing persuasively that the “problems with Nehor” must have been going on long before the first year of the reign of the judges, and, furthermore, Conkling ventures that Alma and Nehor could “have been old friends or allies, even disciples.”

54. See Alma 1:3–4.

55. See table 1, “Belief comparison: Nehor vs. Nehorite dissenters.” There are overlapping beliefs, though perhaps not as many as would be expected between Nehor’s and Ammonihahite beliefs.

56. See Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies,” 108–17, 130–32. Conkling makes the same argument about Amlici. If Nehor and Amlici simply arrived in Zarahemla in the second and fifth years of the reign of the judges, then they would have to accomplish the following during a one-year time period: Nehor would need to arrive in Zarahemla,
high-profile positioning of the two men and the fact that each seems to be based in Zarahemla supports a prior relationship.

Establishing that relationship conclusively is impossible, given the lack of a direct statement; however, Mormon’s labeling of the people of Ammonihah as Nehorite suggests the possibility of comparing Nehor’s (sparse) beliefs, the Ammonihahite beliefs, and the Unbeliever beliefs (including those held by pre-conversion Alma, who was “numbered among the unbelievers” prior to his conversion [Mosiah 27:8]). In particular, the Unbeliever beliefs enumerated in Mosiah 26–27 connect Unbelievers/Alma and the people in Ammonihah through parallel behaviors and beliefs, and those groups are connected to Nehor by Mormon’s explicit reference and also with some minimal overlapping beliefs and behaviors.57 Interestingly, both Nehor and the Ammonihahites show evidence of Unbeliever impact, though not in the same behaviors or beliefs, suggesting that if the people in Ammonihah are Nehorite, as Mormon says, then Nehor was most likely an Unbeliever. If Mormon was mistaken when he labeled the Ammonihahites as Nehorite hundreds of years after the events, then the Ammonihahites are most likely Unbelievers with some ties to Nehor. Either scenario suggests that dissenter commonalities pre-date Nehor and that the overlap is rooted

57. See table 2, “Belief comparison: Unbelievers vs. Nehor vs. Ammonihah.” This table does not list every possible idea that can be derived from the interactions at Ammonihah, but only those that explicitly tie to the Unbelievers’ beliefs. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the people at Ammonihah and the Unbelievers have much in common.
in the Unbeliever movement in the years leading up to the reign of the judges.

While overlapping beliefs do not signify personal relationships between Alma, Nehor, and priests in Ammonihah, it seems possible that some of them crossed paths in the Unbeliever movement before the reign of the judges. Supporting this notion is the people's initial response to Alma's visit: they begin by insisting that they "know" who he is. They may simply be indicating that they know Alma was recently the chief judge, but their hostility from the moment Alma enters their city may indicate that they "know" Alma was an Unbeliever. Considering that Amulek speaks of "our last king" and references Mosiah having "no one to confer [the kingdom] upon" (Alma 10:19), it is not unreasonable to think that other people, like Amulek, would be aware of political action from the previous decade and "know" who Alma is and that his former beliefs correspond with their current beliefs.

From this perspective, the people of Ammonihah are responding to a former friend or leader whom they likely see as a traitor. To them, Alma condemned Nehor to death for doing what he, Alma, had done a few years before: preach Unbeliever doctrine, persecute the Saints, and try to "destroy the church" (Mosiah 27:10). Alma coming to preach his "new" belief in a Christian faith would be presumptuous, making the people's choice to "cast [him] out of their city" more understandable. Alma returning to say their sins caused him "great anxiety even unto pain" and commanding them to "repent" would be offensive (Alma 13:27, 21). If some of the "many people" Alma persuaded to "do after the manner of his iniquities" are standing in the crowd at Ammonihah (Mosiah 27:8), then what initially appears as unprovoked, disproportionate hostility still appears unbalanced, though less so. Linking the people in Ammonihah and Nehor with the Unbelievers—and thus to pre-conversion Alma—provides explanations for the unprovoked initial hostility, the unwarranted overreactions, the personal directedness of that hostility, the similarity in beliefs, and the people's silence about their supposed leader.

If Alma was a leader (or the leader?) of the Unbelievers, then Mormon has a difficult choice: Should he avoid the connections, making the
story's action lopsided and strange? Should he include the connections, knowing that it may undermine his effort to lead readers to Christ? Will readers be able to hear the messages of an Unbeliever-turned-high priest? Mormon seems to waver between the options before settling on a middle-ground approach that coincides with his imperative as well as a commitment to truth. The beliefs of the various individuals and groups are available, but Mormon's editorial decisions effectively “hide” the connection behind a massive break in structure from one book (Mosiah) to another (Alma), and the (re)labeling of Unbeliever beliefs as “Nehorite,” possibly because Nehor was the first to establish an official church based on these beliefs.

Alma’s Ammonihah-Caused Character Change
and Mormon’s Acknowledgment of Alma’s Pain

The simple fact that Alma entered Ammonihah the second time “by another way” indicates that he knew he was returning to a hostile situation (Alma 8:18). Nevertheless, Alma’s odd, out-of-character speech at the scene of the martyrdom suggests that even he was stunned by the hellish depths of that hostility. Though his rhetorical talent revives, there are numerous reasons to believe that Alma was changed. Moreover, Mormon again demonstrates a commitment to a more complete and complex story even though it could undermine his goal to affirm

58. The practice of labeling groups as Nehorite disappears about the same time that Alma does, though the label of “Unbelievers” is still used as late as 3 Nephi 1:19. Alma encounters the Sons of Mosiah returning from teaching the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 17:4). The Anti-Nephi-Lehies had just been slaughtered by the “Amalekites and Amulonites, the greatest number of which were after the order of Nehor” (Alma 24:29). This is the last mention of Nehor in the Book of Mormon, and Alma dies a short five years later (Alma 45:19).

59. See table 3, “Belief comparison: Unbeliever beliefs vs. Nehor and Nehorite dissenters.” This table demonstrates that the Unbelievers’ beliefs correlate with Nehor’s beliefs and Nehorite dissenters’ beliefs. Although the correlated beliefs are not always the same between groups, all groups overlap with the Unbelievers.
faith: he appears to honor Alma's pain through the use of a variety of subtle literary techniques.

As noted, Mormon used duplication of dates to emphasize the fulfillment of prophecy. This is just one example of Mormon's "explicitly strict chronology," a timeline so meticulous that Hardy calls Mormon "scrupulous" for including the date when Alma and Amulek survive the prison collapse. Mormon's use of dates may be even more deliberate: neglecting one embedded document, only seven dates in the Book of Mormon have the specificity of day, month, and year. The day that Teancum kills Amalickiah is recorded in Alma 52:1, and the day that the great storm begins, marking the death of Christ, is recorded in 3 Nephi 8:5. The other five dates all reference events at Ammonihah. It seems clear that Alma knew and recorded to the day what happened in this city, an inclusion that indicates the impact on him; that Mormon chose to include Alma's precise dates at five times the rate of any other event in the Book of Mormon may be coincidental, although the "scrupulous" attention to dates in the rest of the text suggests Mormon knew and deliberately chose to underscore the significance and effect of Ammonihah.

That Alma was mindful of Ammonihah until his last moments seems clear from his final words to his son, Corianton. Alma "perceive[s]" that Corianton is "worried concerning the resurrection of the dead" (Alma 40:1), a worry that Mormon ties with repetitive word choice to the Unbelievers of twenty years earlier (Mosiah 26:2). The exact phrase, "concerning the resurrection of the dead" is first used by Alma's father (Alma the Elder) at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18:2). Years later, the Unbelievers explicitly reject the "tradition of their fathers" in doctrines such as those "concerning the resurrection

60. Grant Hardy, Understanding, 103.
61. Grant Hardy, Understanding, 115.
62. See Alma 10:6; 14:23 (one date mentioned twice); 16:1; 49:1. The day that Teancum kills Amalickiah is recorded in Alma 52:1, and the day that the great storm begins, marking the death of Christ, is recorded in 3 Nephi 8:5. Beyond those dates, one letter from Helaman to Moroni has two references to day, month, and year dates, as well as a few references to month and year dates. See Alma 56:1, 7, 20, 27, 42; 57:5.
of the dead” (Mosiah 26:2). Aaron, a former Unbeliever, is also described as teaching “concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 21:9), while, in Ammonihah, Zeezrom becomes fearful for his salvation and begins “to inquire . . . diligently, that he might know more concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 12:8). Resurrection is taught throughout the text, but Alma’s acknowledgment that his son is “worried concerning the resurrection of the dead” is a subtle hint: that specific phrase is only used in conjunction with Unbelievers or former Unbelievers. Corianton’s “concern” is apparently not a passing question; it prompts the most extensive discussion of resurrection in the Book of Mormon.

Alma does not tell Corianton the history of this doctrine, nor does he say that it was one of the problematic beliefs in Ammonihah, but it seems that Alma is thinking about Ammonihah as he speaks to Corianton. Alma says that “some have wrested the scriptures” about the doctrine of the restoration of the body, and that they “have gone far astray because of this thing” (Alma 41:1). The allusion is understated, yet unambiguous: the only other use of the word “wrest” in the Book of Mormon is when Alma warns the people of Ammonihah that “the scriptures are before you; if ye will wrest them it shall be to your own destruction” (Alma 13:20). The repetitive diction links Ammonihah and Corianton, at least in Alma’s mind, and also highlights intricate irony: Alma, as an Unbeliever, questioned resurrection and restoration personally and used his talent in speaking to persuade “many of the people” to similarly question that doctrine (Mosiah 27:8). He converts to the church of God and begins preaching the resurrection of the dead, but is

63. Though the Unbelievers’ beliefs are described as a rejection or disbelief in King Benjamin’s doctrine (Mosiah 26:1), King Benjamin never discusses a resurrection of the mortal body and, moreover, does not even use the word “resurrection.” It seems more likely that the Unbelievers are rejecting the senior Alma’s preaching on this particular doctrine (Mosiah 18:2, 9), which he likely learned from Abinadi’s preaching on the subject (see Mosiah 13:35; Mosiah 15; Mosiah 16).

64. One indication of the extent of Alma’s teachings is that thirty of the eighty-one uses of the word “resurrection” in the Book of Mormon are found in Alma’s speech to Corianton.
rejected by the unbelieving people of Ammonihah,\textsuperscript{65} who question resurrection as he did prior to his conversion. That Alma unintentionally provokes a tragedy while preaching about the resurrection of the dead, and that the tragedy he provokes involves people dying, heightens the irony. That his last recorded sermon, a personal address to his youngest son, details the Book of Mormon's most comprehensive explanation of this doctrine press an already heightened irony. The sum total of these ironies is nothing short of heartbreaking. The fire at Ammonihah must be an Abrahamic-sized test of Alma's faith and conversion, considering his former alliance with the Unbelievers and their questions “concerning the resurrection of the dead.”

But the test does not stop when the fires burn out. Alluding to specific questions and concerns discussed at Ammonihah,\textsuperscript{66} Alma insists not once but twice that he has “inquired diligently” of God to “know” these things “concerning the resurrection” (Alma 40:3, 9). Alma spends the last decade of his life searching determinedly to “know” whether “there is a time appointed that all shall rise from the dead,” even while preaching that doctrine to everyone from fallen church members in the ninth and fourteenth years of the reign of the judges to the people in Zarahemla and in Ammonihah, to the anti-Christ Korihor, the apostate Zoramites, and his own rebellious son.\textsuperscript{67} With the fiery deaths of women

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{65} Resurrection is a key aspect of the doctrinal debate at Ammonihah, with Antionah, one of the “chief rulers,” challenging Alma outright: “What is this that thou hast said, that man should rise from the dead and be changed from this mortal to an immortal state?” and claiming that “there [is] no possible chance” that people “should live forever” (Alma 12:20-21).

\textsuperscript{66} See, for example, Alma 42:2-7, an explication of the meaning of the cherubim and flaming sword placed to keep the way to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. In answering Corianton, Alma is directly answering the question asked by Antionah in Alma 12:20-21.

\textsuperscript{67} Alma must preach continuously about resurrection: to fallen church members in the eighth and ninth year of the reign of the judges (see Alma 4:6-14, esp. 14); to church members in Zarahemla (see Alma 5:15-25); to those at Ammonihah (see Alma 11:42, 44; 12:21); to struggling church members in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges (see Alma 16:19-20); to the Zoramites (see Alma 34:33-35); and to Corianton (see 40:1, 2-26; 41:1-9).
\end{footnotesize}
and children and an unbelieving chief judge's condemnation haunting him, Alma diligently seeks knowledge about what happens in the “space between the time of death and the resurrection” (Alma 40:9). Corianton is clearly not alone in his worry about the afterlife (Alma 40:1).

Unlike the doctrine of resurrection, Alma’s interest in the doctrine of rest seems to fade as he becomes more and more restless. At Ammonihah, Alma urged the people to “enter” into the “rest of the Lord” nine different times, but this urging tapers off. By the time he preaches to the Zoramites, Alma seems exhausted; he preaches about having “patience” and “bear[ing] with all manner of afflictions” (Alma 34:40) and urges the few Zoramite converts to believe that they “shall one day rest from all [their] afflictions” (Alma 34:41; emphasis added). After his final words to each of his sons, Mormon reports that Alma, aged and sorrowful, “could not rest” (Alma 43:1), but instead continues proselytizing to Nephite dissenters. While this may be the sorrow of any righteous person watching wickedness, it may be the unique sorrow of a leader whose former Unbeliever philosophies link him to an anti-Christ and to the “wicked and perverse” people he is trying to reclaim (Alma 9:8).

That Ammonihah impacted Alma also seems evident in Alma’s increasing agitation. Little information is provided about Alma’s feelings during the first years of the reign of the judges, despite some situations that were laden with psychological dissonance. In the eighth year of the reign of the judges, Alma’s emotions intensify to the point

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68. At Ammonihah alone, Alma refers to the “rest” entered into by the righteous nine times. See Alma 12:34–37, 13:6, 12–13, 16, 29. Alma also refers to this “rest” in Alma 7:27; 34:41; 37:34; 40:12. Mormon refers to rest in Alma 16:17, connecting it with those who choose to “not be unbelieving.”

69. Little information is provided about how Alma felt to judge and condemn Nehor, to watch escalating political unrest caused by unbelievers, and to fight in hand-to-hand combat with Amlici and kill him (Alma 2:29). Conkling asks, “What was Alma’s first reaction to Nehor and Amlici, this new generation of apostates?” and suggests that “in killing Amlici,” Alma was in essence “killing a version of his old self” and notes that “Alma faced Amlici's dissenters until his last battle” (see Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies,” 115).
that Mormon feels compelled to comment that the people’s wickedness is the “cause of much affliction to Alma”\(^70\) and to note that Alma “began to be very sorrowful” (Alma 4:15). Mormon reassures readers that “the Spirit of the Lord did not fail” Alma, an encouraging statement of faith, but one that can potentially backfire: Why the need to reassure readers if there is no concern that the Spirit might fail him? The phrase offers reassurance of the power of God, but does so by underscoring Alma’s sadness.\(^71\)

That sadness lingers with Alma and then increases. After being “cast out” of Ammonihah the first time, Alma is described as being “weighed down with sorrow” and also as “wading through much tribulation and anguish of soul” (Alma 8:14), emotions with which he is familiar, since he also “wad[ed] through much affliction” and “repent[ed] nigh unto death” (Mosiah 27:28) when he was first converted, and he again “wad[ed] through much affliction and sorrow” in his efforts to teach the people in Zarahemla (Alma 7:5). He insists that “great is his joy” in the people in Gideon, yet in some ways, Alma seems almost despondent as he approaches his last missionary encounter to the Zoramites. Twice labeled as “exceedingly sorrowful” (Alma 31:2, 31), Alma describes his own anguish multiple times as physically manifested “infirmities”: his “heart ... sicken[ing]” (Alma 31:1) and being “grieved” (Alma 31:24) and his “soul” being “pained” (Alma 31:20). Alma’s sorrow is deep enough that he wonders “how long” God will “suffer” him to “dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the

\(^{70}\) Mormon hastens to add that “many” of the other leaders were “sorely grieved,” as well (Alma 4:7), though the seeing of “the persecutions which were heaped” upon church members by the unbelievers seems to impact Alma especially (Alma 4:15).

\(^{71}\) This sorrow causes Alma to resign as chief judge and appoint Nephihah in his place (see Alma 4:16–20). Alma discusses further emotions with the people in Gideon, explaining that he has had “exceedingly great joy” in seeing the people of Zarahemla “established again in the way” and that he hopes to have a similar “joy” in the Gideonites re-commitment to the church (Alma 5:4–5). Yet that full expression of joy is followed by Alma’s statement that he does “not desire that [his] joy over [the people] should come by the cause of so much afflictions and sorrow” and his reiterating in the same verse that his “joy cometh over them after wading through much affliction and sorrow” (Alma 5:5).
children of men” (Alma 31:26). Readers are told that Alma suffered “no manner of afflictions” while preaching to the Zoramites that were not “swallowed up in the joy of Christ” (Alma 31:38), but, after the mission, Alma is again “grieved.” He is so “exceedingly sorrowful” about the people’s wickedness that the scriptures predicate his decision to give his final words of advice to his sons on the depths of that sorrow (Alma 35:15–16). Alma struggles with sorrow for his own sins during his conversion and struggles with sorrow for others’ sins after his conversion, eventually struggling so much that his sorrow manifests physically.

Part of his sorrow may be his realization that his perspective on women was faulty. Before watching women and children burn in a fire, women appear in lists as an afterthought, as a possession, or not at all. Alma almost forgets women when, for example, he mentions that the men buried those killed in war, then returned to their “lands” and “houses” and “wives” and “children” (Alma 3:1). Similarly, Alma blesses the righteous men of Gideon that “peace” will be upon their “houses and lands, and upon [their] flocks and herds, and all that [they] possess, [their] women and children” (Alma 7:27), seemingly suggesting that women and children are possessions. In Zarahemla, Alma declares that he is “called, yea, to preach unto my beloved brethren” (Alma 5:49). The statement could literally mean that Alma was only called to preach to men, except that he then clarifies that he has been called to take the gospel to “every one that dwelleth in the land, yea, to preach unto all, both old and young, both bond and free, yea I say unto you the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation” (Alma 5:49). Alma neglects to mention women in his list of whom he should preach to, an oversight that might itself be overlooked, had Amulek not used Alma’s phrasing in Ammonihah when he explains that the “restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female” (Alma 11:44). Alma regularly disregards women before Ammonihah, though Amulek does not.

After Ammonihah, Alma recognizes women as agents in their own lives—both for good or for ill, noting, for example, that Korihor was

“leading away the hearts of many . . . [both] many women, and also men” (Alma 30:18). In Ammonihah, Alma says that the “joyful news” of Christ’s birth would be declared by angels unto “just and holy men” (Alma 13:24–25). But after Ammonihah, in one of the most egalitarian verses in scripture, Alma claims in “overly emphatic” language that “angels” speak to “not only men but women also” and even “little children” (Alma 32:23). Though the sampling size is small, the results are consistent: pre-Ammonihah, Alma does not notice women; post-Ammonihah, Alma not only notes women, but also acknowledges them as individuals with their own agency.

That makes the portrayal of Alma’s “death or burial” especially poignant. In his speech in front of the fire, Alma tells Amulek that the “Lord received [the women and children] up unto himself in glory” (Alma 14:11). Echoing that description, Alma later tells his son, Helaman: “I know that [God] will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory” (Alma 36:28). Less than a year later—though physically separated by extra scenes and stories—church members rumor that Alma was “taken up by the Spirit or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses.” The narrator counters that the “scriptures saith the Lord took Moses unto himself” and that the Lord has also “received Alma in the spirit unto himself” (Alma 45:19). Given the delicacy of the echo, the interlocking links of similar phrasing may be unplanned, but they are mentioned by Alma in reference to the women and children at Ammonihah, by Alma in reference to himself, and by the narrator in reference to Alma.

If the words are connected, the women and children form the base of this connection. Alma’s explanation to Helaman repeats “up . . . in glory,” and the church rumors about Alma’s passing also use “up.” The

narrator concludes that Moses and Alma are received/taken by the Lord “unto himself” in a slightly different but still intersecting phrasing, and does so in words that stand out because of their repetition and the awkward, convoluted construction. The overt duplication within Alma 45:19 thus draws attention to itself, to Alma’s prophecy of his own fate, and to the much more delicate duplication between Alma 45:19 and Alma 14:11. Notably, no other physical deaths of persons in the Book of Mormon are described as people being taken or received or raised up unto the Lord, though such references exist in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Pearl of Great Price. “Unto himself” is mentioned yet again during the same year that Alma dies by Moroni in reference to the “remnant of the seed of Joseph.” The phrasing is reinforced by Alma when he connects his own fate with that of Moses in his explanation to Helaman, a comparison that asserts itself in the official description of his death in poetic form. The interlocking phrases and

74. See, for example, 2 Kings 2:1–2, 11 (Elijah prepares to be “taken up”); Mark 16:19 (the Lord is “received up”); Luke 24:51 (Jesus is “carried up”); Acts 1:2, 9–12, 22 (Jesus was “taken up”); Acts 10:16 (Peter dreams of a vessel being “received up”); 1 Tim 3:16 (God in the flesh was “received up”); Moses 7:21 (Zion is “taken up”); and Moses 7:69 (God “receives” Zion “up”). The Book of Mormon speaks of Moses being “raised up” (2 Nephi 3:9–11) and also speaks of one who is “like unto Moses” whom God will “raise up” (see, for example, 2 Nephi 3:17; 1 Nephi 22:20, 23; and 3 Nephi 20:23; 1 Nephi 10:4), and Christ teaches that anyone who “remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them” will also be “raise[ed] up at the last day” (3 Nephi 15:1), but no other person who dies is described in similar terms.

75. See Alma 46:23–25. Moroni quotes biblical Jacob as saying that a “remnant of the seed” of his son, Joseph, will be “preserved by the hand of God and be taken unto himself” and repeats the phrasing, saying that he has “joy . . . because of that part of his seed which shall be taken unto God” (Alma 46:24–25).

76. See Alma 36:28. Alma tells his son that he will “praise [God] forever” because he delivered Moses’s people out of bondage.

77. The construction of Alma 45:19 is poetic and repetitive. Whether written by Mormon, Helaman, or Alma himself, it is clear that someone spent considerable time and effort composing the sentences. The circumstances of Alma’s disappearance are framed by the statements “as to his death or burial we know not of” and “we know nothing concerning his death and burial.” The slight change from or to and draws attention to itself, especially since the same construction explains that Alma was “taken up by the Spirit or buried by the hand of the lord, even as Moses” and then that “the
Moses allusions may be coincidental, or they may depict Alma’s ongoing sorrow and/or Mormon’s sensitivity. Alma’s final presence in the Book of Mormon appears to be quietly presented in terms of the women and children killed at Ammonihah.

When Alma disappears, he is last seen “depart[ing] out of the land of Zarahemla, as if to go unto the land of Melek” (Alma 45:18). Like many of Mormon’s other intrusions, the detail calls attention to itself with its odd placement. Also like Mormon’s other intrusions, this is not an irrelevant detail, but a meaningful naming and framing technique. In this case, the lord took Moses unto himself and . . . has also received Alma in the spirit unto himself.” Interestingly, the center element framed by what the Lord did with Moses is “But behold, the scriptures saith” — another light echo of Ammonihah and the people who “wrested the scriptures.”

The name of Melek may also be an oblique allusion to Molek (Molech), the transliteration of the Hebrew mlk, a word with a highly debated meaning. Some argue that Molek is a “particular type of offering, a votive sacrifice made to confirm or fulfill a vow,” while others argue that the word refers to a “pagan deity to whom human sacrifices were made,” which would be a sadly appropriate name for the town one must pass through on the way to Ammonihah (see Paul E. Robertson, “Molech,” in Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England [Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003], 1148). Notably, Anthony J. Frendo contends that the word mlk can be interpreted as “Melek” in his article arguing that “the Israelites had burnt their children in honour of their king, Yahweh, just as their neighbours had done in honour of their gods, such as Baal, whose epithet was often Melek, which eventually became Molek” (Anthony J. Frendo, “Burning Issues: mlk Revisited,” Journal of Semitic Studies 61/2 [2016]: 364). Jeffrey H. Schwartz is one of many who dispute the child sacrifice theory, at least in regard to the Phoenician settlement of Carthage. Using one of the largest samples of cremated bone-containing urns, Schwartz concludes that many bones are prenatal bones and that “the overall mortality distribution . . . [is] consistent with present-day fetal/infant mortality rates” (Jeffrey H. Schwartz, “The Mythology of Carthaginian Child Sacrifice: A Physical Anthropological Perspective,” in Diversity of Sacrifice: Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond, ed. Carrie Ann Murray [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016], 122). That Ammonihah may have been practicing human sacrifice is suggested by a small word choice: readers learn of the fires when they are told that the “wives and children” are “cast into the fire” (Alma 14:8; emphasis added). Since this is the first time this fire is discussed, the appropriate article would be “a.” In other words, the text would say that the women and children were cast into a fire — and then, after that initial description, a reference to “the” fire would refer back to that specific fire. That this fire is labeled as
framing does not circumscribe the story of prophecy and fulfillment, but instead defines Alma’s other life, a life that begins and ends in Ammonihah. Unlike the extensive records of Zarahemla, Gideon, and Ammonihah, Mormon merely summarizes Alma’s stay in four short verses, but those verses refer to Melek by name five different times, the last of which explains that Melek is a three-day journey to the south of Ammonihah. The repetition makes it difficult to forget that Alma went to Melek, even though no sermon is recorded. Melek is mentioned by name only eight times in the Book of Mormon, all of which are between Alma 8:3, when Alma arrives and lingers on his way to Ammonihah, and Alma 45:18, when both Alma and Melek disappear. Melek metaphorically acts as a symbol for Alma’s journey to the hell of Ammonihah, a hell that remains with him until he is last seen walking back there. That Melek is never mentioned again is a weighty textual silence.

Mormon uses one more crushing silence to indicate what Ammonihah meant to Alma, perhaps because ultimately words fail to explain what happened. As noted previously, the chief judge of Ammonihah stands before Alma and Amulek while they are still in front of the smoldering fires, and, slapping them across their faces, asks: “After what ye have seen will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?” (Alma 14:14). He does so as a way

“the fire” from the beginning suggests that it was an already established fire. Moreover, Alma and Amulek are taken forth to “the place of martyrdom” (Alma 14:9; emphasis added).

79. See Alma 8:3–6. Melek is referenced in Alma 8:3, Alma 8:4 (twice), and Alma 8:6 (twice).

80. Besides the five uses in Alma 8:3–6, Melek is referenced in Alma 31:6, when Alma gathers those men he wants to go to preach to the Zoramites, the text noting that “Amulek and Zeezrom . . . were at Melek” at the time. When that missionary endeavor mostly fails, the Zoramites join the Lamanites to war against the Nephites, which necessitates that “people of Ammon depart out of the land of Jershon, and [come] over into the land of Melek” (Alma 35:13). The last use is reporting Alma’s disappearance in Alma 45:18. It is interesting that Amulek and Zeerom were back visiting “Melek” before the people of Ammon moved there. Perhaps they were visiting converts or initiating the process that allowed the people to move there. It is conceivable that they were back visiting the desolate remains of Ammonihah as well.
of drawing Alma's attention to the people's grotesque wit, making sure that Alma knows that his rhetorical flourish about a metaphorical lake of fire is responsible for the literal lake of fire and brimstone burning in front of his eyes. In the text, Alma remains silent. And Alma stays silent. The answer is no. Alma, the "man of many words," will never use this phrase again.

The silence created by Ammonihah is broader and deeper and far more encompassing than Alma. Prior to this event, the "lake of fire and brimstone" imagery is used multiple times by multiple prophets—referenced by Nephi, by Jacob in multiple sermons, by King Benjamin, and by Alma\(^81\)—in what seems to be a well-known doctrine and a well-used metaphor. Yet when the chief judge asks if they will teach about burning fires again, the answer is silence not just for Alma and Amulek, but for the entire Book of Mormon. The sudden extinction of this phrase could be the unspoken rule implemented by an entire nation for hundreds of years, but is more likely the work of a careful editor. The sudden stillness seems to be Mormon's personal tribute to those who died in the fires; to the family members who were cast out; to Amulek who watched his family die; and to Alma, who was forced to watch the torture knowing that his words, and conceivably his former beliefs and actions, catalyzed the people's malice. The Book of Mormon does not explain nor draw attention to the abrupt halt in usage of the phrase; it simply stops. Readers are left with a story about a fire, the deaths of an untold number of women and children, a chief judge's question hanging unanswered in the air, and a haunting silence that lasts for hundreds of years. No one in the Book of Mormon will ever preach of a "lake of fire and brimstone" again.\(^82\)

\(^81\) The references to a lake of fire and brimstone are as follows: Nephi (2 Nephi 28:23); Jacob (2 Nephi 9:16, 19, 26; Jacob 3:11; 6:10); King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:27); Alma (Alma 12:27); and the judge in Ammonihah (Alma 14:14).

\(^82\) Notably, no one ever uses the phrase "lake of fire and brimstone" again, though the metaphor of fire and burning continues to be used. It seems as if a few people almost say the phrase, but there are actually two separate wickedness/fire metaphors working in the Book of Mormon: one concerning "lake" imagery and the other concerning "tree" imagery. Both Jacob and Alma use both of the metaphors, but they do so without
Conclusion

The tragedy at Ammonihah should challenge readers both emotionally and spiritually, but it may fail to do so; readers may focus on Alma and Amulek miraculously emerging unscathed from the prison and find what Ryken calls the “surface meaning that no one can miss.” This faithful reading is credible and is fostered by Mormon’s editorial choices regarding what to include and what to exclude, as well as his literary choices concerning framing and diction. Some may believe that literary analysis is reading into a text something that simply is not there, that a straightforward, “surface-level” reading is all that is available. It is possible that Mormon could be as unsophisticated an editor as he occasionally appears, and the framing, duplication of dates, poetic diction at key points, interruptions at strangely timed moments, word echoes, and other literary devices could be happenstance. Others may believe that Mormon’s editorial choices are unfairly biased, though that interpretation requires readers to condemn what Amy Easton Flake describes as the natural “narrative necessity of selection, arrangement, and interpretation” of a text and the basic meaning-making that any person engages in when deciphering life experience. Nevertheless, readers should consider the possibility that the Ammonihah narrative is as

83. Ryken, “And It Came to Pass,” 140.

multi-layered and complex as the Bible, as Ryken argues, and that it can profitably be read with careful and critical analysis of literary features.\(^8\)

From a literary perspective, how the Ammonihah narrative was written complicates the story in perilous ways. Mormon appears not as a moralistic editor of unsophisticated stories and “and thus we see” didactic conclusions, but as a skillful author and editor who can portray himself as inexperienced while simultaneously weaving depth and nuance into his stories, rounding out flat characters, and creating silences that speak louder than words. Readers who only see his unsophisticated side may wonder why, at Alma’s “death or burial,” the narrator asserts: “This we know, that [Alma] was a righteous man” (Alma 45:19). Obviously, there is no need for the claim if everyone interprets Alma as a two-dimensional, repentant-and-then-perfect caricature of a man. Making the claim implicitly asks readers to question Alma and his righteousness, which opens up the possibility of finding a deeply sorrowful high priest who spends years repenting and searching diligently, only to discover that some damage is irreparable, that some consequences play out regardless of personal repentance, that a child may grow up to be like his parent in distressing ways, and that God may ask His servants to do (or not do) unthinkable things.

Despite the miracles and the deliverance, the faith and the faithfulness, this story remains deeply troubling. It calls on empathetic readers to “suffer . . . great afflictions” (Alma 14:26); to “witness the destruction of those who were consumed by fire” as well as the pains of those forced to watch (Alma 14:9); and to “answer nothing” (Alma 14:19) when they wish to cry out “How long . . . O Lord?” (Alma 14:26). The fire of Ammonihah burns innocent women and children, and readers who attempt to more fully engage with that narrative may find themselves burning their superficial notions of “free” universal agency; a shallow theology of repentance; and naïve ideas regarding who God is and what he may require. Even Alma—the man John Welch says is “crucial to any understanding of the Book of Mormon,” the man whose “testimony . . .

\(^8\) Ryken, “And It Came to Pass,” 140.
is the spinal cord that runs through the backbone of Nephite prophetic history”86—even Alma is overwhelmed by Ammonihah. The chief judge’s unanswered question marks the moment the fire and its personal accusations and blame devastate Alma, as well as the moment that a long-lasting horror begins to burn the conscience of a civilization, or at least the conscience of a proficient editor. That editor’s deep and quiet empathy for a fallible prophet of God is shown—ironically—not by what is said and how it is said, but by what is not said and how it is not said. Despite his “many words,” Alma is seared into silence by the lake of fire and brimstone, and so is the rest of the Book of Mormon. It is no wonder he is last seen walking toward Melek.

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<tr>
<td>believes that &quot;all mankind should be saved at the last day&quot; (Alma 1:4).</td>
<td>(Alma 1)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:20)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:32)</td>
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<td>believes in inequality. Priests and teachers &quot;ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people.&quot; Nehor was &quot;lifted up in the pride of his heart&quot; and began to &quot;wear very costly apparel&quot; (Alma 1:3, 6).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:3)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:20)</td>
<td>(Alma 2:4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>believes &quot;every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people&quot; (Alma 1:3).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:16)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:19)</td>
<td>(Alma 12:3–4)</td>
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<td>believes in persecution of believers (Alma 1:7–9).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:22)</td>
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<td>believes in proselytizing. Nehor had &quot;gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God.&quot; He also &quot;began to establish a church after the manner of his preaching&quot; (Alma 1:3, 5).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:16)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:19)</td>
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*The people in Alma 1 are not specifically labeled as "Nehorite dissenters." However, the text notes that Nehor's death "did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft" and explains that "many" continued to be influenced by his ideas and methods (Alma 1:16). Some "did not belong to the church" (Alma 1:19); some had "their names . . . blotted out" so that they were no longer part of the Church (Alma 1:24); and "many withdrew themselves from among" the Church (Alma 1:24).
Table 2. Belief comparison: Unbelievers vs. Nehor vs. Ammonihah

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<tr>
<th>Believers</th>
<th>Nehor (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Ammonihah</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unbelievers</strong></td>
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<td>did not believe “concerning the coming of Christ” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
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<td>One of Zeezrom’s first questions is “Who is he that shall come? Is it the son of God?” (Alma 11:32). Amulek answers directly, “Yea” (Alma 11:33). Zeezrom continues to question Christ, and Amulek explains that Christ “shall come into the world to redeem his people” (Alma 11:40).</td>
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<td>“did not believe the tradition of their fathers” (Mosiah 26:1).</td>
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<td>The people of Ammonihah say: “We do not believe in such foolish traditions” (Alma 8:11); Alma calls them a “wicked and perverse generation” and asks “How have you forgotten the tradition of your fathers”? (Alma 9:8).</td>
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<td>“did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Amulek’s answer to Zeezrom’s questions about God are focused on Christ and the fact that “the death of Christ shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised from this temporal death” (Alma 11:42); Amulek continues by explaining that “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame” (Alma 11:43). Every person’s body will be resurrected such that “not so much as a hair of their heads be lost” (Alma 11:44).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ammonihah</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>did not believe in “call[ing] upon the Lord their God” to repent of their sins (Mosiah 26:4).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Antionah directly questions why Alma has said “that man should rise from the dead and be changed from this mortal to an immortal state, that the soul can never die?” (Alma 12:21) and claims through a short discussion of the Garden of Eden that “there was no possible chance that they should live forever” (Alma 12:21).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“All mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but they might lift up their heads and rejoice” (Alma 1:4).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Alma calls on the Ammonihahites to “humble [themselves] before the Lord, and call on his holy name,” suggesting that they have not been doing this (Alma 13:28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbelievers</td>
<td>Nehor (Alma 1)</td>
<td>Ammonihah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not believe that “there should be an equality among all men” (Mosiah 27:4). (Ties to idolatry and idleness.)</td>
<td>Priests and teachers “ought not to labor with their hands” (Alma 1:3).</td>
<td>The people “withstood all his words, and reviled him, and spit upon him, and caused that he should be cast out of their city” (Alma 8:13); they “revile” Zeezrom and “spit upon him, and cast him out from among them, and also all those who believed in the words which had been spoken by Alma and Amulek; they cast them out, and sent men to cast stones at them” (Alma 14:7); burned the women and children (Alma 14:8); torture Alma and Amulek in the prison (Alma 14:17–25).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not believe that “all their priests and teachers should labor with their own hands for their support” (Mosiah 27:5).</td>
<td>“Every priest and teacher ought to become popular; they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3).</td>
<td>The lawyers “were learned in all the arts and cunning of the people; and this was to enable them that they might be skillful in their profession” (Alma 10:15); their profession is explicitly named as “the profession of Nehor”; Zeezrom speaks with “lying in craftiness” and has a “very subtle plan, as to the subtlety of the devil” (Alma 12:3–4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did believe in persecution—especially against the Church of God (Mosiah 26:38; 27:1–3; 27:32).</td>
<td>“He began to contend with him [Gideon] sharply, that he might lead away the people of the church” (Alma 1:7).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did believe in proselytizing, especially with “flattering words” (Mosiah 26:5–6).</td>
<td>“He did teach these things so much that he many did believe on his words” (Alma 1:5).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Belief comparison: Unbeliever beliefs vs. Nehor vs. Nehorite dissenters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbeliever Beliefs</th>
<th>Nehor (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Beliefs of Dissenters* (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Amlaci + Amlicite/Amalekite Followers</th>
<th>Ammonihah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do not believe “the tradition of their fathers” (Mosiah 26:1).</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 1:19)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:20)</td>
<td>(Alma 11:33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not believe “concerning the coming of Christ” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 11:40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not believe “what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 11:42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not believe in “call[ing] upon the Lord their God” to repent of their sins (Mosiah 26:4).</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 1:4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 11:44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not believe that “there should be an equality among all men” (Mosiah 27:4).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:3)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:19)</td>
<td>(Alma 2:4)</td>
<td>(Alma 12:21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not think that “all their priests and teachers should labor with their own hands for their support” (Mosiah 27:5).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:3)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:16)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 11:44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>believe in proselytizing, especially with “flattering words” (Mosiah 26:5–6).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:5)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:22)</td>
<td>(Alma 2:1)</td>
<td>(Alma 12:3–4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The people in Alma 1 are not specifically labeled as “Nehorite dissenters.” However, the text notes that Nehor’s death “did not put an end to the spreading of priest-craft” and explains that “many” continued to be influenced by his ideas and methods (Alma 1:16). Some “did not belong to the church” (Alma 1:19); some had “their names . . . blotted out” so that they were no longer part of the Church (Alma 1:24); and “many withdrew themselves from among” the Church (Alma 1:24).
In June of 1830, the first Latter-day Saint missionary Samuel Smith journeyed through the backcountry of western New York hoping to find parties interested in the recently published Book of Mormon. Advertising the volume as “a history of the origin of the Indians,” he attempted to sell copies of the book his brother Joseph claimed to have translated from golden plates given to him by an angel.¹ An etiological tale of the ancient inhabitants of the continent, the Book of Mormon described the emergence of two tribes: the righteous Nephites and wicked Lamanites. After the Lamanites’ rebellion against their relatives, the Book of Mormon recounted how God afflicted them for their iniquity. Whereas they were once “white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome,” they became cursed with “a skin of blackness.”² In the ensuing ethnic conflict, the black-skinned Lamanites ultimately triumphed over their “white” kin, overrunning and

¹. Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 152.

². 2 Nephi 5:21. Though the Book of Mormon also speaks of the skin color of Lamanites as “dark,” when it does so, it always references the original curse of “blackness,” and therefore dark in this context cannot be interpreted to be any other hue than black. For example, in Alma 3:6, we are informed that “the skins of the Lamanites were dark,” but this was “according to the mark which was set upon their fathers.”
annihilating the Nephites to become the ancestors of modern-day Native Americans.³

The early proselytizing efforts of Samuel Smith and other missionaries met with some success; a number of people found this “history” plausible.⁴ Given the Book of Mormon’s racialized representation of the Lamanites that resembled in some ways the prevalent opinions about Amerindians at the time of publication, this is not entirely surprising. In language that echoed popular perceptions about the depravity of indigenous peoples, the book described the Natives as a “wild and ferocious, and blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness.”⁵ Indeed, the very appearance of the Book of Mormon closely coincided with some of the most concentrated animus in the history of the United States

³ 3 Nephi 2:15; Mormon 5:15.
⁴ This was not a universal opinion. Others found the story to be “a nonsensical fable.” Most people, it seems, were unable to separate the book’s narrative from its provenance. See Smith, Biographical Sketches, 152–53.
⁵ Enos 1:20. For analogous portrayals of the Lamanites as savages, see 2 Nephi 5:24; Jarom 1:6; Moroni 9:9–10. Interpreters have taken a variety of positions on whether the Book of Mormon is racist. One group has claimed it cannot be racist as “white-skinned Nephites and black-skinned Lamanites” are nothing more than “metaphors for cultures, not for skin color.” See Douglas Campbell, “White’ or ‘Pure’: Five Vignettes,” Dialogue 29/4 (1996): 134; Armand Mauss, All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 118. Other commentators have tried to downplay the charge of racism against the Book of Mormon by differentiating between the “curse” God spoke upon the Lamanites, cutting them off from his presence, and the “mark” of black skin they acquired. See John A. Tvedtness, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” FARMS Review 15/2 (2003): 186–88; Rodney Turner, “The Lamanite Mark,” in Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 133–57. This, however, sidesteps the fact that the Book of Mormon explicitly states that “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Nephi 5:21). Still others have claimed there is “patent racism” in the book. See Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” American Literature 86/3 (2014): 436. Some characters in the narrative are undeniably racist. For example, at one point, a Nephite leader admonishes his people to “revile no more against them [the Lamanites] because of the darkness of their skins” (Jacob 3:9). On the whole, however, the central message of the Book of Mormon seems to be opposed to racism, claiming skin color is superficial and “all are alike unto God . . . black and white” (2 Nephi 26:33).
toward Native Americans. Only two months later, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, banishing various tribes to territories west of the Mississippi River. Mirroring the widespread belief that the degraded condition of Native Americans was a curse and that assimilation was only possible if they accepted Christianity, the Book of Mormon prophesied that those who came “to the knowledge of Jesus Christ” would, in not “many generations” time, again become “a white and delightsome people.”

Consequently, the similarities between the book’s portrayal of aboriginal Americans and the timing of its release has traditionally led scholars to conclude that the Book of Mormon can be best understood as a projection of the culture from which it emerged. As one author surmised, the book’s descriptions of Lamanites represents little more than “an exaggerated version of contemporary stereotypes about North American Indians.” Others have comparably claimed that the book’s racial worldview “reflected Euro-American impressions of Native Americans,” serving as “a time capsule capturing elements of the moral and physical universe” of Joseph Smith. Even those who do not draw the same conclusions about authorship from such statements acknowledge that the racial depiction of Nephites and Lamanites in the Book of

6. 2 Nephi 30:5-6. This was later changed to “pure and delightsome” in the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon to downplay the physical aspects of this conversion.


Mormon at least “sound like the Jacksonian view of Indians common to most Americans in 1830.” There has existed for some time a widespread consensus that the passages of the Book of Mormon mentioning race bear a remarkable resemblance to the book’s nineteenth-century environment. More recent examinations of the racial outlook presented in the Book of Mormon have added significant insights to the subject, proposing that, upon closer inspection, the text offers a much more nuanced view than a cursory reading would suggest. Jared Hickman, for example, has demonstrated the abnormality of the narrative’s “novel racial eschatology” that predicts the triumph of “dark-skinned” natives over their “fair” relatives. This “inversion,” while attractive to the book’s intended Indian audience, offered a powerful cultural critique of the predominant “(post-) Puritan racial theology” of early America. Also of note, Max Perry Mueller has recently highlighted important ways in which the Book of Mormon “departed from the antebellum intellectual and theological world from which it emerged.” Most significantly, the book’s passages about the future transformation of American Indians challenged ideas about the immutability of race. In his view, despite its racialized portrayal of characters, “the Book of Mormon taught its earliest believers that race was not real, that is, race was not a permanent part of God’s vision for humanity.” As this new research suggests, the Book of Mormon’s comments on race might be more complex than previously supposed. 

Nearly all examinations of race in the Book of Mormon, however, have generally made unfounded assumptions about the book’s working racial paradigm, the most recent scholarship not excluded. Though noting the Book of Mormon’s prediction about a future racial order, they

essentially agree with many others that nineteenth-century notions about race undergird the text’s framework. In doing so, they have overlooked or misconstrued its comments on the most prominent feature of Indian-ness—skin color. While this paper will not respond to all the supposed correspondences between the Book of Mormon’s views about race and Joseph Smith’s culture, it will demonstrate that the book expressed vastly different presumptions about the complexion of Native Americans. In the 1830s, American Indians were overwhelmingly described as red, something the Book of Mormon never does. In the nineteenth century, white, black, and red were clear-cut color classifications that carried with them expectations of origin, nature, and rights. Images of Indians as “red skins” pervaded all aspects of culture, from scientific treatises on race to poetry, hymnody, and literature. Almost no one, excepting in the Book of Mormon, styled them as black, which was a descriptor reserved solely for Africans in antebellum America. After analyzing the history of the racial categorization of Native Americans, contemporaneous descriptions of Indians in potential sources of the Book of Mormon, and the perseverance of these ideas, it becomes clear that the Book of Mormon’s views about skin color were unique and did not match the prevailing racial attitudes of the time. For a book supposedly about the origins of the “red man,” it curiously pictured Native Americans in black and white.

14. Hickman has written how the Book of Mormon “mythologize[d]” such ideas, noting how it shared the worldview of “many nineteenth-century romantic radicalists” (Hickman, “Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” 436, 443). Mueller ultimately concluded that the book’s assertion that Native American’s “dark skin results from twice-fallen ancestors” made it somewhat “standard fare in the antebellum United States” that “bears the makings of its nineteenth-century ‘translator,’ including the linguistic and cultural assumptions about the hierarchies of the races and the taxonomies of these races” (Mueller, Race and the Making, 40).

15. Hugh Nibley appears to have been one of the first to notice this. He wrote in 1950: “There is no mention of red skin, but only black and white” (Hugh Nibley, “Lehi in the Desert,” Improvement Era 53 [1950]: 449).

16. Given the history of African American slavery in America, it is rather surprising that the Book of Mormon never described the black Lamanites as slaves. Instead, it is the white Nephites who fall into bondage at the hands of their dark kin. See Mosiah 21:13.
A History of the "Red Man"

Initial contact with the indigenous people of America resulted in confusion on the part of Europeans. Struggling to make sense of what the newfound race they encountered might be, conquistadors and colonists applied various color classifications to the natives. Christopher Columbus, on his first trip to the New World, described the Native Americans he came across as "the color of the Canarians, neither black nor white." Later, reports of the natives characterized their skin as resembling the "color of a nut." Still other accounts mentioned the "very dark skin" and the "Copper-colour'd Complexion" of those they met. In fact, during the seventeenth century, as Europeans came into contact with the original inhabitants of America, according to one historian, they often painted the picture of a varied "palette of tawny, brown, yellow, copper-colored, and occasionally red" Indians.

20. Nancy Shoemaker, A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 130. The description of Native Americans as having red skin, while not universal, does go back to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In 1574, Spaniard Juan López de Velasco described the inhabitants "from above Florida and Nueva Galicia to the Río de La Plata and the providences of Chile by the Strait of Magellan" as the color of "cooked quince" (Juan López de Velasco, Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias, ed. Justo Zaragoza [Madrid: Establecimiento Tipográfico de Fortanet, 1894], 27). Quince, a pear-like fruit, undergoes a radical transformation when poached, as the usually colorless flesh turns a deep ruby with the release of red pigments from their chemical bonds. Likewise, William Strachey, a Jamestown resident who wrote about the early settlement of Virginia, likened the skin color of the natives there to "sodden quince." Though he had heard rumors they were born "from the womb indifferent white," he claimed they daily "died [sic] themselves red" using "red tempered oynments of earth" that permanently
By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, the diversity of description had almost entirely disappeared. In an effort to simplify the world’s racial diversity, European scientists introduced a color-based racial classification system that quickly became the predominant way to imagine Native Americans. The soon-to-be common association of Africans as “black,” Europeans as “fair,” and Americans as “copper-colored” first appeared in Carl Linnaeus’s 1740 *Systema Naturae.* A few years later, in 1774, a French priest who had traveled through America noted the widespread view that “many believe[d]” that Indians “constitute[d] a third species of men between the blacks and whites,” agreeing that the natives were “very swarthy and of a dirty dark red,” with a “copper complexion.” The next year, in 1775, this hard-and-fast classification of Caucasians as white, Africans as black, and Native Americans as “copper colored” was all but cemented when the distinguished German naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach published his influential *On the Natural Variety of Mankind.* It was no surprise, then, when later European explorers and politicians described Native Americans as “naturally of a colour bordering upon red” and as “all of a copper colour.” Scientific encyclopedias marveled at how, among Indians of all parts,

“cast them into that stayne” (William Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia* [1612; London: Hakluyt Society, 1849], 63–64).


"distinction of colour was not to be found. In the torrid zone there were no negroes, and in the temperate and frigid zones there were no white people. All of them were a kind of red copper colour."  

Americans quickly followed suit by adopting red as the common descriptor of Indian skin tone. James Adair, in his 1775 History of the American Indians, claimed that "the Indians are of a copper or red-clay colour." Similarly, Elias Boudinot, a believer that Native Americans were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, gave his own description of the "colour of the Indians" as "red, brown, or copper coloured," though he favorably quoted others that simply referred to natives as "red men." Josiah Priest's Wonders of Nature and Providence, Displayed, first printed in 1826, concluded that Indians were "all of one colour": red or copper. In addition to historical works that mentioned Native American's ruddy complexion, printed newspapers helped solidify "red man" as a colloquial substitute for "Indian." In 1830, the same year the Book of Mormon appeared, the Ohio Star printed a poem about Indian origins under the title "The Red Man of the South." Imagery of Indians as "red skins" had become universal.

This tripartite model—envisioning all Indians as part of a red race distinct from whites and black Africans—was ubiquitous in America.


26. James Adair, The History of the American Indians (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1775), 1. Adair, in other parts of his history, said the "Indians are of a reddish or copper colour" and referred to them as "red men" (James Adair, History of the American Indians, 4, 355).

27. Elias Boudinot, A Star in the West (Trenton, NJ: D. Fenton, S. Hutchinson, and J. Dunham, 1816), 137, 262.


Though interracial reproduction existed, scientific thought and folk theories of the time suggested that such unions produced unfit offspring, ensuring the perpetuation of only the three principal races on the continent. A popular investigation into the origin of the “Red Race” noted the “copper or brown-red color” of Native Americans, claiming that “no varieties have been observed, which approach the Indians anywhere near the white and black races.” This clean division into three varieties, “the white, red, and black races,” the book claimed, was “acknowledged by most physiologists” and formed “a component part in nearly every complete system yet proposed.” Identically, the Encyclopaedia Britannica noted that in Native Americans, “the two extremes of complexion, the white of Northern Europe and the black of Ethiopia, are unknown amongst them.” Rather, the “copper shade is found more or less in them all” pervading “nearly all the numerous tribes from the Arctic Ocean to Cape Horn.” Clarifying what “copper” meant, it continued, “their colour inclines less to the yellow, and more to the reddish brown.” “Red” replaced all other descriptions of Native American skin color and remained so well into the early twentieth century. The Book of Mormon’s portrayal of “red men” as possessing a “skin of blackness” was certainly unconventional.

30. Often compared to sterile mules, the progeny of amalgamation were widely believed to “be bad breeders and bad nurses.” As one physician concluded, “many do not conceive,” and of those who did, “most” of their children were “subject to abortions, and a large portion of the children die young.” The few who did survive to adulthood were “intermediate in intelligence,” “less capable of undergoing fatigue and hardships,” and “subject to a variety of chronic diseases” (Josiah C. Nott, Two Lectures on the Natural History of the Caucasian and Negro Races [Mobile, AL: Dade and Thompson, 1844], 32).


34. Thompson Ferrier, commenting on the tripartite model of racial citizenship in 1906, noted that “the commonest mistake made by his white well-wishers in dealing
The “Red Man” in Potential Sources of the Book of Mormon

One of the clearest places to see the contrast between the Book of Mormon’s description of Native American skin color and prevalent portrayals of Indians as “red” can be found in the works of literature that have been linked to it as possible sources. As soon as the volume appeared in print, those who dismissed Joseph Smith’s story of its angelic origin proposed other possible explanations for its provenance. One of the earliest theories suggested that Smith simply plagiarized from a lost 1812 manuscript authored by Solomon Spalding.\(^{35}\) First popularized in 1834, Eber Howe’s *Mormonism Unvailed* published eight affidavits collected by Doctor Philastus Hurlbut in which witnesses recalled similarities between Spalding’s *Manuscript Found* and the Book of Mormon.\(^{36}\) This explanation of the origins of the Book of Mormon relied on the unfounded speculation that Smith’s later associate, Sidney Rigdon, passed the document to him well before the two ever met, yet the story proliferated, as it was impossible to examine the misplaced manuscript.\(^{37}\) Rediscovered in 1884, Spalding’s story did not match the text of the Book of Mormon or tell the story of the founding of America by Nephi and Lehi as the witnesses attested, but instead it contained an account of a Roman vessel bound for Britain that became blown off course and landed in the Americas.\(^{38}\)

with the Indian is the assumption that he is simply a white man with a red skin.” The next most frequent mistake was “the assumption that because he is a non-Caucasian he is to be classified with other non-Caucasians, like the Negro” (Thompson Ferrier, *Indian Education in the North West* [Toronto, ON: Dept. of Missionary Literature of the Methodist Church, 1906], 6).


38. While the content of *Manuscript Found* hardly matches that of the Book of Mormon, the description of its discovery does contain interesting parallels. Like Joseph Smith, the unnamed narrator claimed to have found a large stone that he could only open with the assistance of a lever, that revealed an “earthan Box” containing ancient
Parallels between the two are mostly superficial, seriously calling into question the validity of this theory, though recent wordprint studies have revived interest. 39

At least in regard to skin color, the Book of Mormon did not borrow ideas about the Native Americans from Spalding’s Manuscript Found. Mentioning the color of the natives, the narrator of Manuscript Found described their complexion as “copper coulered [sic].” 40 The shipwrecked Romans initially debated whether intermarriage with this tribe could result in children “as fair & nearly as white” as Europeans, but eventually became convinced they must move away in order to not “degenerate into savage & by mingling with them become the most awful race of beings in existence.” 41 Reflecting common cultural descriptions about Native Americans, Spalding’s Manuscript Found presents the expected descriptors of Indians as copper or red colored. Nowhere does it mention the skin color of the natives resembling anything close to black. 42

The next naturalistic explanation of Book of Mormon emerged around the beginning of the twentieth century, positing that Joseph


40. Spalding, Manuscript Found, 12.


42. The natives as a whole are described as of a “copper” color, but individual tribes and characters express variations to this general rule. The Deliwan’s had a more “brownish hue,” while the Ohon’s skin tone bordered “on an olive tho of a lighter shade.” Another character in the novel, Baska, is depicted as “a little whiter” than others, though so few details are given about him in an aborted chapter, it is unclear if he was an Indian since he is described as “different from the natives” and from another “country” (Spalding, Manuscript Found, 15, 27, 41).
Smith stole from Ethan Smith's 1823 *View of the Hebrews*.\(^43\) Blending scientific opinion with biblical interpretation, the book outlined parallels connecting Indians and Israelites to argue that Native Americans were descendants of the lost ten tribes. By 1922, noted Latter-day Saint apologist B. H. Roberts had studied these similarities and concluded they represented "a serious menace to Joseph Smith's story of the Book of Mormon's origin."\(^44\) Others soon became attracted to this theory, and it remains popular today, despite numerous differences between the two texts.\(^45\)

If the *View of the Hebrews* did serve as source material for the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith ignored its description of the skin color of Native Americans. Quoting the opinions of influential historians, Ethan Smith noted the consensus among scholars, all of "the same opinion," that "the colour of the Indians generally is red, brown, or copper."\(^46\) Though "different shades of complexion [are] found among different tribes of Indians," they were, in essence, "of one colour," red.\(^47\)

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47. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews*, 87.
The enlarged and enhanced 1825 edition of *View of the Hebrews* added the additional opinion of the well-traveled explorer Alexander von Humboldt that Native Americans from "Canada, Florida, Peru, and Brazil" all had "the same swarthy and copper colour." The Book of Mormon's portrayal of two groups of Indians, one with black skin and the other with white skin, is in conflict with the description of Native Americans in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres as red or copper-colored in Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.

By far the most common explanation for the racial attitudes of the Book of Mormon, however, is that Joseph Smith simply absorbed ideas from his surrounding culture. The first to suggest this theory was the Book of Mormon critic Alexander Campbell. Deriding the fact that the book referenced "every error and almost every truth discussed in N. York for the last ten years," Campbell dismissed the possibility of the book being an ancient work, as it contained what he called "Smithisms" throughout. With material for the Book of Mormon floating in the air, Smith, according to early detractors, simply "adapted [the text] to the known prejudices of a portion of the community." Imagining Smith as a master schemer, they claimed that he added "the known habits and characteristics of the Indian" to the Book of Mormon in order to "satisfy the credulous inquirer."

At the time of the Book of Mormon's publication in 1830, undoubtedly the most popular depiction of Indians could be found in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, published only four years earlier, in 1826. Cooper, also a native of upstate New York, imbued his writings with romantic images of Indians and detailed descriptions about the physical appearance of his characters that helped influence the popular perception of Native Americans. The American Indian,


Cooper noted, was “not brown,” but rather “charged with the colour of the rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds.” Throughout the book, Native Americans, irrespective of tribal affiliation, are portrayed as red. Whites in the novel alternatively refer to different groups of Indians as “red men,” “red skins,” “red friends,” “red warriors,” “red associates,” “red companions,” and “red devil[s].”

Characters in *The Last of the Mohicans* debate the theological meaning of race, all while tacitly acknowledging the unalterable division between black, white, and red. At one point in the narrative, Major Duncan Heyward, surrounded by hostile Indian foes, attempts to defuse the situation by claiming that the “Great Father” knows “no difference in his children, whether the colour of the skin be red, or black, or white.” Later, the villain Magua offers a contrary opinion on the same division: “The Spirit that made men colored them differently. . . . Some are blacker than the sluggish bear. These he said should be slaves; and he ordered them to work for ever.” Another group “he made with faces paler than the ermine of the forests: and these he ordered to be traders.” With “appetites to devour the earth . . . God gave him enough, and yet he wants all.” The final group, which “the Great Spirit made with skins brighter and redder than yonder sun,” were God’s “favoured people.” *The Last of the Mohicans*, with its threefold division between blacks, whites, and “red men,” it seems, had little influence on the Book of Mormon’s binary portrayal of Indians as black and white. Taken together,

53. The lone exception is Chingachgook, the last chief of the Mohican tribe. He is described as “one who might claim European parentage . . . drawn in intermingled colours of white and black” (Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 22). It appears that in order to make the near-extinct Mohicans more sympathetic to readers, Cooper chose to differentiate the Mohicans from their “red skin” compatriots.
57. This tripartite division of racial hierarchy reflected not only popular opinion, but also Cooper’s own views. He wrote: “As a rule, the red man disappears before the superior moral and physical influence of the white, just as I believe the black man
all these potential sources reflect relatively expected ideas about the skin color of Native Americans whilst offering strikingly few similarities with the Book of Mormon on the subject.

Latter-day Saints and the “Red Man”

Despite the tremendous influence of the Book of Mormon on the outlook of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, surprisingly, the book’s description of Native American skin color failed to leave a lasting impression. Instead, Latter-day Saints consistently relied heavily on the familiar classification of Indians as red. Even Joseph Smith subscribed to racial attitudes about Native American skin color that were different from the one presented in the Book of Mormon. Like many of his contemporaries, Smith divided humanity into three great races, “red, black, or white.”

Though the Book of Mormon spoke of the black-skinned descendants of the Lamanites turning white through a process of education and acculturation, Smith himself agreed it would be the “Red Men of the western wilderness” who underwent this transformation.


Likewise, while Smith's language at times mirrored paternalistic passages of the Book of Mormon that described “white” gentiles as the “nursing fathers” of the forsaken Native Americans, in his correspondence with the Pottawatomie Indians, where he imagined himself as their “Father,” he departed from the text when calling them his “red children.”\textsuperscript{60} Deeply affected by the Book of Mormon's descriptions and prophecies about the Native Americans, Smith, it seems, was also heavily influenced by nineteenth-century American ideas about the Indians as red.\textsuperscript{61}

In a similar manner, Oliver Cowdery, Joseph Smith's scribe during the translation of the Book of Mormon, is reported to have exhibited a racial outlook about Native American skin color much closer to his contemporaries than to that presented in the Book of Mormon. Following a revelation through Joseph Smith that instructed Cowdery, Peter Whitmer, Jr., Parley P. Pratt, and Ziba Peterson to go “into the wilderness among the Lamanites,” the missionaries traveled by foot over a thousand miles letter to the editor. On another occasion, Smith also spoke of the “face of the Red Man” turning “pale,” though this appeared in the context of lamenting the wrongs committed by the state of Missouri following the eviction of the Latter-day Saints, and therefore should be interpreted as metaphoric in nature and not a literal change. See “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 [2 November 1838–31 July 1842],” 927, The Joseph Smith Papers, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/109 (accessed June 12, 2017).


\textsuperscript{61} Even though Smith viewed modern Native Americans as “red,” he invoked the Book of Mormon's racial binary when he imagined their Lamanite ancestors. In 1834, while traveling with Zion's Camp through Illinois, Smith and his companions unearthed a skeleton from an Indian burial mound. Though there are multiple conflicting accounts of the event, the majority agree that Smith declared the remains belonged to a deceased “white Lamanite” named Zelph. Noting the peculiarity of a “white Lamanite,” those who recorded the event further stated that Smith explained how the Book of Mormon curse was removed from Zelph due to his exceeding righteousness. See Kenneth W. Godfrey, “The Zelph Story,” BYU Studies 29/2 (1989): 31–56. Smith appears to have accepted without reservation both descriptions of contemporary Native Americans as red and the Book of Mormon's portrayal of Lamanites as black or, in this case, white, without ever squaring these discordant descriptions.
to Indian Territory. After reaching their destination, Cowdery, according to a witness, addressing the displaced Delaware Indians through an interpreter, told of a “Book in the earth . . . found and made known in the latter day to the pale faces who should possess the land; that they might again make it known to the red man.” This news, “which will do the red man good,” contained the history of the “red men’s forefathers” written “in the language of the forefathers of the red man.” Presenting a copy to “our red friend, the chief of the Delawares,” the missionaries promised that “if the red man would then receive this Book and learn the things written in it, and do according thereunto, they should . . . become one people . . . in common with the pale faces.”

Warping the Book of Mormon through the lens of American racial understanding, Cowdery inadvertently changed the book’s white/black dichotomy into a pale/red one. Though both Smith and Cowdery were involved in the publication of the Book of Mormon, both expressed a racial vision of Indians as red in conflict with the text’s claim to the contrary.

Following their lead, subsequent Church officials also frequently referred to Indians in their public speeches as “red men” or “red skins.” In private, Latter-day Saint leaders alternatively called Native Americans red men or red skins.


their “red neighbors,” “red brethren,” and “untutored red men.”

Despite the insistence of the Book of Mormon text that the Lamanites inherited a “skin of blackness,” modern Indians were universally classified as red. The terms “Lamanite” and “Indian” soon became interchangeable with “red man” in common parlance. Notably, neither was ever employed synonymously with black. Commenting on this fact, historian W. Paul Reeve finds it “ironic” that “the color [Latter-day Saints] ascribed to Native Americans . . . did not fit the color of the Book of Mormon curse,” something they never did reconcile.

This rhetoric, that Indians were the “red-skinned” progeny of Book of Mormon peoples, was not only perpetuated by officials, but also penetrated into popular discourse through hymns. Included in the Church’s first hymnal edited by Emma Smith and appearing in subsequent Latter-day Saint hymnals until 1927, W. W. Phelps’s “O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man” imagined a conversation between a white settler and Native American. Asked “Who are you? Why you roam? And how you get your living? Have you no God;—no home?,” the “Red Man” surprisingly responded that he is a descendent of Ephraim and “Before your nation knew us, Some thousand moons


66. Brigham Young to George A. Smith, May 29, 1856, George A. Smith Papers 1834–1877, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Amasa M. Lyman to Brigham Young, January 20, 1858, Brigham Young office files 1832–1878, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; and Brigham Young to Amasa M. Lyman, February 4, 1858, Brigham Young office files 1832–1878, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

67. For information on the Church’s later relationship with Native Americans, see Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 41–153.


70. For more information on the portrayal of Native Americans in Latter-day Saint hymnody, see P. Jane Hafen, “‘Great Spirit Listen’: The American Indian in Mormon Music,” *Dialogue* 18/4 (1985): 133–42.
ago, Our fathers fell in darkness, and wander’d to and fro.”

Filled with racist images of “idle Indian[s]” with “savage customs,” the hymn makes clear that these Lamanite descendants are “Red Men.”

If anything, the association between the Book of Mormon curse and “red skin” only solidified in hymnody during the Utah Period. Charles W. Penrose, a Latter-day Saint Apostle, composed the hymn “Great Spirit, Listen to the Red Man’s Wail,” which appeared in four editions of the Latter-day Saint hymnal between 1871 and 1927. The text, which promised “Not many moons shall pass away, before The curse of darkness from your skin shall flee” pleaded with God the “Great Chieftain” to “hear the Indian’s cry” and save the “red man” “from the pale-faced foe!”

Like “O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man,” the Book of Mormon’s “curse of darkness” in “Great Spirit, Listen to the Red Man’s Wail” was explicitly associated with the “red skin” of Native Americans.

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71. W. W. Phelps, “O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man,” *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, OH: F.G. Williams, 1835), 83–84. In the same serial in which “O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man” first appeared, Phelps spoke of the curse upon Native Americans as “a sample of marking with blackness for rebellion against God’s holy word and holy order.” He argued that “in time” all people who disobeyed God would inherit “black skin” as the Book of Mormon had described. Despite specifically tying the Lamanite curse to “blackness,” Phelps consistently referred to modern Native Americans as “red men.” See *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1834: 34, 50, 82.

72. Charles W. Penrose, “Great Spirit, Listen to the Red Man’s Wail,” in *Sacred Hymns and Spiritual Songs, for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. George Q. Cannon (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Office, the Church Book Depot, 1871), 371–73.

73. Latter-day Saints also commonly visualized the trek west as a journey through red territory into former Lamanite lands. Another hymn authored by Penrose mentioned the trip to Zion over prairies of “waving grass Where the red man roams in his pride” (Charles W. Penrose, “O Wouldst Thou from Bondage,” in *The Mountain Warbler, Being a Collection of Original Songs and Recitations*, ed. William Willes [Salt Lake City: Deseret News Book and Job Establishment, 1872], 97). Likewise, the hymn, “For the Strength of the Hills,” present in the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hymnal, once contained a reference to the Great Plains as where “red untutored Indian Seeks here his rude delights” (Edward L. Sloan, “For the Strength of the Hills,” in *Sacred Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, ed. Cannon, 93). Outside official channels, the story is much the same. In one popular folk song, sights along the Mormon trail included antelope, deer, elk, buffalo, and the “the bloody redskins” (“Root, Hog, or Die,” in *The Mormon
Imagery portraying modern Native Americans as the offspring of red Lamanites permeated literature as well. George Reynolds, combining scientific theories about the genesis of racial diversity typical of the time with his unwavering belief in the Book of Mormon, wrote a series of articles for the *Juvenile Instructor* entitled “Man and His Varieties,” attempting to describe how the “red-” skinned Native Americans came to be.74 Cursed by God, Reynolds wrote that this “once a white and beautiful people” fell “from their beauty and strength” into the “copper colored” people “we see they are to-day.”75 Decades later, Latter-day Saints reached the same conclusion. A lesson supplement in the *Young Woman’s Journal* included an extensive list of questions answered by the Book of Mormon. Reading the Book of Mormon promised to not only solve the issue of “Who are the American Indians?” but also, the supplement claimed, “Why have they a red skin?”76

This prevalent, and incorrect, reading of the Book of Mormon that depicted Lamanites descendants as red was not exclusive to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A pamphlet titled, *Whence Came the Red Man* distributed by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints recapitulated the Book of Mormon story as such:

> For many years the [Indians] remembered the gentle teachings of the Son of God and all lived together in peace, prospering greatly,

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74. George Reynolds, “Man and His Varieties,” *Juvenile Instructor*, November 1, 1868: 165. While at times he referenced the three races of “black, white or red,” Reynolds believed there were in reality five distinct races: “fair” Caucasians, “the Negro Race” with “black” skin, Asians with a “yellowish” complexion, the “brown” Malayan race, and the “copper colored” Native Americans. See Reynolds, “Man and His Varieties,” *Juvenile Instructor*, November 1, 1868: 165; “Man and His Varieties,” *Juvenile Instructor*, September 15, 1868: 141–42.


76. “Lesson XXXVI,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 13/7 (July 1902): 334.
but at last they divided into two great camps and began to quarrel bitterly among themselves. Part of them became the color of fine copper and the red brethren fought against the white.\textsuperscript{77}

Distorting the actual descriptions in the Book of Mormon, red replaced black in order for the story to make sense for an American audience.

Twentieth-century commentaries on the Book of Mormon were equally not immune from the pitfalls of conflating red and black skin. Fawn Brodie, in her brief synopsis of the book in \textit{No Man Knows My History}, described in her chapter on the “Red Sons of Israel” how “Laman and Lemuel were evil-tempered, sinful youths who so incurred the wrath of God that He cursed them and all their descendants with a red skin.”\textsuperscript{78} Even famed Brigham Young University professor Sidney B. Sperry, normally careful in his observations about the Book of Mormon, once claimed that the modern Native Americans received their pigmentation from their Lamanite ancestors who “were cursed with a red skin.”\textsuperscript{79} Likewise, Leslie Rumble, an Australian scholar writing during the 1950s, summarized how the Book of Mormon told how the “American Indians” were “cursed by God with red skins.”\textsuperscript{80} Though the Book of Mormon was explicit that the Lamanite’s skin color was changed to black, persistent attitudes about Indians as red influenced interpretations of the book well into the middle part of the twentieth century.

Even in modern times, as the racialized language of Indians as red has fallen out of favor, the confusion of black and red skin continues, especially in critical treatments of the Book of Mormon. Eager to discredit Joseph Smith, such works often employ language of red Lamanites

\textsuperscript{77} The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, \textit{Whence Came the Red Man} (Independence, MO: Ensign Publishing House, 1920), 4.

\textsuperscript{78} Brodie, \textit{No Man Knows My History}, 43.

\textsuperscript{79} Sidney B. Sperry, \textit{Our Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: Stevens &Wallis, 1947), 40.

to argue against his explanation of its origins. Accordingly, Sally Denton has concluded that the curse of “red skin” proved definitively “the saga of the Nephites and Lamanites” was nothing more than “an expansion and explanation of the most common theories of [Smith’s] day.” 81 The cartoon South Park took a similar position. Satirizing an imagined conversation between Joseph Smith and the Angel Moroni in which the deceased Nephite prophet explained how “as punishment, God turned [the Lamanites’] skin red,” a chorus of singers immediately lampoons: “Dumb dumb dumb dumb dumb.” 82 Blurring the distinction between red and black, these critics have rather ironically become like the early believers in the Book of Mormon who first twisted the text by misappropriating the Book of Mormon’s actual description of Native American skin color to meet their own preconceptions.

**Conclusion**

The racial worldview of the Book of Mormon is a historical anomaly in that it envisioned Native Americans as either black or white when nearly everyone else identified Indians as red. As it turns out, this radically departed from the personal views of Joseph Smith and his nineteenth-century culture. The description of Native Americans as red, which one should expect to find in the Book of Mormon, simply is not there. At the time, antebellum America abounded with images of Amerindians as “red men” or “red skins,” making frequent mention of their unmistakable “copper” complexions. Though certainly offensive to today’s sensibilities, no one would have batted an eye at the time of the Book of Mormon’s publication in 1830 if it had represented Native Americans this way. Instead, somewhat paradoxically, the Book of Mormon exhibited a peculiar perspective, portraying the ancient Americans as either black or white. This fact, however, seemed to have been lost


82. *South Park,* “All about Mormons,” season 7, episode 12, Comedy Central, November 19, 2003, written and directed by Trey Parker.
on most readers. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Community of Christ commentators, scholars, and critics of the Restoration alike, all understood the Book of Mormon as a history of the “red man.” Rather than adopt the black- and white-skinned schema presented in the Book of Mormon, ingrained American attitudes about racial coloration as it related to Native American skin color held sway. Borrowing a stereotype from their own culture, they imagined Indians as red all over.

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83. In a similar way to the process by which the doctrinal content of the Book of Mormon was believed as true while never becoming the source of theology and praxis, the same can be said for the attitudes of early Latter-day Saints related to skin color. See Philip L. Barlow, Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44; Terryl Givens, By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.
The Book of Helaman is a segment of the Book of Mormon whose study is both imperative and complicated in underappreciated ways. The imperative behind the book of Helaman’s study lies in the text’s significance for the self-conception of the Book of Mormon as well as its mythmaking function for the early Saints in their imaginative mapping of the American West. Like the Book of Mormon, Helaman traffics in buried texts that disclose signs and covenants and makes explicit the latent Lamanite frame that undergirds the Book of Mormon as a whole. It presents, as well, the Book of Mormon’s most robust account of secret combinations—a group that then entranced the text’s earliest readers to such a degree that they used this characterization to imbue their landscape with religious significance, describing the mountains surrounding the Salt Lake Valley as “the abode of the

1. The Book of Mormon is oriented by and sympathetic to the Lamanites more than many Latter-day Saints recognize. It explicitly addresses itself to the Lamanites (see Title Page), identifies them as the covenant remnant responsible for building the New Jerusalem (3 Nephi 21:23–24; cf. D&C 28:8–9), and consistently holds up Lamanite faithfulness as a contrast to the Nephite infidelity that resulted in their eventual destruction. These, among other prioritizations of a Lamanite frame, led Jared Hickman to credit the Book of Mormon as a “theology of Native and/or nonwhite liberation” and a text that performatively undoes its own instances of racism (Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86/3 [2014]: 435).
spirits of Gadianton robbers.” To understand the Book of Mormon’s sense of itself as a material artifact, to clarify the theological status of the Lamanites, and to explore the way the Book of Mormon helped sculpt a sense of place for early Latter-day Saints, close attention to the book of Helaman is an unavoidable prerequisite.

Complicating that imperative, however, is the book’s structural density, which I will treat here as a problem of doubling. Nearly every major character or object or social group within Helaman’s text is doubled with another character or object or social group. Everything comes in twos: murdered chief judges (Helaman 1:9; 8:27), Lamanite conversions (Helaman 5:19, 50–51), buried objects (Helaman 5:51; 11:10), slippery treasures (Helaman 12:18–19; 13:18–20), angelic ministries (Helaman 5:48; 16:14), and so on. The book opens with two distinct threats to the Nephite government and concludes with the sermons of two prophets, who each give two signs relative to the prediction of Jesus’s future advent. The book of Helaman also contrasts the dualistic split in Lehi’s posterity more pointedly than any other Book of Mormon text. This doubling extends even to seemingly basic


3. Even this attempt to name the structural density of the text obscures the complexity of the situation. My point is less to claim Helaman’s rigid adherence to the number two and more to note the proliferation of parallels that often—but not always—present as doubles. There is, for instance, one other mention of a chief judge’s murder in Helaman 6:19 (although it is not part of the narrative action as are the other two instances), and depending on how we group buried objects, this theme could also be read to occur more than twice (should we include, for instance, references to the “hiding up” of treasures/tools?). It should also be noted that the two cases of angelic ministries referenced here represent the appearances of angels to large groups in Helaman, and not appearances to individuals. However, the prophets Nephi and Samuel also exhibit individual relationships with angels in private theophany settings, which could be taken to form yet another double (see Helaman 10:6; 13:7).
concepts such as motion: Helaman twice highlights the motility of the Earth (Helaman 5:27, 31–33; 12:13–15) and twice reports major characters falling to the ground (Helaman 9:3–4; 14:7). In this strategy of doubling, Helaman carries forward the trajectory of the book of Alma, which is also organized around a set of detailed parallels. But where Alma’s parallels are stable, precise, and neatly composed, Helaman’s doubles seem messy and erratic, collapsing together only to bleed into other doubled pairs and trouble their borders. Helaman is thus both a priceless moment of clarity through which a better understanding of the Book of Mormon can be reached and also simultaneously opaque as a nebulous text whose precise shape is difficult to pin down. It is, in other words, not unlike the “slippery treasures” encountered for the first time within its pages.

This paper tracks the structural shift from Alma’s tidy parallels into the seemingly erratic doubles of Helaman and suggests one possible culprit behind that collapse. Put simply, the blame seems to fall on what the text presents as a new Nephite technology for subverting the law. It is no coincidence that the book of Helaman appears to abandon every attempt at structural coherence at the very same moment that it narrates the rise of secret combinations. Indeed, what might at first appear to be an accidental degradation in the structure of Helaman reveals itself to be, instead, a deliberate response to the narrative instabilities inherent in describing the Gadianton robbers. What I call narrative doubling, then, refers to the structural forms correlated by the book of Helaman with its description of events among the Nephites between the fortieth and ninetieth year of the reign of the judges. In order to make that case, I highlight two kinds of doubling in Helaman (narrative juxtaposition and prophetic mirroring) in which the former showcases the purported cause of structural erosion while the latter showcases the text’s (and, perhaps, the entire Book of Mormon’s) attempt to halt that erosion. After a brief overview of the structural patterns of Alma and Helaman as I see them (still preliminarily, it must be noted), the paper will examine the narrative juxtaposition between secret combinations and Nephite dissenters in order to reveal the disruptive novelty of the
secret combinations' subversion. Following that, I turn to Helaman 8, where the prophet Nephi exhibits the second kind of doubling characteristic to the book of Helaman—a specular or mirroring double that is leveraged here to disrupt the Gadianton robbers. By tracing Helaman's structural phenomena, the technology of secret combinations, and the prophetic mirroring that attempts to undermine that technology, this paper hopes to clarify the structure of Helaman at the same moment that it reveals the real obstacles complicating its study.

Alma and Helaman: Structural Preliminaries

In 2017, Joseph Spencer published a brief article outlining the “intentional organizational structure of the book of Alma” as a two-dimensional grid in which Alma 30–44 mirrors the narrative of Alma 1–16, while Alma 45–63 inverts the narrative of Alma 17–29. Quite handily, for our purposes, Spencer concludes his article by laying out the parallels in a single table, which I reproduce here.

Table 1.

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<tr>
<th>First quarter (Alma 1–16)</th>
<th>Third quarter (Alma 30–44)</th>
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<td>Aftermath and cleanup (Alma 27–29)</td>
<td>Aftermath and cleanup (Alma 63)</td>
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Spencer’s article is cogent, and the theological provocations he offers along the way are well worth readers’ attention. My purpose in citing it here is simply to contrast the structure of Alma with the structure of Helaman. Like Alma, the book of Helaman seems intent on organizing Nephite history around a series of comparisons, but Helaman’s comparisons are strung along in a linear chain rather than stacked in the sort of two-dimensional grid suggested by Spencer. The book opens with the juxtaposition of two attempted political coups that threaten Zarahemla in the years following Pahoran’s death (Helaman 1–2), then looks to a broad comparison between Nephites and Lamanites along both military and religious metrics (Helaman 4–6), followed by the prophet Nephi’s inverted echoes of secret combination techniques in his effort to destabilize Gadianton operatives’ seizure of judicial power (Helaman 7–9). Mormon then interrupts the narrative in order to emphasize Nephite wickedness by way of an overt comparison with the divine responsiveness of a kinetic earth (Helaman 10–12), and the book concludes with Samuel’s elevation of Lamanite faithfulness as a mirror to Nephite instability along once-more racialized lines (Helaman 13–15). That these doubles are intentionally comparative is evident in statements of explicit appraisal peppered throughout the book.6

6. As a representative sample drawn from texts not discussed in more depth in what follows, see Helaman 4:24 (the Nephites “had become weak, like unto their brethren the Lamanites”); Helaman 12:7 (“O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth”); Helaman 15:15 (“Had the mighty works been shown unto [the Lamanites] which have been shown unto you [Nephites] . . . they never would again have dwindled in unbelief”).
When compared to the structure of Alma, one is struck by the way the book of Helaman fails to align its pericopes with others in the text; Helaman's doubles consistently gaze inward on the contents of its narrative rather than across the narrative to compare it with later or earlier narrative events. Where Alma 1–16 renders itself parallel to Alma 30–44, for instance, Helaman 1–2 exhibits no structural interest in what, say, Helaman 10–12 might signify. Helaman may carry forward Alma's strategy of doubling, in other words, but it does not seem to carry those doubles forward in a way that gives shape and coherence to the book as a whole.

We might notice, as well, that while the parallels in Helaman are not only more tightly condensed, they are also proliferating. Alma's organization pairs together fifteen-chapter sections of the narrative. At best, Helaman's parallels only ever unite three-chapter text blocks, any one of which contains several smaller doubles that haphazardly pick up themes and images from elsewhere in the text. It's as if as soon as the narrator finds a useful comparison around which to organize the account, it immediately slips away, until the entire book of Helaman is composed of successively pinned-together parallels that fail to hold. The juxtaposition of dissenters with secret combinations characterizes Nephite politics for only a single year; after that, the most pertinent illustrative contrast is the military failure of the Nephites compared to Lamanite success; that situation likewise diffuses itself in rapid order, and the text scrambles to compare the prophet Nephi's revelatory capacity with the fraternal knowledge of secret combinations, and so on. The book of Helaman is deeply invested in comparisons, and yet that comparative framework fails to sustain itself in any thematically cohesive way.

The fact that doubling remains so prominent in Helaman all the same suggests that we are witnessing not simply a novel narrative technique keyed to a new era of Nephite history so much as the simultaneous failure of the same narrative techniques that had succeeded so well in the previous book. Readers are meant to understand that Nephite history is no longer sufficiently stable to bear the kind of tidy structuring that had been imposed on the book of Alma, and so we witness the
previous two-dimensional grid collapse into the one-dimensional linear organization of Helaman. As the Nephites hurtle toward large-scale destruction in Third Nephi and (later) Mormon, so, too, the parallels that organize their narrative—and the auto-deconstruction of those parallels—pick up in tempo, leaving the structure of Helaman caught in the Nephites' breakneck gallop toward total political collapse.

Given that this structural disintegration and increasing tempo occurs so soon after the transition between books, Helaman's opening chapters warrant extra attention in accounting for this shift. Helaman's first stretch of text narrates the rise of secret combinations set against the backdrop of the more familiar Book of Mormon phenomenon of militarized dissent. As many Latter-day Saint commenters have noted, secret combinations are the novelty that sets Helaman apart from previous sections of the Book of Mormon, and so it is to secret combinations that we should look in order to understand the novel textual structure used to narrate their rise. Helaman opens with the account of their development, is dogged by their political disruption at every step of its narrative, and sets the stage for dire prophetic warnings about the latter-day destruction that secret combinations portend. If the structure of Helaman is indeed characterized by seemingly erratic parallels, its

7. Brant Gardner, for instance, dedicates an entire introductory chapter of his commentary on the book of Helaman to the identity and theological significance of secret combinations; see Brant Gardner, "The Gadianton Robbers in Mormon's Theological History: Their Structural Role and Plausible Identification," in Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:11–29. Reynolds and Sjodahl go so far as to describe the years narrated in the book of Helaman as "among the most important in Nephite history" specifically because "at that time arose that terrible and devilish organization, the Gadianton Robbers" (George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973], 5:202). And McConkie and Millet place first on their list of "timely messages" in the book of Helaman the "rise of secret combinations and the Gadianton bands," which they take as evidence "that Satan . . . is alive and well on planet earth" today (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991], 3:331). The rhetoric of the latter two examples is illustrative of the imaginative sway Gadianton robbers continue to exercise for many Latter-day Saints well into the twentieth century.
content is undoubtedly characterized by secret combinations. My sug-
gestion is that the book of Helaman, like many sophisticated narratives, 
intends to correlate that content with its structural form.

**Narrative Juxtaposition: Secret Combinations**
**versus Militarized Dissent**

Significant as the account of secret combinations is to the opening chap-
ters of Helaman, however, it is not narrated in a vacuum. Kishkumen's 
band (the first secret combination recorded in the Book of Mormon) 
arises as a new method for subverting Nephite law—a method whose 
innovation is thrown into relief by overt comparison with another, more 
traditional method of legal disruption among the Nephites: militarized 
dissent. The titular “secrecy” of secret combinations is pointed up by 
contrast with the overt displays of the aggrieved dissenters, while the 
difficulty of identifying Kishkumen’s operatives and plans is juxtaposed 
with the brazen visibility of dissenter aims. In order to elaborate on 
these differences, readers are encouraged to look to the political con-
ditions narrated in Helaman’s opening chapter, the several similarities 
between secret combinations and dissenters, and the crucial diver-
gences between the two groups in dress and tactics. Over the course of 
these comparisons, it becomes clear that no parallel or double remains 
structurally stable in Helaman because secret combinations erode bina-
ries altogether.

Helaman 1 opens with a succession crisis that splits three ways 
rather than two; it adds, that is, a third political option to the more 
conventional dual lines of rivalry that characterize previous stretches of 
the Nephite narrative. Among the political constituencies of Pahoran’s 
three sons are represented not just the anticipated winners (Pahoran is elected chief judge; Helaman 1:5) and losers (Pacumeni; Helaman 1:6). There is also a third brother, Paanchi, who represents a group of 
sore, nearly dissenting losers. Here, too, the story seems to proceed at 
first along predictable lines. Paanchi and his followers are “exceedingly 
wroth” at their loss and are just “about to ... rise up in rebellion” when
the judicial machine suddenly incarcerates their leader and condemns him to death (Helaman 1:7–8). Instead of amping up the conflict in the form of full-blown dissent, however, Paanchi’s followers resort to more subtle disruptions of power by assassinating Pahoran, and taking a protective oath of secrecy (Helaman 1:9–11). Three brothers vying for government office thus provide the narrative backdrop against which can appear a third way to exert political power. Rather than splitting predictably into the binary camps of winners and losers or, more accurately, majority populists and minority dissenters, the Nephite populace here finds itself divided between the winning majority, the defeated minority, and those who cannot be neatly grouped with either.

Of special note here is the way that this new group is explicitly set alongside the more familiar phenomenon of Nephite dissent. Not only is this juxtaposition internal to the band’s initial formation (Kishkumen’s group, remember, is populated by those who were “about to ... rise up in rebellion” [Helaman 1:7] but opted for murder instead); the chapter also supplies an external specter of dissent in the form of the army that threatens Zarahemla the following year—an army led, notably, by “a man whose name was Coriantumr; ... and he was a dissenter from among the Nephites” (Helaman 1:15). Due to the political distractions attending Pahoran’s succession, the Nephites found themselves insufficiently prepared for an attack on their capital city such that Coriantumr “did take possession of the whole” of Zarahemla, executed their newly appointed chief judge, and immediately launched a campaign against outlying Nephite territories (Helaman 1:20–22). The Nephites scrambled for several months to gain their military footing, but no sooner had the general Moronihah “established again peace” (Helaman 2:1) than the text pivots straightaway to secret combinations once again (Helaman 2:3ff.). The formation of Kishkumen’s band of robbers is framed internally and externally by both the threat and the realized consequences of dissent.

8. It is suggestive that Kishkumen and his fellows exhibit something like fraternal unity at the same moment that they concretize the fraternal division between Pahoran’s three sons.
The intentional comparison between secret combinations and Nephite dissenters is signaled by more than their tightly interlacing narratives, however. Kishkumen's group is also framed in terms similar to Coriantumr's army. Both are explicitly motivated by "anger" (Helaman 1:9, 16–17). Each is also oriented toward political power and wealth, with dissenters being characterized throughout the Book of Mormon by their regnal aspirations (of which there are also hints here; see Helaman 1:16), while secret combinations are known for government maneuvering and "robbery" (Helaman 2:4). Both groups seem to have some kind of Jaredite connection, suggested by the recognizably Jaredite names of their leaders, Kishkumen and Coriantumr. And both are also introduced, oddly enough, with an emphasis on their dress. The dissenter-led army comes notably bedecked in armor (Helaman 1:14), while Kishkumen makes his first narrative appearance in disguise (Helaman 1:12). Each group is also numerically undetermined: Coriantumr heads an army that cannot be counted due to its excess (an "innumerable army of men" [Helaman 1:14]), while Kishkumen's band is untotalizable due to its secrecy (they "did mingle themselves among the people, in a manner that they all could not be found" [Helaman 1:12]). Note, as well, that each group is responsible for the death of a chief judge in Helaman's opening chapter: Kishkumen famously murders Pahoran₂ (Helaman 1:9), while Pacumeni is killed by Coriantumr in battle (Helaman 1:21).

Point by point, secret combinations and Nephite dissenters are set up as doubles of each other in the first chapter of Helaman.

This pairing not only forms the first and most paradigmatic double of the book of Helaman; it also delineates with particular clarity the distinction between secret combinations and Nephite dissenters that is responsible for the structural instability of the text and the political instability of the subsequent Nephite government. For all their

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9. One Coriantumr figures prominently in the final Jaredite battles described in Ether 13–15. The name Kish (and related variants) also appear frequently in names from the book of Ether; see Ether 1:18–19; 8:10–17; 9:1–12; 10:17–18. For more on the connection between Jaredites and Kishkumen's band, refer to Gardner, "Gadianton Robbers."
similarities, the narration of these two groups sharply differentiates their methods. Our first hint of this distinction occurs with the different clothing associated with each group’s grab for power, which provides a contrast in visibility versus secrecy. The dissenters lead an army dressed conspicuously in armor—a type of clothing with nothing duplicitous about it. Armor registers immediately as armor, announcing unironically the anticipated military conflict propagated by its wearers. Indeed, armor’s function depends on that visibility precisely in order to intimidate opposing armies. A disguise, by contrast, works through its invisibility. If a disguise is identifiable as a disguise, it has already failed. Disguises cannot straightforwardly perform their own utility in a recognizable way without immediately compromising that utility. Through something as seemingly inconsequential as the descriptions of their appearance, the text positions Nephite dissenters as relying on straightforward, conspicuous display, and secret combinations, by contrast, as depending on enigmatic and covert acts.

Similar to the brazen visibility of their dress, dissenters operate along external, visible axes of movement and behavior—axes, moreover, that are consistently linear. This pattern is evident throughout the long history of Book of Mormon precedents for dissent in which a Nephite faction grows dissatisfied with either the Church or the government and makes a beeline for Lamanite territory, cutting an externally oriented line from one side of the binary to the other and trading their Nephite identity for a Lamanite affiliation. This was the tactic by which Amalickiah famously assumed the Lamanite throne in Alma 46–47, causing his followers to join “with the traditions of the Lamanites” (Alma 47:36). Less famously but following the same pattern of dualistic territory-switching, the Book of Mormon reports dissenters joining with Lamanites in the thirty-ninth, fifty-fourth, fifty-sixth, and eightieth years of the reign of the judges (Alma 63:14; Helaman 4:1–4; 11:24). Secret combinations, by contrast, work orthogonal to grand displays of political affiliation and the external axes of militarized allegiance. Rather than venting their frustrated electoral ambitions by turning outward and allying themselves with a warring clan,
members of Kishkumen's band turn inward and ally themselves with one another, exhibiting a tactical reliance on the invisibility provided by oath-bound confidentiality. Thus, Kishkumen and his group avoid detection by “mingl[ing] themselves among the people” (Helaman 1:12), evincing the broad diffusion by which secret combinations operate. Once again, the text pointedly contrasts their tactics with Coriantumr’s military transparency by noting that his goal was “to cut his way through with the sword” (Helaman 1:23), bifurcating Nephite lands by carving a straight line from one exterior territorial boundary to the other.

This same distinction between visible linearity and invisible diffusion is also on display in the way each group exits Zarahemla. After the death of Kishkumen, the band’s new leader and the remaining members quietly diffuse themselves into the wilderness: “They took their flight out of the land, by a secret way, into the wilderness; and thus . . . they could nowhere be found” (Helaman 2:11). When Coriantumr exits the narrative, however, he does so with a conspicuous trajectory: “[Coriantumr] did not tarry in the land of Zarahemla, but he did march forth with a large army, even toward the city of Bountiful” (Helaman 1:23). Notice as well how these different technologies of power are reflected in each group’s murder of a chief judge. Secret combinations are described as looking inward, taking aim at the very heart of Nephite government, such that Kishkumen killed Pahoran “as he sat upon the judgment-seat” (Helaman 1:9) at the inmost nucleus of Nephite territory and governance. It should come as no surprise that Coriantumr kills Pacumeni “against the wall” of the city (Helaman 1:21), along a boundary—indeed, at the precise external limit he hoped to breach. Each group’s dress, movement, and even the deaths of their most prominent victims are narrated in a way that exhibits their aims and methods. While dissenters are boundary-crossing, allegiance-switching groups, secret combinations are oriented internally, flouting traditional political binaries in favor of diffuse, networked tactics. It is this tactical distinction, I want to claim, that proves so disastrous for both governmental and textual stability.
Although dissenters have plagued Nephite politics throughout the Book of Mormon, such rebellions typically resolve themselves in a more or less straightforward fashion, often giving way to long stretches of peace. The new technology of secret combinations, however, cannot seem to resolve into any stable equilibrium. Readers are meant to understand that secret combinations prove so disastrous to the Nephite government because of their impact on the social binaries that organize Nephite life. Where dissenters reinforce social boundaries, secret combinations erode them—precisely the distinction on display in the narrative juxtaposition of Helaman 1–2. To switch national allegiance, as the Nephite dissenters have done, is to reinforce the difference between the two identities being exchanged (judges vs. king-men, say, or Nephites vs. Lamanites). To affiliate oneself with one side of that binary over and against the other is to make use of the binary to ground one’s identity. Just as the full force of a law is not felt until it is broken or a geographic border is not firmly maintained unless it is felt to be under threat, so, too, the social boundaries that structure the Nephite narrative are reinforced whenever a dissenter crosses them.

Secret combinations, however, weaken and erode those boundaries in that they never transgress those limits. Rather than joining with the Lamanites and thereby shoring up the Nephite/Lamanite division, Kishkumen’s band expresses its dissent internal to the Nephite polity. Their invisible, networked, and diffuse approach to power throws the sovereign model of Nephite legal authority into complete disarray. It is, paradoxically, through their disinterest in the traditional binaries of Nephite life that secret combinations so successfully erode them. It may be no coincidence, then, that it is a literal boundary that is threatened as a consequence of their scheming in the opening chapter. Helaman 1:18 records that “because of so much contention and so much difficulty in the government, [the Nephites] had not kept sufficient guards in the land of Zarahemla.” No sooner do secret combinations emerge in the Book of Mormon than even something as literal as the border enforcement of the Nephite capital is immediately eroded.
To return briefly to the structural questions that opened this article, at least one way should now be clear in which the political instability of the Nephite government is reflected in the structural instability of the book of Helaman, and how secret combinations, as a narrative phenomenon, are responsible for both. Social and narrative binaries can no longer map a terrain thrown into binary-eroding chaos. It is a measure of the slipperiness of secret combinations that the group associated with binaries and visibility can be cleanly dispatched ("[Coriantumr] himself was slain, and the Lamanites did yield themselves into the hands of the Nephites" [Helaman 1:32]), while the group associated with diffusion and secrecy can only be temporarily forced underground just to recur in equally nebulous and ever more disruptive forms for the rest of the Nephite story. Structural parallels come undone when they narrate a history haunted by that underground.

And yet, although Helaman dispatches with the tidy, two-dimensional parallels of the sort displayed in the book of Alma, this is not to say that parallels and doubles are entirely discontinued in Helaman. Nor does the book of Helaman represent a mere structural flop, as if the narrator was stubbornly forwarding a set of authorial tactics without any heed for their obvious failure. The erosion of political binaries by secret combinations is not the last word on doubling in Helaman. There is another kind of doubling running through the text that functions as something other than the broad-scale historical juxtapositions we saw in Alma. These are the moments where doubling is leveraged as a mirror, which I will illustrate with two occasions, both of which cluster around the prophet Nephi. In the first, Nephi uses his prophetic power to mirror the logic and methods of secret combinations, and, in the second, the Earth reflects the instability of the Nephite situation (initially by way of a famine invoked through Nephi's newly bestowed sealing power). Helaman may be rife with quickly proliferating and seemingly unstable doubles, but not all of those doubles function in the same way. Additionally, it is in this second method of doubling that we find hints of intention behind Helaman's structural instability.
Prophetic Mirroring: Nephi versus Secret Combinations

The metaphor of mirroring will be useful to us here for two reasons. First, mirroring emphasizes visibility. A reflective surface doubles an image in such a way that it reproduces the entirety of the image and makes that entirety open to a gaze. While narrative juxtaposition also aims to underline a motif through its repetition or to highlight a contrast by way of its opposition, such juxtapositions only aim at isolated motifs or contrasts. Mirroring instead produces visibility in a broader register. As we saw in the previous section, juxtaposition rendered visible only certain points of comparison—particular items of clothing, specific patterns of movement, or certain behavioral tactics. To hold a mirror up to secret combinations is not to emphasize a solitary feature (a nose here or an eye there) but to reproduce the whole face in perfect clarity. Given this emphasis on visibility, it is no coincidence that the book of Helaman associates mirroring doubles most closely with the interruption of secret combinations—that is, precisely when the book hopes to counter strategies based on secrecy and hiddenness. Beginning in Helaman 7–9, Nephi's task is to disrupt Gadianton tactics (to disrupt their disruption, we might say), and the way he proposes to do so is by behaving like a reflective surface alongside their operation. Rendering them and their methods public and visible—especially on the broad scale that the term “mirroring” invokes—obviously hampers secret combinations' reliance on invisibility. Using a mirroring metaphor thus allows us to highlight the visibility specific to this kind of doubling, which renders secret combination tactics inoperative.

Second, I use the language of “mirror” to indicate that this doubling is not as dualistic as a narrative juxtaposition. The goal here is not to compare and contrast two groups, but instead to reveal the traits of one. A mirror reproduces the same image with which it is faced; the person who stares back at you in a mirror is your twin, your own self rendered into an object and presented to you for inspection. There may be two visual surfaces in play—one on each side of the mirror—but there is arguably only one subject being rendered. Thus, rather than setting secret combinations against some other group in order to shed light on
both, the prophet Nephi sets secret combinations *against themselves*. In this way, he can perhaps disrupt their operation without re-inscribing the previous binaries that have been so problematic for Nephite/Lamanite politics. Assuming the language of mirroring is doubly useful in this way, let me now illustrate that mirroring with some details.

At the opening of Helaman 7, Nephi returns home to Zarahemla following a preaching circuit in the land northward and is emotionally overwhelmed by the degree of government corruption he finds among the Nephites. In particular, he is struck by the “state of such awful wickedness” in which “those Gadianton robbers fill[ed] the judgment-seats” (Helaman 7:4). When a histrionic display on his garden tower draws a crowd, Nephi seizes the opportunity to call his audience to repentance (Helaman 7:6–13). Although the ensuing sermon contains a notable prophecy of the coming Son of God (Helaman 8:14), less frequently observed is the fact that Nephi shapes that prophecy into a mirror image of the secret combinations against which he preaches. Even his well-known prophecy of an approaching messiah is framed as secret knowledge held by a prophetic brotherhood: “Behold, I say unto you, that Abraham not only knew of these things, but there were many before the days of Abraham who were called by the order of God . . . and this that it should be shown unto the people . . . that even redemption should come unto them” (Helaman 8:18). Like the Gadianton robbers, Abraham and his predecessors are here portrayed as a fraternal “order” oriented around a piece of information that is not public knowledge.

Nephi’s reflections grow more pointed as the chapter progresses. In a sudden twist at the close of his sermon, Nephi proves the extent of government corruption by announcing the murder of yet another chief judge. What makes this revelation so shocking, in addition to its abrupt delivery, is its specificity. Nephi is able not only to announce that “your judge is murdered, and he lieth in his blood,” but also to expose the culprit (“and he hath been murdered by his brother”), thereby exposing the very identity that secret combinations were initially formed in order to conceal: the identity of a chief judge’s assassin (Helaman 8:27; cf. 1:11). With that identification, moreover, Nephi exposes the hypocrisy of their
oaths, revealing their fundamental commitments as little more than fantasy. Whereas secret combinations use “signs, and . . . secret words” in order “that whatsoever wickedness [a] brother should do he should not be injured by his brother” (Helaman 6:22), the chief judge has here been killed by his literal brother. Even the means by which Nephi comes to this surprising knowledge echo secret combination methods. “The Lord God has made them known unto me,” Nephi explains (Helaman 7:29), echoing the only other instance of the phrase “made known” in the book of Helaman, which describes Kishkumen’s disclosure of an assassination attempt to a disguised servant (Helaman 2:7).

Beyond simply mirroring the logic of secret combinations, Nephi also mirrors their methods. He, too, uses signs to prove his identity and the veracity of his revelations (Helaman 9:24–25; cf. Helaman 2:7). He likewise duplicates the elaborately scripted scenarios required by political intrigue. Much as secret combinations must presumably plan out the lines they will deliver while performing their deceptions, Nephi stages beforehand the interchange his audience of judges will have with their suspect: “Say unto him—Has Nephi . . . agreed with thee, in the which ye have murdered . . . your brother? And behold, he shall say unto you, Nay. And ye shall say unto him: Have ye murdered your brother? And he shall stand with fear, and wist not what to say” (Helaman 9:27–30). Nephi can preemptively script a political scene with the accuracy of the most meticulous Gadianton operative.

Nor is all this mirroring lost on Nephi’s audience. His display of presumably confidential information leads them to assume, rather sensibly, that he has gained this knowledge by emulating their conspiratorial tactics: “Behold, we know that this Nephi must have agreed with some one to slay the judge, and then he might declare it unto us” (Helaman 9:16). Because Nephi has reflected their fraternal logic, use of signs, and political scripting, they assume he must be playing their game in its entirety, including conspiring with unknown allies to stage murder and leverage that violence in bids for power. The measure of how fully Nephi functions as a mirror for the Gadianton robbers is the degree to which they respond to him as if he represented a rival secret combination.
The text stresses, of course, that Nephi is working on the basis of divine revelation rather than conspiracy, but the reflective surface presented to his audience is no less clear. Mormon reports that “those judges were angry with him because he spake plainly unto them concerning their secret works of darkness” (Helaman 8:4). Their anger, note, is not due simply to the public broadcasting of what they intended to keep secret, but rather to the mirrored quality of that broadcast. They complain not that he “spake plainly” unto the people, for instance, but that he “spake plainly unto them.” The Gadiantons see themselves reflected in Nephi’s prophetic display and are simultaneously suspicious of and incensed by the clarity of the image.

The result of Nephi’s confrontation with secret combinations is curious both for the ambivalence of its outcome and the persistence of mirroring themes in the narrative aftermath. Some people “believed on the words of Nephi,” others identify him as a prophet, and an especially enthusiastic faction of the crowd identify him as “a god, for except he was a god he could not know of all things” (Helaman 9:39–41). Although all three sound like the sort of valuations with which a preacher could turn his audience to conversion, the outcome is instead strangely anticlimactic: “There arose a division among the people, inso-much that they divided hither and thither and went their ways, leaving Nephi alone, as he was standing in the midst of them” (Helaman 10:1). Perhaps as a consequence of the mirroring function he has performed for the past two chapters, appellations fail to stick to Nephi and instead simply refract to the identitarian politics of those who offer them.

In spite of the odd tonality and ultimate ambivalence of the people’s response, and in spite of the fact that the text now leaves behind such exclusive focus on secret combinations, the book of Helaman does not leave behind the specular technique Nephi represented. The text continues to hold up mirrors on a wider scale that no longer operates along interpersonal or even anthropocentric lines. To capture the expanding range of Nephite wickedness and instability, the book of Helaman selects what is, in some ways, the largest possible mirror one could identify for mortals: the very dust from which they were formed. Nephi’s
local and particular mirroring gives way to mirroring on such a large scale that the very Earth is enlisted to reflect back to the Nephites the instability of their situation. Thanks to Nephi's request for famine, the seasons no longer bring rain and harvest at predictable intervals (Helaman 11:3–5). As far back as chapter 5, the earth is presented as liable to sudden shaking (Helaman 5:27), and, in chapter 9, it was explicitly the earth that displayed the blood of the murdered chief judge (Helaman 9:3), mirroring political violence back at its perpetrators. By the end of Helaman, the earth is further portrayed as an unreliable repository for treasures or hidden plans that will be "[found] . . . again no more" because of the curse upon their owners. In the book of Helaman, the earth is made to be as unstable as the Nephite situation is precarious, and so it is to the earth that we must look for the continuation of the narrative's mirroring technique.

It is precisely this logic, for instance, that lies behind Mormon's odd interpolation in Helaman 12—a chapter that breaks with the narrative action of the previous and following chapters in order to wax rhapsodic about "the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men" (Helaman 12:1). Curiously, the theme of Nephite wickedness and instability gives way almost immediately to a long reflection on "the dust of the earth" that "moveth hither and thither" in response to divine command (Helaman 12:7–8). The Earth is here represented as radically unstable, prone to earthquakes, shattering mountains, interrupting its own orbit, and evacuating entire oceans (Helaman 12:8–16). Much like Nephite fidelity, the Earth is radically in motion. It is within this chapter—in fact, within one of its most maligned verses—that the mirroring quality of this geological dynamism is made explicit. In the infamous "Copernican verse" of Helaman 12, the Earth is celebrated not only for its obedient motility but also for revealing what is actually the case despite appearances to the contrary. Mormon writes: "And thus, according to [God's] word the earth goeth back, and it appeareth unto man that the sun standeth still; yea, and behold, this is so; for surely it is the earth that moveth and not the sun" (Helaman 12:15). Under normal circumstances, it appears to creatures
on the surface of the Earth that the Sun moves while the Earth remains fixed; from our perspective, the Sun rises in the east each morning, travels across the sky, and sets in the west each evening at dusk. In the book of Helaman, however, the Earth is instead reflective of the post-Copernican perspective that knows, despite appearances, that it is the Earth that moves rather than the Sun. The Earth’s obedient dynamism here functions as a mirror of planetary reality in a way that is not immediately visible on the ground. This association is useful shorthand for the larger function of the Earth in the book of Helaman: to make visible through reflection the objective reality of a situation in order to disrupt the Nephites’ subjective blindness. As long as the Nephites are erratically unfaithful, given to secret murders, and obsessed with wealth, the Earth will mirror their instability, violence, and greed.

Mirroring is thus a consistent and deliberate type of doubling in the book of Helaman, always leveraged against Nephite wickedness in a way calculated to disrupt the invisibility of secret combination tactics. The intentionality behind Nephi’s doubling hints at the possibility of an equally deliberate intention behind the doubles characterizing Helaman’s structure. If the narrator can depict doubling as a calculated tactic for Nephi’s countering of Gadianton robbers, it stands to reason that the narrator’s own deployment of doubles at a structural level is equally calculated. In Helaman’s condensation and proliferation of narrative doubles, the text mirrors the political and spiritual instability of its Nephite protagonists and displays the diffusive tactics of its Gadianton antagonists. In its obvious borrowing from the structural techniques of the preceding book, Helaman likewise mirrors the structure of Alma in order to render visible that structure’s subsequent collapse. In sum, where narrative juxtaposition provided a contrast that highlighted secret combinations’ novel technologies for gaining power, prophetic and geological mirroring seem designed to counter those technologies without simply reverting to the binaries that had previously structured Nephite history. That this prophetic/narrative technique is ultimately unable to halt the Nephites’ mad dash toward political collapse should
not cause us to miss the determined care with which the book of Helaman deploys its doubles, nor the intentionality that lies beneath what seemed at first glance to be their erratic arrangement.  

Conclusion

Through the narrative juxtaposition of secret combinations with Nephite dissenters and through the mirrored displays held up by the prophet Nephi and a dynamic earth, we see just two instances of Helaman's saturation with doubles. The task of this paper has been to put just the barest sample of these doubles in conversation with others as a way of introducing the structural questions that attend the study of this book. The parallels within Helaman seem, at first, to be a kind of editorial holdover from Alma that reflect a binary structure to Nephite public life. When that structure is then eroded by the Gadianton robbers (whose technology of power is devastatingly fluid, networked, diffuse, and invisible), the book of Helaman counters with another model of doubling that is specular rather than comparative. It is to this second, mirroring technique that readers ought to look for the intentionality behind Helaman's narrative structure. While this is far from the last word on the structure of the text, at the very least, it seems clear that we cannot sort out the role and status of Helaman within the Book of Mormon until we have sorted through some of its doubles, a task made all the trickier by the fact that not all these doubles operate in the same way.

What's more, the stakes of this task are especially high given the relationship between the book of Helaman and the Book of Mormon as a whole. Like the hidden plans of secret combinations, the Book of Mormon is also a buried text that discloses signs and covenants. Like the

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10. Although I don't take it up here, Samuel the Lamanite represents further evidence of that determined care. Samuel is also a figure of doubling in the way he holds up the Lamanites as a comparative foil for the Nephites, and in how he himself structurally doubles the prophetic interventions of Nephi and invokes cosmic parallels between the events surrounding the birth and death of Jesus. See Kimberly M. Berkey, “Temporality and Fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 24 (2015): 53–83.
disruptive mirroring of Nephi’s prophecy, the Book of Mormon aims to reveal secret works of darkness (see 2 Nephi 10:15; Alma 37:23–25) and shatter certain pretensions among its latter-day audience (e.g., 2 Nephi 29:3–4). Much of the Book of Mormon’s framing is markedly Lamanite in a way that comes into view most clearly in Helaman, where Samuel analyzes the Nephites’ erratic spiritual condition (what has colloquially come to be known as “the pride cycle”) and identifies the Lamanites as the covenant remnant. The Book of Mormon also speaks about its constituent records being “hidden up” in the earth, a phrase used only to refer either to sacred records or to the buried objects that populate the book of Helaman. Even the slipperiness of these buried treasures seems to reflect nineteenth-century American folklore about hidden wealth that slips away from its seekers’ grasp. Many of the Book of Mormon’s themes find their most potent doubles here, nested among a flurry of other parallels and mirrorings. Whatever we ultimately make of these parallels on top of all the others, it seems evident that the book of Helaman is key to the Book of Mormon’s self-conception and that doubles are, in turn, key to the book of Helaman. Our reading of both will be measured by what we find doubled within their pages.

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11. Indeed, Samuel the Lamanite provides the most systematic articulation within the Book of Mormon of what has come to be known colloquially among Latter-day Saints as “the pride cycle.” If, as many readers claim, the pride cycle is one of the most dominant themes of the Book of Mormon, it ought not be missed that this theme originates from an emphatically Lamanite perspective. See Helaman 15.
For the Nephites, the sixteenth year of the reign of the judges was tremendously difficult. The arrival of the people of Ammon, in itself an incredible disruption of Nephite society, precipitated a battle, which Mormon describes as a “tremendous battle; yea, even such an one as never had been known among all the people in the land from the time Lehi left Jerusalem” (Alma 28:2). The dead, we are told, were not counted due to their enormous number. These events compounded the pre-existing struggles that resulted from the sociopolitical fallout from the reforms of Mosiah. Though Alma 30:5 suggests that all is well in Zarahemla during the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges, the events of the next year and half, the eighteenth year, belie this peace. Within this span, the Nephites exploded in two separate, but related, political conflagrations: (1) the secession of the inhabitants of Antionum from the greater Nephite community, and (2) the civil war spearheaded by Amalickiah. But prior to both of these events came Korihor.

Korihor appeared toward the latter end of the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges, and the rapid favorable response to his teachings suggests that he tapped into a sense of unease and insecurity experienced by at least some portion of the Nephite population. Korihor found an audience that believed that the current system of leadership—in particular the ecclesiastical structure—was flawed at best, and corrupted at worst in regard to its relationship to the Nephites' ability to exercise their rights and privileges. While it does not appear that Korihor's teachings led directly to the politically divisive events that would follow a few months later, there is no question that the teachings, as we have them now, outlined an ontological and epistemological philosophy that threatened the Nephite social and cultural traditions, legal and political systems, and church.²

“And this Anti-Christ, whose name was Korihor”

We are introduced to Korihor by name in verse 12 of Alma 30, but he is referenced earlier in verse 6, where he is termed “Anti-Christ.” This designation, according to Mormon, is given because “he began to preach unto the people against the prophecies which had been spoken

² Contra both Welch and Gardner, who see no real threat in the figure of Korihor. Welch writes: “Indeed, the text wants readers to see Korihor as an isolated individual defying the foundation of collective responsibility that undergirded the concepts of justice, ethics, prosperity, and well-being in Nephite and Israelite societies” (John W. Welch, The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008], 273). Also, Gardner: “Looked at realistically, Korihor probably has little impact on Nephite history. Unlike Nehor, he creates no organized movement. He may have influenced some in the first city where he preached, but failed utterly in Jershon and Gideon. Korihor's greatest value comes in Mormon's use of his story. Literarily, Korihor serves two functions. First, the failure of his mission to teach false doctrine contrasts with Yahweh's power in strengthening the missionaries who taught true doctrine and reaped an impressive harvest. Second, and more important, Mormon juxtaposes Korihor, the Anti-Christ, to Alma, the Messiah's defender and prophet” (Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Vol. 4: Alma [Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford, 2007], 418).
by the prophets, concerning the coming of Christ” (Alma 30:5). While the original Nephite word used for this designation is unknown, it may be assumed that Joseph Smith felt that the term “Anti-Christ” best communicated the original Nephite intention. Smith likely would have been familiar with the term from its origins in the Johannine Corpus in the New Testament. It is comprised of two Greek elements, the first being the prefix “anti.” “Anti” signifies “opposite, against,” but in the sense of “counterfeit, or simulating,” as in antivenom, which is similar to venom, but opposite to it in effect, or the star Antares, which is similar in size, color, and luminosity to Mars (Ares) but is not, of course, that planet. The second element in the designation is the Greek word chrestos, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew māšiāh, or “the one who has been anointed.” Thus, an anti-Christ is one who is in opposition to Christ, but does so by being similar to or by simulating Christ’s characteristics. It is this quality of similarity that makes anti-Christs dangerous and also acts as the impetus for assigning the title to Korihor. Though Korihor’s teachings are explicitly against Christ, as we shall see, Korihor appears to understand himself as a deliverer for the Nephite population. The question regarding what Korihor and that segment of the Nephite population adhering to his tenets believed the Nephites needed redemption from can be understood by looking more closely at Korihor’s ministry itself.

Yet before the actual narrative of Korihor begins, Mormon makes an intriguing editorial decision to insert five verses concerning Nephite law. Much has been written concerning this text both in regard to

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3. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), s.v. “avti”: “In its basic meaning of ‘over against’ it does not occur in the NT, but is mostly used in the sense of . . . ‘in place of.’ . . . In this respect it makes little difference whether the word denotes an actual replacement, or intended replacement, or a mere equivalent in estimation.” See also Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, Building Faith with the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 74: “The Greek preposition ant, roughly translated, means instead of. It also carries the meaning of ‘face to face’ or mirror image. The image in the mirror, looking back at you, is face to face with you. It looks like you. Yet it has no substance. It is a counterfeit of you, in a sense. It only appears to be you.”
Nephite law generally and to the Korihor narrative specifically. But this section is not so much an explanatory passage of Nephite law as it is an explanation of one specific negative right: that no law should punish a man for his beliefs. We are told that no law existed that forbade or prevented a man from his beliefs, and that there should be no such law because it went “contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men on unequal grounds” (Alma 30:7). This explanation suggests that the legal history concerning this right could be found in the commandments of God, and specifically in the law of Moses—and indeed the law of Moses does clarify the legal rights of individuals to such things as fair trials, the need of witnesses for judgments made, and so on. But Mormon does not quote a passage of the legal material; instead, in Alma 30:8, he provides a paraphrase of Joshua 24:15: “For thus sayeth the scripture: Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve.”

The specific context of the biblical verse finds Israel at Shechem at the behest of Joshua, who, prior to his death, wished to bestow his final instruction. His declaration mentioned above follows a recitation of God’s delivering acts on behalf of Israel and is itself followed by a covenantal renewal event by Israel. Though similar to other covenant-making or covenant-renewal events, this particular one differs in that it does not emphasize or even mention the negative consequences for failure to participate in the covenant. Joshua does warn the Israelites of the

4. Particularly, see Welch, Legal Cases, 273–309.
negative consequences that will follow if they decide to serve other gods, but this warning precedes the official covenant-renewal; there is no such warning given should they choose not to enter into the covenant itself.

By choosing to paraphrase a text from this particular event, it appears that Mormon intended to validate legal tolerance for different beliefs within the Nephite community. The need for such tolerance arose from the institution of the judgeship, which, in turn, provided for more localized, independent, and equal representation of the disparate Nephite groups. The favored position of certain institutions, such as the Church (which was privileged under the legal and political authority of the last monarch), was no longer legitimated by any such political authority exterior to the institution itself. Indeed, it is possible that the devaluation of the privileged status of these institutions explains at least part of the overtly positive popular response to the reforms of Mosiah. The implementation of the reforms now meant that greater tolerance was needed if the reforms were to have any lasting influence.


7. Welch, Legal Cases, 276–77: “With the reforms of Mosiah and the shift to the reign of the judges, however, came several changes in the Nephite legal system—innovations that particularly accommodated the needs of a society that had become home to Mulekites, Nephites, Zoramites, Nehorites, king-men, the followers of Alma, and Limhi’s refugees.”

8. This does not mean that these institutions necessarily lost political power, merely that monarchical protection and privilege were no longer available.
Building on this paraphrase, Mormon then explains that if a man "desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was his privilege to serve him; but if he did not believe in him [and therefore had no desire to serve him] there was no law to punish him" (Alma 30:9). Again, the emphasis here is on the absence of negative legal consequences for non-belief, but Mormon goes further by differentiating between thought ("believing") and performance ("serving"), and implies that it is only the latter that is legally accountable. This approach harmonized religious practice with the rest of Nephite legal code; Alma 30:10 emphasizes that only the physical acts one performs received legal scrutiny: "But if he murdered he was punished unto death; and if he robbed he was also punished; ... and if he committed adultery he was also punished; yea, for all this wickedness they were punished."

Reiterating this legal principle again in Alma 30:11, Mormon repeats that an individual was held accountable only for the acts he performed, and not for his thoughts or beliefs, thus establishing equality regarding one's legal standing: "A man was punished only for the crimes which he had done, therefore all men were on equal grounds." Moreover, as we shall see a few verses later, it appears that the sharing of one's

9. See Welch, *Legal Cases*, 277–78: "The Nephites divided human conduct into three categories: words, actions, and thoughts (Mosiah 4:30). Alma's teachings made it clear that God would impose punishments on people with respect to all three of these categories (Alma 12:14). The right of humans to inflict punishment on others, however, was limited. While people could be punished under the law for their actions (30:10), it was unlawful for the government to punish people for their sincere beliefs. That much is straightforward. Much more difficult, however, were two problems that had to be faced sooner or later under the law of Mosiah. One problem was evidentiary: how should a court determine whether a person sincerely believed what he taught? In other words, what evidence would be required to prove a person guilty? The second issue was conceptual: how were speech acts to be treated? Should speech be considered merely to be an assertion of one's beliefs and therefore protected under the civil law and punishable only by divine justice, or should some speech acts be viewed as a type of overt action punishable by civil or religious authorities? Speech is a hybrid between thoughts and actions."

10. The mention of "equal grounds" may be perhaps an allusion to Mosiah 29:38, which recounts the reaction of the Nephite population to Mosiah's reforms: "Therefore
beliefs or thoughts was not considered a “crime” (a negative physical act). Thus, even if one’s words should lead others to commit crime, there would not be any sense of culpability for the instigator—there was no legal requirement for punishment.

As noted earlier, Mormon’s biblical basis for this legal view was not the Mosaic Law itself, but the paraphrase of Joshua 24:15. This choice may be due to the fact that the Mosaic Law does not have provisions for disparate religious populations. Instead, it is oriented toward a religiously homogenized group in which alternate religious traditions are not allowed. The church as described in the Book of Mormon, however, had to coexist with at least one other major religious tradition—Nehorism—which also had the legally recognized right to assemble and organize. Thus, the use of the paraphrase from Joshua appears to indicate the existence of a Nephite legal innovation in response to their specific socioreligious reality.  

“that every man should have an equal chance”

Having established this legal baseline, Mormon returns to the greater narrative, tying the legal background to the emergence of Korihor and his ministry among the Nephites and thereby establishing a tension that governs the later interactions between Korihor and the Nephite leadership. Even though Korihor as anti-Christ is destructive to the moral and ethical fabric of the Nephite society, legally he has done nothing wrong, having committed no actual, physical wrongdoing: therefore, “the law could have no hold on him” (Alma 30:12). Thus, a legal and they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land.”

11. Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 406–07: “The citation from Joshua is a prophet’s declaration that others had a right to choose, although Joshua was announcing a pragmatic, not legal, principle. Here, the pragmatic principle is expanded to a legal principle, both expanding and formalizing the scriptural episode. A single episode becomes an example and then a formal, legal model for social actions.”

12. Gardner believes that the excursion reflects differing perspectives on Nephite law and therefore possible conflict as to the nature of the Korihor narrative. See
political crisis arose when Korihor was bound and brought before the chief judges of Gideon and Zarahemla. The act of being bound suggested a crime has been committed, but Mormon makes it quite clear that Korihor, at least in the land of Zarahemla, had presumably done nothing criminal according to the legal definition.

One cannot underestimate the danger that this scenario presented to the nascent legal system and the fragile implementation of the “rule of law” engendered by the new judicial/political system. One of the consequences of the abolishment of the Nephite monarchy and its replacement with a legalized selection process for judges was the displacement of “rule by law” for “rule of law.” Rule of law reflects the political supremacy of the law in governance. On a more practical level, this process means that political and legal authority is ultimately formed from and founded by the law. On the other hand, rule by law reflects the use of law to further the designs of a given political authority. In other words, under rule by law, the law is subordinate to the political entity. A monarchy often reflects the latter, in which the law is used by the monarch to further his or her designs and thus often reinforces the monarch’s personal power.

It appears that these two concepts undergird the political reformation of Mosiah. While he notes that a monarchy could be a positive institution, “establishing the laws of God” and judging the “people

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Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 407: “Why does Mormon deviate from his narrative to explain Nephite law? I hypothesize that he expected his readers to be surprised at this tolerance of an offense to the majority religion. Therefore, Mormon’s greater society apparently did not share the concept of tolerating individual beliefs, or Mormon would not have needed to mention it.”

13. He is also bound in the territory of Jershon, but as this is Anti-Nephi-Lehite territory, the legal parameters are not necessarily Nephite.

according to [God’s] commandments” (Mosiah 29:13), if the monarch was unjust, “he teareth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and trampleth under his feet the commandments of God; And he enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness” (Mosiah 29:22–23). Mosiah’s solution to the potential problem of the unjust monarch was to raise the legal potency of the law so that it, and not the monarch, would ultimately be the governing force: “Choose you by the voice of the people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws which have been given you by our fathers” (Mosiah 29:25). Such a change in political thinking not only replaced rule by law with rule of law. It also placed greater political power into the hands of the populace, making them responsible for their own actions. This move initiated a rebalancing of political power within the Nephite sociopolitical ecosystem, such that, as Mosiah believed, “equality” was then established throughout the land: “I desire that this land be land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike” (Mosiah 29:32). 15

Yet such a shift in political thinking would have been difficult for a people with five hundred years of direct, monarchical history. Promonarchical forces continued to bubble up following the death of Mosiah 2

15. Mormon suggests that this equality reflected not just political responsibility, but moral and ethical responsibility as well: “Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins” (Mosiah 29:38). See Waldron, “Rule of Law”: “But the Rule of Law is not just about government. It requires also that citizens should respect and comply with legal norms, even when they disagree with them. When their interests conflict with others’ they should accept legal determinations of what their rights and duties are. Also, the law should be the same for everyone, so that no one is above the law, and everyone has access to the law’s protection. The requirement of access is particularly important, in two senses. First, law should be epistemically accessible: it should be a body of norms promulgated as public knowledge so that people can study it, internalize it, figure out what it requires of them, and use it as a framework for their plans and expectations and for settling their disputes with others. Secondly, legal institutions and their procedures should be available to ordinary people to uphold their rights, settle their disputes, and protect them against abuses of public and private power.”
and the official implementation of his reforms and the challenges that followed: mass immigration, depopulation resulting from the worst military conflict yet experienced by the Nephites, and overall political instability as power was still being determined by the various cultural entities. Though monarchy could curtail individual agency and responsibility, it also functioned as a stable institution able to provide both political and economic security. 16

The growing influence of the Church following the abolition of the monarchy also seems to have complicated matters. Under Mosiah₂, the church of God appeared to have enjoyed royal protection (for example, as represented in the proclamation that no unbeliever could persecute “any of those who belonged to the church of God” [Mosiah 27:2]). Following Mosiah₂’s reformations, the Church prospered due to its “steadiness” (Alma 1:29), with its members becoming far wealthier than those who did not belong (Alma 1:31). What is meant by “steadiness” is not clear, though it appears to reflect the Church’s institutional stability. What is clear is that the Church was economically well-off: “They began to be exceedingly rich, having abundance of all things . . . an abundance of flocks and herds, and fatlings of every kind, and also abundance of grain, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen” (Alma 1:29). This prosperity, we are told, was the result of their “industry” (Alma 4:6), and may have stemmed from Mosiah₂’s reforms, which now rewarded individual effort. It is clear that in the early years of the judgeship, the Church was wealthy, having accumulated not only basic goods, but luxury items as well.

What is also clear is that there were confrontations between members and non-members that occurred repeatedly through the first eight years after the institution of the reforms. In fact, within the first year the persecution of non-believers resulted in physical confrontation (Alma 1:21–22). Although the text does not give a specific reason as to why this persecution occurred, the report of this persecution follows the trial and execution of Nehor. While Alma stressed that this case was determined under the rule of law and not under ecclesiastic authority (Alma 1:14), Nehor was originally brought before Alma by “the people of the church” (Alma 1:10) and was eventually sentenced by Alma, who was also the high priest of the Church. From an outside perspective, the distinction between political and ecclesiastic authority was somewhat blurred, and this blurring may have led some non-members to believe that the Church was particularly situated to take advantage of the new system.17

By the eighth year of the reign of the judges, the disparity in prosperity was such that some members of the Church “began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe” (Alma 4:8), perhaps confirming the earlier fears of non-members concerning the relationship between the Church and the new political system. Alma himself appears to have been concerned with the “great inequality” present within the Nephite people and the Church.

17. Although Mormon views the events of these early years of the judgeship through a lens of righteous behavior vs. wicked behavior, he does appear to observe the difficulty that other religious traditions had with the new system. Alma 1:16–18 describes the legal relationship of “priestcrafts” (i.e., other religious traditions), stating that “they durst not lie, if it were known, for fear of the law . . . therefore they pretended to preach according to their belief; and now the law could have no power on any man for his belief. And they durst not steal, for fear of the law.” Mormon suggests that such institutions were insincere, and thus lying, but it is possible that what Mormon notes is the concern of these institutions with regard to their ability to express their beliefs under the new system, a concern that is not an apparent concern of the church of God at all: “Yea, they [the priestcrafts] did persecute them [the church], and afflict them with all manner of words . . . because they did impart the word of God” (Alma 1:20). Verses 30–31 further suggest that the new rule of law inversely affected non-members as “the law was put in force.”
It is this inequality that encourages Alma to make a significant change: he decides to step down as chief judge and retains only his position as high priest over the Church (Alma 4:15–19).18

In light of the above, Korihor was concerned with what he saw as the inordinate influence the Church had upon its congregations, which he believed affected their critical thinking skills. For Korihor, religion, and in particular the belief in a Christ, represented an epistemic closure that limited a person’s ability to truly understand the surrounding world.19 Belief in Christ was a “foolish and a vain hope” that “bound” or “yoked” one to an inaccurate view of the world. Emphasizing the role of empiricism in the formation of knowledge, Korihor stated that “no man can know of anything which is to come” (Alma 30: 13). Though it may be tempting to simply write off Korihor’s epistemology as a version of the childish taunt to “prove it,” further reflection suggests that Korihor’s epistemology is based on the universal experience of time’s arrow. For Korihor, belief in Christ was not only based on the belief that one could know the future, but also led to the belief that the future had a direct effect on the past, a process that simply did not reflect any experience of time and space. Thus, the belief that one could receive a remission of one’s sins due to the acts

18. The nature of the “inequality” is unclear. While on the surface, it appears to reflect the economic disparity between the wealthy and poor, equality was also the end goal of Mosiah’s reforms. Thus, it is possible that the inequality recognized by Alma reflected a growing imposition of the Church over all Nephites. One of the central tenets of the Church was no persecution of non-members (Alma 1:21), but the events of the eighth year suggest that church members had become so powerful that this was no longer a concern.

of a yet unborn being (i.e., the belief that a future event would effect a change in one's own past) was symptomatic of a "deranged" or "frenzied" mind. This problematic mind itself was, according to Korihor, a direct consequence of "the traditions of your fathers" (Alma 30:16)—past traditions of a future promise that would effectively revise past, present, and future. This belief flew in the face of every experience provided in living a temporally oriented existence.

Korihor's critique of Nephite epistemology, then, was one in which the "traditions of the fathers" produced a "foolish and vain hope" due to the way in which they led believers to expect past events to be rewritten or revised by a future event (Christ). From Korihor's perspective (i.e., one in which the directionality of time had never been thus interrupted), an epistemological certainty based in a future event was simply untenable. This critique led Korihor to suggest a new epistemological approach, one that emphasized the acquisition of knowledge from one's own senses, which in turn established a new ontology—that man was nothing but a "creature." According to Korihor, a physical, tangible understanding of the surrounding world rather than a cosmic view through the eye of faith necessarily leads one to the conclusion that man is nothing more than a creature, similar to the other creatures that surround him. And, like those creatures, man as a creature "fared"

20. Lance, "Korihor, Psychology, and False Doctrine," 62: "The implications of accepting a strictly empirical epistemology are further illuminated by Korihor himself, in another of his arguments against Alma. If we cannot gain knowledge from spiritual experiences, we are forced to question their very nature. Korihor does this by telling Alma that believing one has had a remission of sin 'is the effect of a frenzied mind' (Alma 30:15). Inasmuch as Alma's knowledge of his own remission of his sins came from revelation (see Alma 36), this argument can apply to all revelatory experiences. To Korihor, having a religious experience is tantamount to insanity, or at least some form of psychopathology." It is possible this epistemic challenge lies at the heart of a number of alternate theologies in the Book of Mormon, as the Book of Mormon prophets often explicitly noted that belief in Christ could lead to a remission of sins no matter the time—it was not necessary to wait for the performance of the atonement itself for it to be effective in one's life. Thus, the atonement had retroactive efficacy. Or, to put it another way, the atonement had non-local effects in that it disregarded the normal strictures of time and space to allow for efficacy prior to its actual performance.
according the innate traits of the creature and the “management” of those traits. Thus, one’s experience was determined by the success one had utilizing those abilities: “Therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and [that] every man conquered according to his strength” (Alma 30:17).

While primarily a theological argument, Korihor’s new epistemology/ontology would have had serious implications for the purpose behind Nephite political, economic, and social structures. If, in fact, Korihor’s ontology was correct, along with its implied description of the “good life,” then society’s primary, perhaps even sole, function was to provide one with the opportunity to exercise one’s inherent right to succeed or prosper. Conversely, a society that restrained one from exercising such rights would have been corrupt. A society established on such principles would be the ultimate meritocracy in which excellence was rewarded with power. Such a system would not eliminate disparity; indeed, under Korihor’s system, any given individual has as much right to succeed as any other and thus, to succeed, one simply needed to find one’s area of excellence, be given the opportunity to develop this skill, and the opportunity to exercise it, regardless of the impact it would have on others.

Yet if Korihor’s ontology—that man was nothing more than a mere animal simply faring according to his genius or strength—was the foundation of a society, then, as the redactor rightly notes, “whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). The line of reasoning that the writer appears to follow is thus: If man is merely a creature who has the right to prosper according to his innate skills, then there is no need for an artificial limit to be placed upon one with regard to the exercising

21. Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 410–11: “Korihor’s doctrine appears to be a form of social Darwinism. For Korihor, sin itself is not possible because there is no valid religious rule against which we might be judged. We are not responsible to a God but only to ourselves. By calling human beings ‘the creature,’ Korihor uses a rather animalistic term, thus further removing his listeners from a creator God. ‘Management of the creature’ means that each individual is responsible only to himself, not to other people (unless they are more powerful and able to enforce their will), and certainly not to the fiction of a God.”
of that right. Morality and ethics are thus superseded by this inherent right to prosper, since they represent just such unnecessary constraints. Similarly, the application of the term "crime" and the attendant penalties associated with acts designated as "crimes" suggest another form of constraint to a given individual's right to prosper. Following Korihor's principles to their end, it is conceivable that if one had the skill to perform spectacularly heinous acts that would promote oneself, then one should have every right to do so.  

In teaching about the necessity of atonement, the Church maintained the concept of sin. In doing so, the Church also maintained its position as an essential part of the formula through which sin could be overcome. Teaching about atonement, then, produced a set of moral and ethical standards that were regulated institutionally by the Church itself. For Korihor, religious institutions were detrimental because such belief systems could contradict knowledge garnered from experiential observation. The artificial moral and ethical standards imposed by the

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22. Gardner believes that the political and religious laws remained separate from one another. "His next statement, that 'whatsoever a man did was no crime,' could be read two ways. If Korihor is announcing that man's actions may never be defined as a crime, then he declares himself a social anarchist. If he is referring to crime as a synonym for sin, then he is simply continuing his attack on the foolishness of the fathers. I see this interpretation as the more probable of the two, more consistent with Korihor's discourse. Korihor is not attacking the civil law, but rather Nephite religious law" (Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 411). But Mormon has tied the two together: "And many more such things did he say unto them, telling them that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men... and whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17), and it is Mormon's account that we have. Thus, whether or not the two legal systems were officially separate, Mormon points out the difficulties in disentangling the two on the pragmatic level. If one says there is no sin, then one is ultimately saying there is no crime. In a similar vein, Gerald N. Lund notes that, regardless of their explicit specificity, Korihor's teachings affect all aspects of public behavior: "From Korihor's epistemology (the denial of revelation) and his metaphysics (there is only the natural world and man is the supreme reality in it), flows his axiology (the only good or bad is that which is decided by man himself). This is often the case. In other words, how we answer the questions, 'How do we know what is true?' and 'What constitutes reality?' often determines how we perceive what is good and bad, right and wrong" (Lund, "Anti-Christ in the Book of Mormon," 112).
Church would thus inhibit an individual from achieving his or her potential, something that, in Korihor's system, was highly problematic in that it denied access to a successful life. Moreover, if moral and ethical standards were regulated by the Church, and if adherence to such standards were an essential component to the individual's ability to overcome sin, then the religious institution would have an inordinate amount of influence over all actions of the believers, including their political actions.

Whether or not Korihor truly believed that man as a creature should succeed or fail according to the results of his own efforts, and whether or not he believed this system should be the political and economic reality, is unclear. It is possible that Korihor was merely reacting in accordance with his antipathy to religion and not thinking through the horrific social consequences such an ontology would create if put into practice. Nevertheless, his system does suggest that Korihor would have liked to see social change on some level. Korihor's doctrine does away with a moral/ethical social structure in which the well-being of the community is prioritized. Instead, Korihor replaces this structure with the imperative to promote the individual.

One social result of the Korihorian epistemology and ontology is described in Alma 30:18: "And thus he did preach unto them, leading away the hearts of many, causing them to lift up their heads in their wickedness, yea, leading away many women, and also men, to commit whoredoms." We are not told anything regarding the social makeup of those who accepted Korihor's precepts, but his disparaging of the "traditions of the fathers" suggests that perhaps his audience was comprised of a young cohort. This hypothesis would make sense particularly if Korihor sought to institute social change. As we shall see, Korihor was not only against religion in general, but also particularly against the "ancient priests" who made up the ecclesiastical leadership and who he believed had "usurped" the power of the younger generations (Alma 30:23). Thus, the message itself may have resonated with the younger generation who had lived with the chaotic first eighteen years of the reign of the judges.
In fact, Korihor’s teachings would have resonated with anyone who believed that societal constraints imposed by religious precept, legal principle, and informal cultural norms—the traditions and teachings of the fathers—constrained individuals such that they were not allowed to “enjoy their rights and privileges” promised to them through the reforms, thus keeping them from achieving what they might have considered as the good life. In light of this, the chaotic nature of the first decade and a half of the reign of the judges with its own various societal constraints would have appeared as proof that these forces were corrupt.

“Now this man went over to the land of Jershon”

Korihor’s success in Zarahemla appears to convince him to minister elsewhere, going to both Jershon and the city of Gideon. The selection of these two locations implies that Korihor believed they would have been particularly amenable to his teachings. Both were populated by groups that conceivably chafed under the Zarahemlan Nephite hegemony. Jershon was inhabited by the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (ANLs), who were recent immigrants. As such, they may have suffered Nephite animosity, both due to their cultural differences as well as the fact that they served as a cause for the latest military conflict, which resulted in the death of thousands of Nephite sons, fathers, and brothers. The city of

23. That the writer mentions women first as particularly influenced may suggest that Korihor’s message resonated with a particular segment of the female population, possibly highlighting the disruption of social norms that Korihor’s teachings engendered.

24. Welch suggests that Korihor may be assuming that ANLs are adherents or are at least sympathetic to Nehorism, the religious tradition that Korihor himself may have come from; see Welch, Legal Cases, 274–76: “It is unclear why Korihor went to Jershon…. Perhaps Korihor was unaware of [their] background, or perhaps he believed that these converts might be vulnerable because they were a displaced people and were young in the gospel. It is also possible that he believed that, as former Lamanites, the Ammonites would be receptive to his message as some of their former kinsmen had been to Nehorism (Alma 21:4, 24:28).” Gardner, on the other hand, sees no Nehorite influence, believing instead that Korihor represents another religious tradition altogether:
Gideon appears to have been settled by the descendants of a group of nationalistic Nephites who had sought to reclaim the former Nephite territory of the land of Nephi. Though the colonization effort failed within three generations, the impetus for the attempt does not appear to have been fully erased. The survivors did not return to Zarahemla, but rather established their own city (Gideon) across the river Sidon. It is possible to read into this move an attempt to form a center of "pure" Nephite culture and influence, geographically separated and culturally distinct from the more blended society of Zarahemla.

"Korihor does not appear to be associated with the order of Nehors, even though he also denies the Atoning Messiah. His apostasy appears to extend even further, however, and Korihor may have rejected all Nephite traditions, including the law of Moses. I hypothesize that Korihor may have accepted one of the local religions and therefore combats the entire Nephite religio-political spectrum" (Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 406). Both Welch and Gardner assume that Korihor is religious in some sense, but while Korihor is clearly virulently anti-Christian, his teachings do not espouse any religious tradition.

25. For more on the Zeniff recolonization attempt, see Dan Belnap, "The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity," in Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2018), 27–66; see also Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 413: "Although the inhabitants of Gideon were Nephites, they had migrated from the land of Nephi after being converted from the apostate religion of Noah." Gardner continues, suggesting that it was the Lamanites: "I hypothesize that Korihor thought that their previous exposure to Lamanite beliefs would make it easy to persuade them to revert to those beliefs."

26. While there is no explicit mention of such a cultural separation between the cities, the text does suggest that it did exist within Zarahemla itself; see Mosiah 25:2–4; also 1:10–11; for more on the cultural separation, see Dan Belnap, "And it came to pass," 117–27. Moreover, at least one account suggests that the separation existed. Alma 59–61 presents an exchange of letters from Captain Moroni to Pahoran, the chief judge. In them, we find that a rebellion had occurred in Zarahemla in which Pahoran had been ousted and a king installed. We are not told the lineage of the king, but we are told that he sought to maintain the city of Zarahemla, abandoning the rest of the Nephite territories. Pahoran in the meantime had fled with the freemen to the city of Gideon. As noted in the study, this particular city appears to have been named after Gideon, one of the leaders from the failed recolonization community who left Zarahemla in the first place because they believed it did not represent the land of their fathers. Thus, it appears that, upon their arrival to the land of Zarahemla after the failed attempt, at least
In both cases, Korihor goes directly to the people rather than to a political or ecclesiastic center in order to make his case. In Jershon, Korihor is bound and brought to Ammon, the son of Mosiah. Ammon was also the high priest of the community, and he promptly extradited Korihor from the territory. The entire episode occurs in only two verses, but it highlights again the ambiguous nature of the narrative established earlier, namely, the tension between what Korihor is doing and the question concerning whether it was legal or not to do so, as he is bound in Jershon for nothing more than speaking his mind.

With this said, it is possible that, at least for the ANLs, Korihor’s binding was not against the law. While it may be that as immigrants into Nephite territory, the ANLs adopted the established Nephite laws, this assumption is not necessarily readily confirmed. In fact, a number of clues suggest that the ANL relationship with the Nephites was more of an alliance than an assimilation. To begin, the text of Alma 27 suggests that a formal treaty governed the Nephite-ANL relationship. The treaty established that (1) territory was to be provided to the ANLs in which they could settle, contingent upon them not picking up their weapons; (2) Nephite military personnel would be placed within this new territory, ostensibly for the protection of the ANLs as they would be stationed at the southern end of Jershon between the actual settlement and the Lamanites in the land of Nephi; and (3) it was expected that the new inhabitants would supply provisions to the Nephite military stationed within their borders (Alma 27:24).

What is not stated in this treaty is a declaration of explicit Nephite status for the ANLs, either culturally or legally. We are told that they were “among the people of Nephi” and that they were “numbered among the people who were of the church of God,” but that the community itself was known as “the people of Ammon,” and apparently retained its own monarchy.27 If the ANLs thus maintained some degree

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27. This is reinforced by Alma 53:10, 12–13, 19: “I have somewhat to say concerning the people of Ammon, who, in the beginning, were Lamanites; but by Ammon and his
of political autonomy, then Korihor's treatment in the land of Jershon may have been entirely legal under the laws and authority of the ANLs.²⁸

brethren, or rather by the power and word of God, they had been converted unto the Lord; and they had been brought down in to the land of Zarahemla, and had ever been protected by the Nephites. . . . They had ever been protected by the Nephites . . . when they saw the danger, and the many afflictions and tribulations which the Nephites bore for them. . . . They never had hitherto been a disadvantage to the Nephites.”

In each of these references, the ANLs are distinguished from both Nephites and Lamanites, suggesting an independence from both. The autonomous nature of the ANLs is reflected fourteen years later in the thirty-sixth year of the reign of judges. At that time, the Nephites were engaged in a desperate struggle for freedom against the greater Lamanite army led by the Nephite dissenter Amalickiah. Determined to help their allies, many of the ANLs were willing to break their oath and pick up a weapon to go to battle. Helaman, the son of Alma, feared that doing so would have serious, negative consequences on their souls. Though the impetus of the text is solely on the spiritual nature of the oath, it appears the integrity of the agreement also influenced the decision, as picking up the sword would have violated the treaty stipulations noted above (see Alma 53:12–18).

As most readers are aware, the two thousand sons of the ANLs point out that they did not enter into the oath and therefore may pick up the swords without negative consequences to their souls. Yet this would not have excused them from the treaty stipulations, which may explain why, following their decision to pick up weapons, we are told that “they did assemble themselves together . . . and they called themselves Nephites” (Alma 53:16) and were now able to pick up their weapons.

²⁸. Welch, Legal Cases, 280–81: “It is significant that Korihor was taken to the high priest over the Ammonites. No civil judge is mentioned here at all, as happens when Korihor is prosecuted in Gideon and in Zarahemla (Alma 30:21, 29). In other words, the Ammonites perspicaciously framed this case as a religious matter and took Korihor directly to their high priest. In retrospect that was a wise move, since the case was eventually resolved primarily a religious matter. Second, it is also possible that the legal system of the Ammonites in Jershon was somewhat different or somewhat independent from the laws in the land of Zarahemla. Nothing in the record indicates that the Ammonites ever agreed to be bound by the law of Mosiah. Formal popular adoption of that law, essential for it to become binding upon the people had occurred several years before the Ammonites arrived in Zarahemla (Alma 1:14). It follows that the Ammonites may not have been bound by the progressive law of Mosiah and that, in carrying Korihor out of their independent land of inheritance, they were simply exercising a typical, traditional prerogative of excluding Korihor, as a foreigner, from taking up residence in their city without some local patron host. Taking another tack, perhaps the Ammonites were subject to the law of Mosiah but argued that expulsion or banishment was not a form of punishment that was prohibited by that law. In other
The physical constraint Korihor received among the people of Gideon, on the other hand, is another matter altogether.

Unlike the ANLs, the people of Gideon were Nephite by origin, and they had maintained that legal and cultural identity despite their geographical separation from their fellow citizens in Zarahemla. According to Mosiah 22, upon their arrival in the land of Zarahemla, the people of Limhi (from which the eventual settlers of Gideon would come) “joined Mosiah’s people, and became his subjects” (v. 13). This action makes the legal Nephite identification of the people of Limhi explicit, which would have meant that, unlike the ANLs, the Gideonites were subject to Nephite law. Thus, Korihor’s bondage in Gideon is much more problematic in terms of its legality than the event in which he is bound in Jershon. This tension is heightened considerably as he is taken before both the leading ecclesiastical and political leadership of the city, the high priest and chief judge, respectively.

We can explain the presence of the high priest through Korihor’s religious antipathy, but the presence of the chief judge suggests that this trial was more than a simple church matter. Indeed, his presence indicates the potential for legal and political problems presented by Korihor. As noted earlier, there was no indication that Korihor has done anything illegal under Nephite law. And yet, as indicated by Mormon, Korihor’s precepts would have serious ramifications for Nephite social and political structures if they were accepted generally. In light of these potential consequences, it is possible that the chief judge was in attendance in order to determine whether there had been any legal violations.

While it is reasonable that both political and ecclesiastic leaders were in attendance at Korihor’s trial, the apparent cooperation between the two may have actually reinforced Korihor’s accusation that the Church exerted undue influence on the general population. Established during the reign of Mosiah, the Church had enjoyed a quasi-official state status following the king’s edict recorded in Mosiah 28, which words, they may have held that a person could be ostracized or banished, but not beaten or executed, for disruptive speech.”
guaranteed protection for the Church against any persecution. While this official security disappeared following the abolition of the monarchy, the Church remained a significant force in the early years of the reign of the judges, as it was led by a member of the Nephite social elite and was one of the most stable social institutions during a period of chaotic transition. Not surprisingly, each chief judge during the period in question was also a member of the Church. Thus, Korihor’s accusation against church doctrine and practice additionally serves as a veiled criticism of the political system, given that the latter apparently tolerated, and perhaps even supported, the Church and its tenets. 29

The dialogue between Korihor and the high priest begins with the high priest issuing a series of challenges, the first of which highlights Korihor’s challenge to the teachings of the Church: “Why do ye go about perverting the ways of the Lord?” (Alma 30:22). The question presents an implied understanding among the church leadership, and presumably the secular leadership as well, that Korihor had some sort of prior relationship with the Church—he would need to have been familiar with the “ways of the Lord” first, in order to subsequently “pervert” them. Though the text is silent on his earlier years, it is possible that Korihor was a member at one point. More importantly, the query demonstrates that the leadership of Gideon recognized that Korihor’s doctrine, regardless of its anti-religious stance, was a perversion of the truth.

Though the similarities between Korihor’s doctrine and the doctrine of Christ taught by the Church has not been discussed in great

29. It is unclear how or if state sponsorship is present during the reign of the judges. It certainly existed under the last Nephite monarch. In Mosiah 27:2–3, Mosiah, sends out a proclamation commanding that “there should not any unbeliever persecute any of those who belonged to the church of God.” This appears to have worked in conjunction with church policies that encouraged “no persecutions among them,” but it is telling that the latter is a directive originating within the church leadership and not the state. Following the political changeover, the Church continued to enjoy a privileged position as noted elsewhere; see Belnap, “And it came to pass,” 108–14. Though it no longer was under monarchical protection, the new system of judges privileged church leadership over other demographic groups (see Mosiah 29:11–13).
detail elsewhere, Mormon’s designation of Korihor as an anti-Christ suggests that parallels are significant. Certainly, Korihor’s emphasis on the individual’s right to act without coercion reflects Book of Mormon teachings on the nature of agency. The idea that an individual has the right to prosper by utilizing the skills and talents given to him also fits within the gospel. Yet the perversion noted by the Gideonite leadership may have been Korihor’s emphasis on the expression of rights without the commensurate recognition that exercising these rights also required one to recognize the responsibilities one had toward the well-being of others. Care for others constitutes an important element of gospel living; Korihor’s meritocratic ethics reveal problematic social and political implications and may begin to suggest the nature of Korihor’s guilt under Nephite law.

The second question the Gideonite authorities put to Korihor also reveals why they felt it legal to constrain him: “Why do you teach this people that there should be no Christ, to interrupt their rejoicings?” What the high priest means by “rejoicings” is not at all clear. On the one hand, it may refer to the positive emotional state of the Church experienced through their sincere worship. The term “rejoicing” is found eighty-three times in the Book of Mormon and often refers to the state of joy expressed by individuals or communities. Thus, Nephi is found rejoicing over the Lord’s blessings on his behalf, and King Benjamin’s people rejoice in the return of the self-exiled people of Limhi.

Yet the term is also often used to describe the emotional state of groups engaging in certain ritual behavior associated with joyful events such as deliverance or reunion. For instance, in 1 Nephi 5:9, upon the return of Nephi and his older brothers, the entire community “did rejoice exceedingly, and did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings.” In Mosiah 7:14, Limhi caused his people to rejoice by gathering them all together to hear

30. The 1828 Webster’s Dictionary defined rejoicing as “the act of expressing joy and gladness,” suggesting that rejoicing was a physical or mental act, not merely a state of being (American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster, 1828, s.v. “rejoicing,” http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/rejoicing [accessed January 6, 2018]).
Ammon’s message from King Mosiah, while in Mosiah 18:14, rejoicing is associated with the act of baptism. A chapter later, a “ceremony” performed upon meeting the people of Gideon and some of the men who had fled with King Noah ended with the latter group rejoicing as they returned home. Finally, in Alma 45:1 the rejoicing of the Nephites is associated with the giving of thanks, fasting, and praying, all formal forms of worship. Thus, we find “rejoicing” is used to describe the emotional state of Church members engaging in ecclesiastical ritual.

If this is the case, then it is possible to justify the binding of Korihor as he may have physically interrupted formal religious festivals when he “interrupt[ed] their rejoicings” (Alma 30:22). Such an act would be against the law. As noted earlier, while Nephite law had no hold on one’s beliefs, or even the expression of those beliefs, it did apply to those who acted against others. Thus, while it was not illegal to preach, physically acting to disrupt others’ worship crossed the legal line between thought and performance. In crossing that line, Korihor could legally be bound for “disturbing the peace.”

The final question put to Korihor by the Gideonite high priest appears to simply repeat the first challenge, but on closer inspection again indicates concerns that Korihor’s teachings might affect more than the ecclesiastical authority of the Church, undermining instead the very identity of Nephite culture: “Why do you speak against all the prophecies of the holy prophets?” (Alma 30:22). Knowing Korihor’s epistemological stance on prophecy, this question is not surprising. However, it’s important to recall the cultural context for this question: Nephite history up to this point had been directly influenced and even directed by the prophecies of earlier Nephite patriarchs, Nephi and Lehi in particular. Textual evidence within the Book of Mormon suggests that Lehi’s dream served as the cultural narrative for the Nephites, and it was used by their later historians to retell the Nephite historical

31. That the Nephites did practice the festivals of the law of Moses seems to be the case, as many have noted what appear to be events associated with such festivals; see Jacob’s speech of Jacob 2–3, King Benjamin’s discourse of Mosiah 2–6, and Jacob’s speech of 2 Nephi 6–10, for several examples.
experience (most notably, Mormon, but evidence for this reading is also found in the writings of Nephi, Jacob, Alma, and Helaman). Korihor’s attempts to interrogate the epistemological value of prophecy thus also put into question key components of Nephite cultural identity. Korihor’s questions are recognized by the Gideonite leadership as an existential threat to Nephite society as a whole in that he seeks to completely re-define what it means to be Nephite.

“Ye say that this people is a free people.... I say they are in bondage”

Korihor’s response, recorded in Alma 30:23–28, reveals that these concerns are not unduly grounded. He begins with an iteration of his earlier claim: “Because I do not teach the foolish traditions of your fathers” (Alma 30:23). This is the third time Korihor has mentioned the “foolish traditions of your fathers,” and his emphasis on “your fathers” suggests that he sees a distinction between himself and those Nephites who claim these fathers.


33. See Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 414–15: “What the judge does ask is why Korihor is preaching these things. Korihor ignores this question and instead explains what he believes. The judge’s question focused, not on the belief, but on Korihor’s actions to persuade others to adopt that belief. Nephite law protected belief, but not preaching dissent ideas with the purpose of fomenting social contention and division. The charge that Nephites are usurpers of power and authority is one that Lamanites typically make of Nephites. Perhaps Korihor is not simply a Nephite apostate but a Nephite-become-Lamanite on his own missionary journey—an interesting mirror to that of Mosiah’s sons. In fact, Mormon may have positioned this story immediately after that of Mosiah’s sons as a contrast. At this point, however, Korihor is not typical of what most Lamanites would have believed. He might have developed his own philosophy, perhaps being influenced by the Amalekites who were apostate Nephites living in Lamanite territory and with Lamanite affiliations.”
As early as 1 Nephi 3, we find mention of these fathers (as opposed to Nephi's immediate father, Lehi) that apparently refers to Nephi's Israelite forebears: "And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers" (1 Nephi 3:19). This reference distinguishes between the language of the fathers and the words of the prophets. Similarly, in 1 Nephi 4:21, the term "fathers" refers to the Israelite company led by Moses. There is a shift in the referent that occurs once the Lehites cross the seas: by the time of Jacob, the term is used to refer to Nephite progenitors in the Promised Land. In his temple speech, Jacob declares that the Lamanites' hatred toward the Nephites was the consequence "of the iniquity of their fathers." In this reference, the term "their fathers" appears to refer directly to Laman and Lemuel, Nephi and Jacob's older brothers, and not to distant Israelite forebears. Jacob's son, Enos, speaks of the Lamanite desire to destroy the Nephites and is the first to use the phrase "traditions of (X) fathers": "and they swore in their wrath that, if it were possible, they would destroy our records and us, and also all the traditions of our fathers" (Enos 1:14). By verse 19, "fathers" appears to refer to the Nephite progenitors, just as Jacob used the term to refer to the Lamanite counterparts, with the "traditions" being the belief system those individuals passed down to later generations.

This usage is the primary usage by the time we reach Mosiah, approximately 450 years later. In Mosiah 7:9, the fathers are specifically those Nephites who colonized the land of Nephi. This precise usage by the people of Zeniff may provide insight into the Isaianic challenge laid down by Noah's priests when confronted by Abinadi. In Mosiah 12:20, immediately prior to their citation of Isaiah 52:7–10, they ask Abinadi: "What meaneth the words which are written, and which have been taught by our fathers"? The allusion to "our fathers" here suggests that this scriptural passage was part of the justification and validation for reclaiming the land of Nephi following the Nephite exodus to Zarahemla. In other words, it would appear that Zeniff's people understood
their actions in terms of a prophesied historical trajectory explicitly taught by these “fathers.”

In Mosiah 26:1, we are again confronted with the Nephite traditions of the fathers. In this case, we are told that the younger generation, which did not enter into the covenant of King Benjamin, “did not believe the tradition of their fathers.” These traditions are described in the next verse, namely, the resurrection of the dead and the coming of Christ. These individuals were never baptized and never joined the Church. As such, they remained a “separate people as to their faith . . . ever after” (Mosiah 26:4). Yet, while they rejected these specific traditions, the verse does not suggest that they necessarily rejected their relationship to “the fathers.” In other words, while the traditions may not have been kept or believed, the concept of these “fathers” provided a critical sense of identity within the Nephite social consciousness.

Consider the usage of the term “fathers” in Amulek’s discourse to the Nehorite Ammonihahites: “Behold, O ye wicked and perverse generation, how have ye forgotten the tradition of your fathers” (Alma 9:8). In this instance, the traditions refer to the recounting of God’s power in delivering the fathers and the official remembrance of the promises the Lord made to the fathers concerning obedience and prosperity in the land. Amulek’s exhortations suggest that it is the interpretation of Nephite traditions and history that provided the distinctive characteristics between the Church and Nehorism.


35. This appears to distinguish them from Nehorites as well. Although those who followed Nehor were not members of the Church, there is nothing to suggest they didn’t believe in Christ or didn’t practice baptism. In fact, Nehorism espoused universal salvation and redemption, believing that all mankind would be saved in the last day “and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4). Thus, among the Nephites there were at least three religious movements: the Church of Christ, Nehorism, and this group described in Mosiah 26. Of course, there were other religious movements as well; see Alma 30 and the Zoramites.
As Amulek’s usage of the term implies, both Nephites and Nehorites shared the same “fathers.”

Yet this assumption is challenged by another intriguing reference that describes another group of Nehorites. In Alma 21, Aaron, the eldest son of Mosiah₂, engages a community of Nehorites who reject his message concerning the Christ who would “redeem mankind from their sins” (Alma 21:7). Instead, the speaker replies: “We do not believe that thou knowest any such thing. We do not believe in these foolish traditions. We do not believe that thou knowest of things to come, neither do we believe that thy fathers and also that our fathers did know concerning the things which they spake, of that which is to come” (Alma 21:8). What is striking here is the distinction drawn between two sets of fathers: the fathers of Aaron (“thy fathers”) and the Nehorite fathers (“our fathers”), both of which believed in the same traditions. The speaker is an unnamed Amalekite, a member of a group of estranged Nephites who left and joined up with the Lamanites, though they retained their own cultural identity (as indicated by the frequent separate identification of both Lamanites and Amalekites). The origin of the Amalekites is unknown, though many assume the Amalekites to be the same group as the Amlicites. If this is the case, then this is the first reference by a group of Nephites indicating that they did not wish to be associated with traditional Nephite identity. Even though their fathers and Aaron’s fathers shared traditions, they did not self-identify as Nephites.

Thus, Korihor’s response that he does “not teach the foolish traditions of your fathers” (Alma 30:23) is notable due to his explicit use of the term “your fathers” rather than the traditional “our fathers.” The separation from the traditional Nephite cultural identity that results

from Korihor's word choice is clearly a deliberate rhetorical move designed to distance himself from the Nephite culture that he critiques. Korihor believes that the Nephites had subordinated the power of the greater population: "And because I do not teach this people to bind themselves down under the foolish ordinances and performances which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority over them, to keep them in ignorance, that they may not lift up their heads, but be brought down according to thy words" (Alma 30:23). The association of "your fathers" with "ancient priests" implies that the church leadership was drawn from the original Nephite elite and therefore used Nephite cultural tradition to retain their economic and political superiority. Korihor believed that ecclesiastical practices/rituals functioned to consolidate the power of the upper echelon of the older elite Nephite society. The keyword here is "usurp." Korihor believed that the religious leadership, by basing their authority in the "traditions of the fathers," had "usurped" the legal power and authority of the people, power that they could exercise following the abolition of the monarchy. For Korihor, the Church threatened the stability of the new governmental structure by binding the people to a history and belief system established under monarchical rule that promoted a dependency upon the leadership of the Church, which in turn enhanced the power of the politically dominant Nephite elite.37

Korihor's accusation continues in Alma 30:27 when he reiterates his earlier claim and adds: "Thus ye lead away this people . . . according to your own desires; and ye keep them down, even as it were in bondage, that ye may glut yourselves with the labors of their hands, that they durst not look up with boldness, and that they durst not enjoy their rights and privileges." In other words, not only did the ecclesiastical

37. Robert E. Clark, "Notes on Korihor and Language," Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (1993): 198: "Korihor is less concerned with the truth of the traditionally received teachings than he is with the role those traditions play in maintaining structures of dominion within the society. . . Authority is shown to be the power to determine the boundaries of the language, to establish the words that will constitute communal discourse."
ideology maintain the political power of the elite, but also consolidated their economic status by sublimating the people to give deference to “their traditions and their dreams and their whims and their visions and their pretended mysteries” (Alma 30:28). The people’s deference, reinforced by the religious rites and ceremonies (whose importance, in turn, was emphasized in order to maintain this control), kept the people from enjoying the various political, economic, and cultural rights and privileges that were legally theirs under the structure of judicial government. This self-reinforcing ideological loop thus maintained an inequitable power structure within Nephite society.38

These are serious accusations and may have been based in some aspect of reality. According to the law of Moses, the priests were in fact entitled to a portion of any given sacrifice offered at the sanctuary. Moreover, the Old Testament attests to the fact that this right, in some cases, led to priestly abuses. In Mosiah 18:24, we are told that priests should “labor with their own hands for their support,” but just four verses later, we find that the Church did share their substance with “those priests that stood in need” (Mosiah 18:28). Nehor taught that priests should be supported by the people, and in Alma 31–35, we see a community of Nephites who in fact had rigid social boundaries ruled by an ecclesiastical elite who do appear to have glutted themselves on the labor of the poorer class. The textual evidence is thus sufficient to claim that Korihor’s accusations were plausibly valid in the current configuration of Nephite society.

And it is here that Mormon’s designation of Korihor as anti-Christ may be understood. Korihor claimed that the current system stole individual liberty—“that they durst not look up with boldness, and that they

38. This would have been particularly egregious if those in ecclesiastical position were also in political positions of judges, as would have probably been the case. See Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 420: “Probably most Nephite priests were also community leaders. Alma had been a judge in addition to his responsibilities as high priest (v. 33). Thus, while the division between church and state existed, probably in many locales, the “natural” leader held both positions. As judge, they received compensation, and the people may not have made a clear differentiation between roles, and, therefore, reason for payment.”
durst not enjoy their rights and privileges"—which led to a state of fear and coercion in which "they durst not make use of that which is their own lest they should offend their priests" (Alma 30:27–28). If the elites and their attendant social systems keep the people in bondage via ignorance and overreliance on the said elites, then Korihor will free them by encouraging acceptance of an ideology that emphasizes an individual's own experience as the basis for epistemology and an individual's right to prosper without social constraints. Claiming the contemporary system is corrupt, Korihor depicts himself as a deliverer, a savior who will free those who are in bondage to the constraining system. He will then—in a society based on equality in which one's rights and privileges may be exercised freely, without constraint, and where anyone may prosper—inaugurate the fulfillment of what was promised when Mosiah initiated the political reforms eighteen years earlier.

Korihor's critique was more than a simple invitation to cultivate a meritocratic society. Rather, he issued a call to dismantle the Church and its political, economic, and cultural influence in order to establish a society free from the "traditions of the fathers." In the social structure Korihor proposes, individual rights and privileges are emphasized, and an epistemology based on personal experience over the acceptance of ecclesiastical teachings is endorsed. In this interpretation of the Mosiah reforms, an emphasis on personal rights over social responsibilities would form a society stripped of any sense of community. The implications of such a society would be profound, including the inability for long-term planning, care of the poor and indigent, and the establishment of rule of law vs. rule of personality; all of which are necessary for beneficial social growth. 39

Yet despite the promotion of social revolution, without specific action on Korihor's part, the illegality of his teachings is not firmly established within the codified structures of Nephite law. Thus, the

39. Robert E. Clark, "Notes on Korihor," 199: "In trying to tear down that power, and thereby 'liberate' the people, Korihor likewise tears down the order in which the powers of society are held, thus leading to such things as murder, robbery, theft, and adultery (Alma 30:10), working toward the disintegration of the community."
Korihor narrative, to this point, reveals the central tension, for what is one to do when one whose teachings have the potential for utterly destroying the moral and ethical foundation of one's society is not in fact breaking any law? ⁴⁰

"You have all things as a witness"

The answer to the above question is the subject of the second half of Alma 30. Following his exchange with the leadership in Gideon, Korihor is taken before Alma and the chief judge of the land. Again, the difficult position Korihor represents to the new system is apparent in the presence of both secular and ecclesiastical leadership. ⁴¹ Again, it is the high priest who asks the questions. Alma's participation is expected by virtue of his being the high priest, but his prior experience as the chief judge makes him uniquely qualified to deal with this growing crisis. ⁴²

In this case, it appears that Alma, like Korihor, recognizes that a society's ontological stance on the nature of God has a direct bearing on its understanding of the nature of man, which in turn determines the

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⁴⁰. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 277–78: "Korihor was clever. He was smart enough to understand these issues and bold enough to assert his right to 'equality' under the law (Alma 30:7, 11). Moreover, unlike Nehor, Korihor scrupulously avoided acting in any way that was expressly forbidden."

⁴¹. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 278–79: "Another background factor that seems to have complicated this case was an issue of jurisdiction. With the establishment of a church and a separate civil administration in Zarahemla, priests were no longer involved in civil matters, which were instead heard by the judges. This, of course, raised the question of whether Korihor's case should be considered a church matter or a public matter. He had directly attacked the teachings of the church, repudiating the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah (Alma 30:6), and thus he may well have been an apostate member of the church. Should he thus be taken to the high priest? On the other hand, he had also created a public disruption and incited others to break the civil law. Should he thus be taken to a civil judge? The fact that he was eventually taken to both may indicate that this point remained a preliminary issue in such a case."

⁴². Gardner, *Second Witness: Alma*, 418: "Given the comparative youthfulness of the system of judges, Alma's presence may represent both his former occupancy of the position and also, I hypothesize, a manifestation of his personal influence."
function of the given society. Thus, Alma will do exactly what Korihor has done: build an epistemological framework to establish an ontology. This move keeps the problem within the ecclesiastical realm and avoids political entanglements even as it addresses political issues.

Alma begins with a refutation of Korihor’s accusations concerning the ecclesiastical leadership and economic bondage, emphasizing that Korihor himself knows the accusations are baseless: “Why sayest thou then that we preach unto this people to get gain, when thou, of thyself, knowest that we receive no gain?” (Alma 30:35). While recognizing that members of church leadership have also functioned as political appointees, Alma stresses that he and the others have received no payment for their ecclesiastical offices and ministries, which include extensive travel through the region. Instead, such expenses have been covered by the individual’s own funds. Moreover, the result of these ministries has been the increased joy experienced by the communities themselves. Alma asks Korihor: “Believest thou that we deceive this people, that causes such joy in their hearts?” (Alma 30:35). Korihor’s monosyllabic response—“Yea” (Alma 30:36)—sounds petty and ignores the response from the communities themselves, especially since it appears that Korihor has recognized this joy himself, but has questioned its value, believing that it was the result of deception.43 Similarly, the positive experience of looking forward for a remission of sins was panned by Korihor because it resulted from the traditions of the fathers. Alma’s query brings Korihor’s suppositions into sharp relief and demonstrates that they are in fact as subjective as those Korihor complained about.

This same pattern is repeated beginning in Alma 30:37, the subject this time being the existence of God. Having asked if Korihor believed in God and having received his negative response, Alma declares: “I know there is a God, and also that Christ shall come” (Alma 30:39). Alma shifts the conversation, placing his knowledge and witness against

43. Korihor’s answer is a simple affirmative, but that response indicates he agrees with the general premise of the question, that is, that the joy of the people has been caused by the deception of the Nephite leadership. While this supposedly indicts the leadership, it also acknowledges that the people are experiencing joy.
that of Korihor. This move is followed by Alma’s question: “And now what evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not?” (Alma 30:40). With this question, Alma arrives at the heart of Korihor’s claims, which are based on a series of suppositions concerning the nature of God and man. Alma’s question places Korihor in the position of having to prove his claim without in fact accusing Korihor of anything. And Korihor’s lack of an answer suggests that he recognizes the epistemological problem that Alma’s question presents. It is not that Korihor doesn’t have evidence (though Alma’s statement that there is no such evidence, “save it be your word only” [Alma 16:48], suggests that this may in fact be the case); it is that Alma has established that any such evidence is subjective. In other words, through Alma’s observations, Korihor’s epistemology is revealed as one that also fails to address all available information.

In light of the epistemic disagreement between Alma and Korihor, Korihor requires proof for Alma’s claim. That the confrontation would ultimately result in this demand is not surprising, for if there is no clear-cut objective basis for either epistemological approach, then the only arbiter remaining is that of a mutually recognized “proof.” However, by asking for proof, Korihor inadvertently changes the contours of the argument itself. Rather than starting with the premise that “God” is utterly false, Korihor has now accepted that “God” is a valid claim. Significantly, Alma never asks Korihor for proof of his claims. Doing so would validate their premise. Instead, the focus is now on the sign of proof, not the legitimacy of claim. And this perhaps explains why Alma invokes the law of witnesses: “Will ye say, Show unto me a sign, when ye have the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets? . . . All things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator. . . . Will ye deny against all these witnesses?” (Alma 30:44–45).

On many levels, Alma’s invocation of the law of witnesses changes the very nature of the confrontation between himself and Korihor. First,
the witnesses themselves span both time and space, including living witnesses apparently watching the interaction between Alma and Korihor, as well as deceased ecclesiastical eyewitnesses (i.e., the prophets) and the very order of the cosmos. This last witness is of particular interest since, in much of the ancient world, the orderly movement of cosmic objects provided *prima facie* evidence of the divine. Yet the importance of Alma's invocation of the law is not so much in proving his point as it is in deconstructing Korihor's epistemology, namely, that truth may only be understood via one's senses. Alma's inclusion of the movement of the Earth and the planets, which would be observable to both Alma and Korihor, is, to Alma, proof of divine presence, whereas, to Korihor, it is not proof. While it is very possible that Korihor would refuse to accept these witnesses as objective truth demonstrating Alma's claim, there is no way to disprove Alma's claim either. Instead, the reader is left with the understanding that even when two people see the same thing, the conclusions as to what they see and the significance of it may be radically different. The logical implication behind this move is the recognition that an epistemology that prioritizes sensory experience can be just as fallible or subjective as one based on revelation or faith. 44

44. Welch also points out that that Korihor is not able to respond in kind with his own witnesses. See Welch, *Legal Cases*, 285–86: “Alma warned him by naming the witnesses that would stand against him: Alma himself was a witness, testifying that he knew 'there is a God, and also that Christ should come' (Alma 30:39); and in order to give further evidence in support of that testimony, Alma asserted that 'all things [are] a testimony that these things are true' (v. 41), and he also cited the testimonies 'of all these thy brethren' (v. 44). By contrast, Korihor lacked any support for his accusations (v. 40), a serious deficiency.” Welch goes on to believe that this is the primary legal case Alma establishes against Korihor. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 286–87: “As part of the substantive warning to Korihor that he was lying, Alma also pointed out to him that he had only one witness for his position, namely, Korihor himself. In contrast, Alma had rebutted Korihor's assertions and called a host of witnesses. . . . By doing this, Alma rhetorically showed that Korihor had failed, even nominally, to produce the minimum number of witnesses required by law—two. . . . Alma's query, 'What evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not?' effectively turned the tables on Korihor, who suddenly found himself running the risk of being convicted of bearing false witness. . . . In this way, Alma was able to expose an objectively provable defect in Korihor's case.
What follows is Korihor's denial of these witnesses. While that could be expected, what is striking is that it changes the perimeters of the argument; instead of Alma being on the defensive concerning perceived wrongdoings by the Church, it is now Korihor who is defensive as to his epistemological claims. It also puts the confrontation squarely within the ecclesiastical sphere: the discussion centering on the reality of the divine. Korihor's denial is contingent on a sign: “Yea, I will deny, except ye shall show me a sign” (Alma 30:45). While this denial is in harmony with his epistemology, it has also narrowed the complaints down to the reality of God, a purely ecclesiastical question, which now allows for an ecclesiastical solution. Or more accurately, a divine solution. As Alma himself notes, the disputation is now between Korihor and God directly: “If thou shalt deny again, behold God shall smite thee, that thou shalt become dumb, that thou shalt never open thy mouth any more, that thou shalt not deceive this people any more” (Alma 30:47).

This pronouncement was prefaced by Alma stating a principle found elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, that it is better that one man perish than a whole nation: “It is better that thy soul should be lost than that thou shouldst be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction, by thy lying and by thy flattering words” (Alma 30:47). The terminology here is almost word-for-word that spoken by the Spirit to Nephi at the slaughter of Laban: “Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13).45

Alma's legal logic is based implicitly on the reasonable assumption that bearing sole witness was a form of judicial speech that Nephite law could still punish and, thus was an act not insulated from prosecution by the law of Mosiah.

45. The similarities between the slaughter of Laban and the trial of Korihor are intriguing. In both, the ecclesiastical requirement is challenged by the (il)legal nature of the activity. While Nephi is in fact following the exemption to the killing of another human being, as outlined in Exodus 21, the event is a difficult one to reconcile. Similarly, Korihor, who has done nothing technically illegal, is a threat to the sociopolitical and legal fabric of Nephite society. The similar wording in the rendering of these two events indicates that Alma (or perhaps Mormon) found Korihor as potentially destructive to
Perhaps recognizing that the situation has changed, Korihor equivocates: “I do not deny the existence of a God, but I do not believe that there is a God; and I say also, that ye do know that there is a God” (Alma 30:48). Though it may appear as if Korihor is backtracking from earlier claims, or at least playing a semantic game, in truth, his response displays the essence of his epistemology informing his ontology. While he does not deny the possibility of divine existence, he himself has never experienced any phenomena that would indicate such. Moreover, he believes the same about all others, including Alma: “And I say also, that ye do not know that there is a God.” This response reflects the same position he held in the beginning of the chapter. Korihor ends his denial by reiterating his desire for a sign, which is promptly given, described succinctly in verse 50 in which Korihor loses the power of speech.

At this point, the chief judge, who has remained a silent figure, now addresses Korihor. However, he does not appear to do so in his role as chief judge. Rather, he emphasizes Alma’s authority as well as the legitimacy of his actions before asking Korihor if he wishes to continue to argue. The spontaneous nature of Nephiah’s outburst may reflect the chief judge’s religious background. In Alma 4:16–17, the chief judge was

Nephite society as the loss of the brass plates would have been if Nephi had let Laban live. Even the outcomes are similar. Though Korihor’s life wasn’t forfeited, if Korihor does not recant, then he will lose his ability to speak, and for a figure whose “much success” (Alma 30:53) has up until this point been dependent upon his skill with words, the loss of speech would be in essence take away his prior life.

46. Contrary to some (see Lund, “Anti-Christ in the Book of Mormon,” 107–28), this is not contradictory to Korihor’s suppositions. Since he espouses a strictly empirical stance, to admit that it is possible, some evidence somewhere could conceivably demonstrate that the validity of divinity is permissible, even as he declares that he does not believe such proof exists because he has not experienced it yet.

47. The event itself is couched in a volitive sequence followed by a perfective sequence of verbs. This verbal pattern reflects a common Semitic pattern of volitive verb sequence followed by active verb sequence found in ritual narratives, as the volitive declares the intent of the performer followed by the actual performance, in this case, noted by the injunction of God. The use of this grammatical structure, and its relationship with ritual descriptions, may suggest that the performance of this sign included the use of the priesthood.
chosen from among the elders of the Church. Regardless, in light of the legal conundrum established earlier in the chapter, his involvement here is problematic as it indicates a potential mixing of ecclesiastic and legal judgments.

More significant is Korihor’s written confession, provided in verses 52–54. The confession begins with his recant, in which he not only confesses that there is a God, but claims that he had always known this. This confession is followed by what is a simply stunning admission that reveals an unbelievable disconnect between what Korihor experienced and what he taught. According to Korihor, at some point, he had a supernatural encounter with the adversary who appeared as an “angel.” This being gave him the charge to “reclaim this people, for they have all gone astray after an unknown God” (Alma 30:53). Though it had been implied earlier, it is Korihor himself who admits to seeing himself as a religious reformer; the moniker of “Anti-Christ” applied by Mormon now makes sense. And yet the religious reform undertaken by Korihor was itself an effort to erase the belief in God altogether: “And he said unto me, There is no God” (Alma 30:53). Korihor’s confession confronts the reader with an event in which an angel appears to Korihor to tell him there is no God.

Part of the difficulty hinges on the meaning of the term “angel.” It is possible that its usage here reflects the modern English definition—that of a being sent from God, the Judeo-Christian deity. The challenge to this reading is that it is unclear how anyone could accept that a being defined as one sent from God would be believed if it said there was no God. Another possibility is that the term refers to supernatural beings generally and not necessarily to one that is subordinate to a higher order of deity.48 The text states that the being appeared in the form of

48. Throughout history, syncretism between native traditions and beliefs invading other cultures and their religious systems has occurred, resulting in systems that had the semblance of the dominant culture while retaining native practices, albeit in new forms. This was the case of Christianity and pre-Christian Europe as well as Christianity and the pre-Christian New World. In both cases, terminology utilized by the dominant religious system was used to incorporate traditional beliefs. In the New World, this meant that traditional deities and beings, while originally considered demonic, could
an angel, which suggests that such a being could be differentiated from mortal beings, but it does not state that the being functioned as an emissary from another being. If Korihor understands the angel as a type of supernatural being not attached to the Nephite God, then he appears to espouse a type of animism. Local, supernatural worship is alluded to in the Book of Mormon, suggesting that both alternate deities and worship systems would have been available to Korihor. It may also explain how the angel could state that people, having gone astray after an unknown God, need to be reclaimed (i.e., irrespective of local divinity), and that there is no God (i.e., no overarching deity).

While this possibility may make sense of the two contradicting elements, it creates other problems, such as why a being like this would be concerned with reclaiming the Nephites. Korihor’s teaching does not appear to espouse any religious belief or suggest that the Nephites are worshipping the wrong god. In fact, his doctrine demonstrates a conception of man as independent of any divine intervention. It is possible that the angel was meant to represent a local spirit or deity and thus reflect the belief system of the native population that had been subverted by the invading Nephites three to four generations earlier. This theory would correlate with the political message of Korihor—that it was the Nephite elite, particularly those of the Nephite church—who were corrupting the general population, leading them astray from the true intent and purpose of Mosiah’s reforms. But if this were case, then the return to the earlier, native religious tradition is missing completely.

become “angels” and “saints.” See Manuel M. Marzal, The Indian Face of God in Latin America (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); also James Merrell, The Indian’s New World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989; also James Axtell, The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). While the text identifies the being as the adversary, the being itself does not appear to give an identification during the encounter and does not construct its identity in terms of opposition to another being, that is, Satan vs. God. Instead, the being is simply presented as a supernatural being.

Either way, Korihor’s account of this angel is difficult to reconcile with his actions and message.

And perhaps that is the point. The experience may have been irrec­oncilable for Korihor as well, but it gave license to an appealing moral and ethical laxness. As he tells the gathered congregation, it was the carnally pleasing nature of the teachings that led to his acceptance of them: “[The devil] taught me that which I should say. And I have taught his words; and I taught them because they were pleasing unto the carnal mind” (Alma 30:53). What he means by “carnal mind” is not explicit in the text itself, but when put into the context of his teachings, the phrase *carnal mind* suggests a belief system divorced from a divine order as well as from any social responsibilities for an individual’s actions. This “freedom” from consequences or limitations to behavior coupled with the innate desire to excel and be only concerned with the present mortal life (there is no life after death, man is a creature, etc.) is the carnal mind.50

But perhaps the most important part of his admission is his explana­tion as to how he convinced himself that the devil’s teachings were true. Korihor admits that he knew these teachings to be false: “I taught them, even until I had much success, insomuch that I verily believed that they were true” (Alma 30:53). A number of insights arise from this admission. First, as Korihor notes, his frequent teaching of these principles and their subsequent popularity rendered the given subjects “true” regardless of whether or not they were truth. It is this understanding of the creation of truth, or even the nature of truth, that is, ultimately, the epistemic question of the Korihor narrative. Such an epistemological approach denies the concept of innate, inherent truth and replaces it instead with a definition of truth that is relative to circumstances or belief. In this version, truth is based on the way things seem.

50. The term “carnal” stems from the Latin root “carne,” meaning flesh. While often used to describe the particular “fleshly” sins associated with sexuality, the term, as used here, appears to ultimately refer to any mental process in which the things of this earth are emphasized over the eternal perspective. Thus, believing that man’s existence ends at death is as much a carnal principle as immorality.
Though it is merely one sentence, this part of his admission ties Korihor’s narrative into other narratives associated with truth and wisdom. Five hundred years earlier, Jacob taught that truth was in the purview of the Spirit, revealing “things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). This definition contrasts with the definition implied in Korihor’s doctrine that one’s observations of the way things seem—that is, empiricism—determines truth. Later, Jacob confronts an individual named Sherem who also seeks to abolish worship of a Messiah (espousing instead the sole observance of the law of Moses). Sherem, too, is confronted with the power of God, punished accordingly, and finally recants his previous position, admitting to being deceived.\footnote{51. It is possible that Sherem’s emphasis on the law of Moses came in response to Nephite interactions with other cultures. Appearing so soon after the arrival, Sherem’s stance may have reflected his concern that the Nephites had veered so quickly from the law. That such a concern would be a real threat so soon could be noted by the observing the Lamanites who, according to Enos, were already “full of idolatry and filthiness” (Enos 1:20). Belief in Christ was not syncretic, nor is it intuitive as to how belief in Christ interacted with the law of Moses, as witnessed by almost all of the apostate systems found in the Book of Mormon as well as the theological challenge Christ presented to the Jewish leadership as attested in the New Testament gospels.}

Though he is more concerned with the proper application of truth, or wisdom, Alma throughout his discourses alludes to the importance of recognizing truth.\footnote{52. See Alma 29:8; 32:12; 37:35; 38:9.} His confrontation with the inhabitants of Ammonihah was one that centered around truth and the denial thereof (Alma 9:19–20). Similarly, the missionary effort among the Zoramites described in Alma 31–35 is also centered around the acquisition of wisdom (Alma 32:12). Thus, the epistemic definitions provided in Alma 30 can be viewed through the lens of greater Nephite history and suggest that Mormon found this particular theme significant as he crafted the final form of the text.

Returning to this specific narrative, following his confession, Korihor petitions Alma to lift the curse from him. While there is nothing to suggest that Korihor was changed by the immediate events one way or
another, Alma indicates that if there was any positive change, it would be temporary and therefore ineffectual. In fact, Alma declares plainly that if Korihor were to be released, he would go back to his old ways and would continue to lead others astray. Instead, Alma indicates that Korihor’s future from this point on will occur according to the will of God. Although this leaves the impression that Korihor’s fate is set and that his wickedness engrained, Alma’s declaration actually highlights the merciful nature of Korihor’s punishment.

While the loss of speech is traumatic, it bears noting that Korihor is not dead, which means his fate is not etched permanently in stone. In essence, Korihor retains his agential status as a living individual. Since the duration of the curse is based on the Lord’s will, the actual duration is undecided and, if the rest of the Book of Mormon is to be any guide, determined largely by Korihor himself. Ironically, Korihor is allowed to retain his individual rights and privileges; whether or not he prospers under this new set of circumstances is up to him. As an individual agent who has recently confessed, it is possible for Korihor to choose to cultivate a direct relationship with God. He has asked for and received a sign, but it is in a certain sense an empty sign, void of signifying content, just as Korihor himself is now silent in his voiceless state. Korihor’s own actions will determine how the conveyed meaning of the sign will be formed: Will the sign be a blessing? Or a curse?

The sign is ever-present, giving Korihor the time to reflect on the error of his epistemology as well as the time to ponder on the truth as revealed by God himself. In other words, though a negative consequence, the sign gives Korihor the circumstances to contemplate and ponder. In essence, the sign is a tangible opportunity to know the sweet by experiencing the bitter. He could now experience fully and completely the very agency he believed to be missing among the Nephite people. We are also told that, in his current state, Korihor’s well-being was now dependent upon the generosity of others: He “went about from house to house begging for his food.... [He] did go about from house to house, begging food for his support” (Alma 30:56, 58). Begging for his food could lead Korihor to re-examine his belief that one only fared
according to the management of the creature. Now dependent upon the charity of others, reliant upon their recognition of social responsibilities, the weaknesses inherent in Korihor’s ideal meritocratic state could now be seen by Korihor himself, bringing about humility and a requisite change to his epistemological claims.

The final scene in this narrative is the proclamation made by the chief judge following Alma’s declaration, which includes both an account of the confrontation between Korihor and Alma and a warning that a similar punishment awaited those who attempted the same activities as Korihor (Alma 30:57). The chief judge’s involvement at this point in the narrative serves as an additional recognition of the political threat that Korihor represented. As has been noted often earlier in this study, the social, political, and economic ramifications of Korihor’s doctrine, if not addressed, had the potential to disrupt the complex relations that structured the Nephite culture. The fact that the “proclamation was sent forth by the chief judge” (Alma 30:57; emphasis added), rather than being distributed through the lines of ecclesiastic authority and communications, underscores the fact that this event was understood by Alma and the chief judge to be just as politically dangerous as it was religiously problematic. While the solution to Korihor personally occurred under the auspices of ecclesiastic authority, the solution to Korihor’s effect upon Nephite society was ultimately one that rested upon the legal and lawful authority of the governing political body. The challenge had been, of course, that, as Mormon pointed out, the doctrine and the teaching of it was not illegal; thus, the nascent system of judges was caught in a catch-22: if they imprisoned Korihor and punished him via state power, the rule of law established under the new system of government was undermined, which would in turn destabilize the entire system and potentially alienate segments of the population. But if they let him go unchecked, his moral and ethical teachings would have corrupted the social fabric of the Nephites, including the new political system, while simultaneously destroying the spiritual influence of the Church. The genius of Alma’s cross-examination lay in the way he neutralized
these threats by guiding the debate to the point that Korihor himself re-configured the entire problem as a theological one in which the only possible resolution would be through an act of God.

Thus, the chief judge is able to marginalize potential threats without resorting to breaking the law. The entire exchange had demonstrated the paucity of Korihor’s epistemology, which the chief judge, who appears to have understood the negative social ramifications inherent in the adoption of said epistemology, alluded to in the proclamation. While the action of the divine sign is noted, the chief judge does not explicitly ally the Nephite political power with that of the Church. This fundamental separation between political and ecclesiastic authority is a requisite move in the diverse population of the Nephite nation.

“And thus we see”

Yet, for all of Alma’s and the other Nephite leaders’ success here, Korihor and his doctrine remained and would continue to remain a threat to the Nephite civilization. The resolution with Korihor did not resolve the underlying social tensions. While it is clear that the Nephite leaders did not agree with Korihor’s approach, concerns over the new political system continued to percolate among the Nephite population during the successive decades. Accusations that the church leadership, in collusion with the political leadership, interfered with the expression of individual rights and privileges would be repeated eighty years later, and the emergence of the Gadianton Robbers with their claims of abused rights all reflect the influence of Korihor’s doctrine in later generations.

More immediately, the introduction of the people of Antionum—Zoram’s followers—in the final verses of Alma 30 foreshadows the missionary discourses by Alma and Amulek to these selfsame people that will take place in the following chapters. There, in chapters 31–35, we will find a people who are in fact actually practicing many of the principles advocated for in Korihor’s philosophy and who, like Korihor, do not understand the nature of God and nature of man. That Korihor dies
there among these people in an ignominious fashion is the final irony
of the narrative.\footnote{As Welch points out, though, “Korihor’s anti-establishment political views
undoubtedly would have been unwelcome among the leaders of the truly oppressive
oligarchy in Antionum, who burdened the poor mercilessly and notoriously” (Welch, Legal Cases, 298).}

Mormon closes the chapter with a final observation: “And thus
we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus
we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but
doeth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60). This principle is
reinforced by Korihor’s isolation and literal death via trampling. But,
of course, recognizing that the adversary abandons all of his partners
eventually is not the only lesson to be garnered from the account. The
inclusive summation “thus we see” refers to the entire narrative, not just
the immediate end of Korihor. Consequently, Mormon’s observations
concerning the potential social and political instability that resulted
from Korihor’s powerful but empty doctrine serve to emphasize what
Mormon thought were the principles by which the adversary destroys
both individuals and communities. For Mormon, when a community
abandons an ontology established around a divine-mortal interaction,
or establishes a moral/ethical environment more concerned with indi­
vidual expression of rights rather than responsibilities for those rights,
or believes that all truth is relative based only on what one senses, the
consequences will be destructive, a state that he himself experienced in
his own life.

Each of these elements is deliberately included by Mormon in his
narrative construction and is meant for his audience. To be sure, the
ministry of Korihor came at a crucial juncture in Nephite history and
took advantage of the fracturing that lay concealed under the surface
of the Nephite civilization. In doing so, the Korihor narrative themati­
cally introduces the intra-societal conflict that would define the Nephite
experience for the next forty years. But for the modern Latter-day Saint,
Mormon’s message speaks to our own experience. As Mormon states
later, Nephite history is not important for solely its own sake, but also
because it may act as a warning to the later generations who will read Mormon’s record. It is in this, then, that the full significance of Korihor’s narrative is revealed, for if it really was written for our day, then Mormon believed that we were to be held responsible for the lessons provided within.

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Many would agree that the most disturbing narrative in all of the Book of Mormon is that of Nephi being commanded to slay Laban.\textsuperscript{1} Few encourage their friends to turn to that passage when introducing the book.\textsuperscript{2} It is the rather detailed account of what appears to be an

\begin{itemize}
\item While most are appalled that Nephi would take the life of a defenseless man, Hugh Nibley did have a group of students who were bothered for a different reason. He had taught “the first class ever held in ‘Book of Mormon for Near Eastern Students’” (Hugh Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City, and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], xii). Those students were upset that it took Nephi so long to follow the instructions he was given (Nibley, An Approach, xii–xiii).
\item “Why does the story begin like this? The Hebrew Bible begins with the creation of heaven and earth; the New Testament begins with the mysterious birth of a boy god. What kind of bible starts off in a dark creepy alley, with a sleazy drunk guy and a gruesome murder/robbery? This sounded more like Dostoyevsky than Genesis” (Avi Steinberg, The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri [New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2014], 19). Later, the author and a friend will conclude that the book begins with this story to show the importance of the book. “There’s a question at the beginning of this story: what kind of book is so important, what kind of story is so important, that you would kill for it—literally \textit{kill}? Well, this is that kind of book” (Steinberg, Lost Book, 20). Though they are confusing the gold plates of the Book of Mormon with the plates of brass Nephi sought, it is still a provocative insight that one could apply to the brass plates: According to the Nephi narrative, God saw the plates as being so important to the people of Lehi that he was willing to have Nephi kill for them.
\end{itemize}
unconscionable act. Its closest parallel elsewhere in scripture is the story of Abraham and Isaac, with the all-important difference that, for Nephi, there was no ram in the thicket. How can we justify a man coming upon another man lying in a street, completely helpless, incapacitated because he is passed out from being drunk, and that first man decapitating the second man, stealing his sword and clothing, and then impersonating him so he could steal a most precious item from his treasury and lead one of his servants away from his household? On the surface, this is what appears to be happening. The fact that Nephi feels led by the Spirit to commit this act may be of little comfort to us as members of society since “few, if any of us, would want to live in a society where individual citizens are free to kill drunken fellow citizens—however guilty the drunk may be—because the citizen feels he has been constrained by God to do so.”

A number of writers have offered a variety of explanations for the account. While a few have proclaimed it to be everything from murder to the fictionalized result of a narcissistic Joseph Smith still reeling from his traumatic childhood, most have interpreted the killing as justified for one reason or another: Jewish law; Nephi acting as a sovereign entity; a “law of retribution” articulated in modern times in the Doctrine and Covenants; reasons given to Nephi by the Spirit. Clearly, the controversial and disturbing nature of this story has caused many careful readers of the Book of Mormon to feel the need to justify Nephi’s actions.

In this article, I will first address the main arguments other writers have put forth. I will then analyze the text of the narrative in detail, providing a close reading through a literary lens and presenting my theory regarding what I consider to be the only justification for Nephi killing Laban.

Legal Defense

Foundational to any study of the story of Nephi killing Laban is the work of John W. Welch, particularly his “Legal Perspectives on the
Slaying of Laban,” in which he explores the relevant law surrounding the event. Welch’s analysis argues that the story “can be evaluated profitably through the perspectives of the prevailing legal principles of Nephi’s day.” The summary of his argument is that “if an action had been brought against Nephi, early biblical law appears to have recognized two types of killings—excusable and inexcusable—and the slaying of Laban arguably falls quite specifically into the excusable category.”

Welch’s argument centers around the interpretation of the “words of the Spirit [as] apparently a verbatim quote from Exodus 21:13, ‘And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand: These words or their equivalent, in [Welch’s] opinion, would have been recognized by Nephi as coming from the Code of the Covenant.”

Exodus 21:12–14 instructs what the followers of Jehovah are to do if a person kills someone: “He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death. And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee. But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die.” Since God has delivered Laban into Nephi’s hands and Nephi was not lying in wait for him—in other words, since the act was not premeditated—Nephi is not guilty of murder. Of course, this interpretation of events is ultimately theoretical; what


6. Welch, “Legal Perspectives,” 133. He continues: “Growing up in Israel as a young boy, Nephi would certainly have learned this passage from Exodus 21. Deuteronomy 6:6–7 required righteous parents in Israel to teach their children the law of Moses, to talk of these words when they sat at the dinner table, to recite them as they walked down the path, to repeat them before going to bed, and to speak of them upon rising in the morning. One of the most important texts of the law of Moses was Exodus 21–23, essentially an elaboration of the familiar Ten Commandments. Coming early in the first chapter of the Covenant Code was the text cited by the Spirit to Nephi.”
an actual court in Jerusalem would have decided remains uncertain at best.\(^7\)

Assuming Nephi is as well-versed in the law as Welch believes he is, Nephi faces a dilemma. While he understands that the act of taking Laban's life may not be considered murder for the reasons outlined by Welch, and that therefore the act may be "excusable;" he would also understand that, in order for the act to be justified under the law, he would be required to follow a certain process. He would have to await trial in a refuge city; if found innocent of murder, he would live in a city of asylum until the high priest dies.\(^8\) While Welch believes that Nephi met these criteria through his journey to the promised land, thereby meeting the requirement to flee and thus avoid polluting the land because he did not remain on it,\(^9\) it is questionable that the legal authorities of the day would have considered these criteria met. The refuge city is an externally designated location and not a choice selected by the killer. Additionally, the killer needed to remain in the place of refuge until the trial was completed; there was no option to simply escape. Nephi's justification under the law is thus a more nuanced matter than an appeal to the Code of the Covenant may initially suggest.

There is another fundamental question: Is Nephi concerned with how the law sees him or is he not? If he is, then one might think he would not feel right about breaking the law by escaping after killing Laban. If he is not, then one might think he would not be worried about whether his action would be considered excusable or inexcusable in the law even if the act is something that God commanded. Some might wonder if Nephi saw himself in a situation similar to Moses, who killed a man and fled (Exodus 2), yet Nephi never compares himself to Moses in this manner. The context of each death further separates Nephi from Moses

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7. Even Welch admits that he does not know if "Nephi would have been able to persuade a court in Jerusalem to let him off or not" (John W. Welch, "Introduction," *Studia Antiqua: The Journal of the Student Society for Ancient Studies* 3/2 [2003]: 12). He does say that he believes Nephi "certainly saw himself as not having violated the law."
8. Welch, "Legal Perspectives," 122.
killed an Egyptian who was beating one of Moses's brethren, while Nephi killed a defenseless man who was passed out in the street.

Prophet like unto Moses

However, Welch also sees an additional justification for Nephi's actions. He accepts a reading of Deuteronomy 18 regarding the figure of the "prophet-like-Moses" that leads to the understanding that "a prophet who is like Moses can change the law. He is the bearer of divine commands and legal formulations." Welch cites instances in which "Nephi encourages his brothers to return to Jerusalem promising that God would deliver them as he had Moses" (1 Nephi 4:2) and when he "implicitly likens himself to Moses while preaching to his brothers Laman and Lemuel" (1 Nephi 17:41–42) in order to support the idea that Nephi is a prophet like Moses. Welch concludes by claiming that, by "receiving the word of the Lord directly from the Spirit, Nephi became a prophet like Moses and, as such, Nephi had the right to suspend or clarify the law as necessary."

In response, one might argue that Jesus Christ is the more likely candidate for the prophet like unto Moses rather than Nephi. After all, Nephi himself declared that the "prophet of whom Moses spake was the Holy One of Israel" (1 Nephi 22:21). Similarly, later in the Book of Mormon, Jesus would state: "Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord our God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me" (3 Nephi 20:23). Joseph Smith records that when Moroni appeared to him, he quoted Acts 3:22–23 (in which Peter teaches about the prophet like unto Moses) and "said that that prophet was Christ" (JS-H 1:40). Welch might reply, however, that "Deuteronomy 18 does not imagine that there would be only one prophet like Moses. Bernard S. Jackson rightly sees that such a prophet will be needed continually so that the people will not turn to augury and divination."

Preservation of a People

A common justification provided for Nephi's actions is based on the Spirit's words following the second time the Spirit told Nephi to slay Laban because the Lord had delivered him into his hands. "Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Nephi 4:13). These words caused Nephi to remember that the Lord had told him that his posterity would prosper in the land of promise to the extent that they would keep his commandments. Nephi also "thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And [he] also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass" (1 Nephi 4:15–16). This moment appears to be key in Nephi's decision: "And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause—that I might obtain the records according to his commandments. Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword" (1 Nephi 4:17–18).

Writers who base the justification of the slaying on these verses believe Nephi had to kill Laban in order to get the plates, which would be necessary to his future posterity's ability to follow the Lord. "Nephi needs a powerful reason to overcome his reluctance to shed blood; that reason is his people's future ability to know the commandments. Because those commandments are contained on the brass plates, they are therefore necessary to Lehi's posterity."12 While it is true that Nephi recalled

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Laban's own sinful actions—how he had "sought to take away [Nephi's] life;" "would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord;" and "had taken away [their] property"—if one interprets Nephi's actions as motivated by a divinely directed concern for a future people's possibility for righteousness, then, in this context, Nephi did not kill Laban because he deserved to die. This was not an act of vengeance, retaliation, or justice, according to this theory; this was an act of preservation for an entire future nation. In this interpretive context, Laban had to die for the people of Lehi to survive, and the Lord was giving his blessing for this death to occur for that reason.

While there is no question that the possession of the plates was important to Nephi and his people, we must be careful not to ignore the unlimited alternative ways to acquire the plates without Nephi having to kill Laban. To answer that Nephi had to kill Laban in order to obtain the plates begs the question of why God did not choose one of an infinite number of other scenarios in which Nephi could have gained possession of the plates without killing anyone. Welch, for instance, speculates that if Nephi had allowed Laban to live, he could have either made it home when Nephi was pretending to be him while trying to get the plates, or returned the next day and led a search party to pursue Nephi and his brothers, possibly catching them, killing them, and retrieving the brass plates. 13 But do those scenarios have to play out in those ways? 14

Joining Welch's viewpoint, Val Larsen writes that while it is "true that God could keep Laban unconscious or slay him himself," the "criticism

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D&C 49:21)? There was something special, something unique, about these brass plates," Murphy writes. "They were not just a genealogy or a narrative; they were a written record that included the law of Moses. The Spirit told Nephi that without the plates his descendants would 'dwindle and perish in unbelief' (1 Nephi 4:13). The hidden presupposition in this statement is that belief, or at least the 'true' belief sought by Nephi, could not exist independent of the written word" (Murphy, "Laban's Ghost," 110).


is, nonetheless, invalid. While God has the power to remedy any ill we may encounter, no thinking Christian or Jew believes that God will or should instantly solve all the problems the believer faces.” But why is it permissible for God to intervene to the extent of leading Nephi to Laban (“I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” [1 Nephi 4:6]) and repeatedly instructing him to slay Laban, but it is not allowed for him to keep Laban unconscious? The scriptures are abundant with examples of God intervening in the affairs of people, but perhaps one of the most relevant here would be the instance in the Book of Mormon in which “the Lord caused a deep sleep to come upon the Lamanites,” allowing a group of people to escape (see Mosiah 24:19ff.). Larsen continues to express his concern that “Laban will pose a serious danger if Nephi leaves him alive: the danger that he will wake and follow Nephi to his house or that he will pursue the brothers to recover the plates.” And yet, in the same Mosiah 24 narrative, “the Lord said unto Alma: Haste thee and get thou and this people out of this land, for the Lamanites have awakened and do pursue thee; therefore get thee out of this land, and I will stop the Lamanites in this valley that they come no further in pursuit of this people” (Mosiah 24:23).

Law of Retribution (Self-Defense)

Some scholars believe that a law pertaining to when it is appropriate to defend oneself set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants applies to Nephi’s killing of Laban. This “law of retribution” or “law of righteous retaliation” maintains that “if men will smite you, or your fam-

ilies, once, and ye bear it patiently and revile not against them, neither seek revenge, ye shall be rewarded.” Then, “if your enemy shall smite you the second time, and you revile not against your enemy, and bear it patiently, your reward shall be an hundred fold.” After this second time, “if he shall smite you the third time, and ye bear it patiently, your reward shall be doubled unto you four-fold” (D&C 98:23, 25–26). The law concludes: “Nevertheless, thine enemy is in thine hands; and if thou rewardest him according to his works thou art justified; if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou art justified. Behold, this is the law I gave unto my servant Nephi, and thy fathers, Joseph, and Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham, and all mine ancient prophets and apostles” (D&C 98:31–32; emphasis added). For those who argue that Nephi is justified in killing Laban because of this law, Laban is guilty of three offenses as required by the law as they interpret it: when Laman asks for the brass plates, Laban angrily casts him out and threatens to kill him (1 Nephi 3:13); when Nephi and his brothers offer to purchase the plates with their family treasure, Laban casts them out so he can have their property (1 Nephi 3:25); and Laban sends his servants to kill the brothers (1 Nephi 3:25). In support of this interpretation, it is significant that all three of these offenses come to Nephi’s mind during his final encounter with Laban: “I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea, and he would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property” (1 Nephi 4:11).


19. Nyman, I, Nephi, 67: Nyman seems to believe this is when the law of retribution is revealed. “All three of these offenses are brought to Nephi’s mind as he deliberates the Spirit’s commandment to slay Laban. The Lord had delivered Laban into his hands (v. 11), the law of the Lord was revealed.” McConkie and Millet also see this event as related to the law set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants. Rather than writing of Laban casting out Laman and threatening to kill him as one of his offenses, they offer the more general violation of not being obedient to the Lord’s commandments (McConkie and Millet, Doctrinal Commentary, Vol. 1, 44).

20. It is not difficult to imagine Nephi perceiving Laban’s refusal to give Laman the plates when he had first asked for them as a refusal to “hearken unto the commandments
One challenge to this justification for Nephi's actions, however, can be found in the law of retribution itself: "And now, verily I say unto you, if that enemy shall escape my vengeance, that he be not brought into judgment before me, then ye shall see to it that ye warn him in my name, that he come no more upon you, neither upon your family, even your children's children unto the third and fourth generation. And then, if he shall come upon you or your children, or your children's children unto the third and fourth generation, I have delivered thine enemy into thine hands" (D&C 98:28–29). According to these conditions, for the law of retribution to be invoked, the victim must first warn the enemy once the enemy has wronged the victim three times. Second, the victim does not act until the enemy has wronged the victim one more time (i.e., a fourth time) after the warning. Thus, when considering the full law of retribution, it would appear that this law fails to apply to Nephi's situation because he did not warn Laban and did not wait for a fourth offense before executing him.

While the Doctrine and Covenants makes it clear that Nephi received this law from the Lord at some point, it does not specify when. It is certainly far from clear during the Nephi and Laban encounter that the law of retribution is being given to Nephi at that moment; at no point, for example, does the Spirit use any language of retribution to justify instructing Nephi to slay Laban. It is true that Nephi thinks about how Laban has wronged him and might, therefore, be coming up with reasons to justify retribution, but the Spirit does not offer such reasons. If we consider the common understanding of a key word used in the Doctrine and Covenants law, smite, at the time of Joseph Smith, it conveys a much more physical meaning than anything Laban had done to Nephi or his brothers: "To strike; to throw, drive or force against, as the fist or hand, a stone or a weapon; to reach with a blow or a weapon; as, to smite one with the fist; to smite with a rod or with of the Lord" since it was the Lord who had commanded the sons of Lehi to retrieve the plates.
The second definition references killing and destroying life with weapons. This matches the historical context of the time in which this section of the Doctrine and Covenants was given—a time when members of the Church had experienced literal physical attacks. The heading to the Doctrine and Covenants section explains the context: "This revelation came in consequence of the persecution upon the Saints in Missouri. Increased settlement of Church members in Missouri troubled some other settlers, who felt threatened by the Saints' numbers, political and economic influence, and cultural and religious differences. In July 1833, a mob destroyed Church property, tarred and feathered two Church members, and demanded that the Saints leave Jackson County" (D&C 98).

Section 98 (D&C) does not seem to provide a law for how to deal with an individual who offends you. With its talk of "men" who "smite" you "or your families," this law does not appear to be counsel regarding conflict between two people, but rather as referring to the larger community. Additionally, consider that immediately following this law of retribution is a second law pertaining to when a people are allowed to go to battle against another people. This second law is patterned after the first; each provides a moral template and justification for larger sociopolitical events rather than individual grievances. Welch believes Nephi might have received the law of retribution when the Nephites separated themselves from Laman and his group, since the "rules of war fit the events in 2 Nephi 5, but they do not apply precisely to the case of Laban." He makes the convincing argument that the statement "if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou are justified" (D&C 98:31) "literally applies only


22. For a more detailed discussion of the historical events pertaining to the persecution of this time period, see Richard Lyman Bushman, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 222–27.
to a case of self-defense," which is not the situation Nephi finds himself in when he stands over Laban, passed out in the street.  

Nephi as Sovereign

Val Larsen theorizes that "while any explanation of this episode will be unsatisfactory if Nephi is held to be acting as an individual, a close reading of the text makes it abundantly clear that the killing of Laban was not an individual act, but rather a sovereign act that had a clear political purpose. That Nephi acts as a sovereign is an overdetermined fact in the text." Larsen believes Nephi became "prophet leader and king" when he killed Laban, gained possession of Laban's sword and the brass plates, and led Zoram, who served as proxy for the people, out of slavery to the freedom of the promised land.  

"By putting on Laban's clothing and armor," he writes, "Nephi both symbolically and literally assumes the sovereign authority of Laban:" He views Laban as "worthy of death" and Nephi with "the sovereign power to execute criminals," so that "far from being the lawless act of an individual citizen, Nephi's execution of Laban is the lawful act of a sovereign lawgiver who is seeking to maintain among his people a social order based on law." 

However, if Nephi assumes the sovereign authority of Laban when he puts on Laban's clothing and armor, it is possible to argue that he did not have it at the time he executed the drunken man. Would that mean he was not acting as the sovereign when he performed the act that

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23. Welch, "Legal Perspectives," 137–44.
26. Larsen, "Killing Laban," 36–37. Nephi is a "lawgiver" in the sense that he is retrieving the brass plates, which have God's law written upon them, and giving them to his people. Without Nephi, his people would not have the law (see 1 Nephi 4:14–17).
required the sovereign power to perform it? Another issue that may not be clear is the extent to which Nephi could gain sovereignty by taking Laban's life. Laban is not the head of Israel in any sense of the word. Perhaps it could be argued that, to some extent, Laban represented the leadership of Israel, but would slaying the representative of a leader bestow that leader's authority upon the perpetrator of the act?

Larsen points out, as additional evidence for Nephi’s role as sovereign, that he is told before he leaves Jerusalem for the plates that, if he keeps the commandments, he will be made a “ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren” (1 Nephi 2:22). However, such an interpretation is not certain. There is no direct correlation between calling Nephi a “ruler” and understanding that designation to mean he will be a formal sovereign with official powers and authority. Other interpreters of the text do not connect the promise with actual legal authority. For example, Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet view the promise in terms of ecclesiastic duty: “God calls his obedient servants to rule and teach. The humble follower is called to lead; the teachable is called to teach.” Later, when an angel stops Laman and Lemuel from beating Nephi and their other brother, Sam, with a rod, he asks them if they do not know that the Lord had chosen Nephi to be “a ruler” over them because of their iniquities (1 Nephi 3:29). Larsen interprets this second question to be a declaration of Nephi’s “sovereign position in this new branch of Israel,” making it a “fait accompli.” The angel’s words, however, could simply indicate that Nephi will be the leader of the family. As Eldin Ricks writes, “by divine edict Laman was to be disinherited from the traditional rights of the first-born son to succeed his father in property holdings and family leadership. He was to be supplanted, not by Lemuel, the second son, nor even by Sam, the third, but by Nephi, the fourth and youngest brother. This was the supreme ignominy.”

we turn to Nephi for an understanding of what was meant for him to be a *ruler* over his brethren, he appears to draw a distinction between that designation and the political authority of kingship:

> And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power. And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore, I had been their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord, until the time they sought to take away my life. (2 Nephi 5:18–19)

Nephi speaks these words at the time that his people are separating from the people of Laman and Lemuel. Note that Nephi's people wanted him to be their king, but he does not accept that title and responsibility, though he certainly served them. Up to this point in the narrative, then, Nephi has not been a king. Also note that he believes that the prophecy about his being a ruler and teacher has already been fulfilled *even though he has not been a king*. It is clear that, to Nephi, his being a ruler does not mean that he will be a sovereign. It is of interest that Nephi's brother, Jacob, will later say to the people that he had been "consecrated by [his] brother Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector" (2 Nephi 6:2; emphasis added). It seems that neither his own brother nor his people officially recognize Nephi as a king in the sense of one wielding sovereign power. Instead, they only look to him "as a king or a protector:"

Larsen offers as evidence for Nephi's role as sovereign what he considers to be "explicit declarations of Nephi's reign." He points to Mormon's subtitle for 1 Nephi: "His [Nephi's] Reign and Ministry," which, to him, indicates that Nephi was a sovereign before 2 Nephi. He then quotes Nephi's only personal mention of his *reign* soon after he acquired the brass plates: "And now I, Nephi, proceed to give an account upon these plates of my proceedings, and my reign and ministry" (1 Nephi 10:1). "This explicit statement would seem to cap his acquisition of
sovereignty in the events that have just unfolded. The events that follow, this passage suggests, are part of Nephi's reign as sovereign."\(^{30}\)

An alternative reading, however, would be that this is the first verse after the chapter that discusses the two sets of plates: *these plates*, which are the smaller plates that are more focused on "the ministry of [Nephi's] people," and "the other plates," which "are for the more part of the reign of the kings and the wars and contentions of [Nephi's] people" (1 Nephi 9:3–4). Since Nephi has just written about the two sets of plates, it makes sense that Nephi would continue by saying what he is about to do ("And now I, Nephi, proceed to give an account . . ."). Perhaps he is not necessarily saying that his reign occurs in 1 Nephi, but that his account of his reign, whenever it might begin, is on *these plates* as opposed to *the other plates*. And if 2 Nephi 5:18 is read as an indication that Nephi had not yet been a king to that point, then it would also appear to indicate that he had not been a king in 1 Nephi. Additionally, it is possible that Mormon takes the subtitle for 1 Nephi from this particular verse rather than the subtitle being a statement from Mormon that Nephi's reign as king began in 1 Nephi.

While Ben McGuire acknowledges that "Nephi's account may also represent a reference to Exodus 21:13," he interprets the story of Nephi slaying Laban as an allusion to the story of David killing Goliath, with the Spirit's statement to Nephi about the Lord delivering Laban into his hands being a "distinctive point of verbal contact" in the last part of the statement David proclaims to the Philistine: "This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand" (1 Samuel 17:46).\(^{31}\) Like Larsen, McGuire also sees Nephi as a sovereign.\(^{32}\) Just as the idea that God had delivered Goliath into the hands of David was a sign that God had


\(^{32}\) Much of McGuire's article is an insightful discussion of methodology. He does bring up some issues, such as whether Nephi is considered a king by his people or the meaning of "the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands," that I deal with when I discuss other articles.
chosen him to be king, McGuire understands the language of delivery by God into Nephi’s hands to indicate that Nephi will be king.33 While McGuire writes of a number of parallels between Nephi and David, I cannot help but be bothered by one of the glaring differences: David triumphed in battle with an armed man—a “giant,” even—while Nephi killed a drunken man passed out in the street. It is difficult to accept Nephi’s action as a divine sign of ascendancy to the throne in the same light as David’s defeat of Goliath.

Psychoanalytical Perspective

Though by no means a widespread interpretation, there is one view of the Nephi/Laban narrative that holds the entire Book of Mormon as the product of Joseph Smith’s attempt to cope with a serious personality disorder resulting from his traumatic youth. William D. Morain reads the story of Nephi and his brothers retrieving the brass plates as “brimming with sibling rivalry” with a “main theme [of] patricide [that] can thus be best understood in a psychoanalytic context.” He believes Joseph Smith performed an act of “splitting,’ a primitive defense mechanism commonly used by traumatized children.” In this interpretation, Joseph assigned the positive attributes he saw in his father, Joseph Smith, Sr., to Lehi in the Book of Mormon, and the negative attributes to Laban. Laban is also representative of Dr. Nathan Smith, the doctor who performed the surgery on Joseph when he was seven years old and who thereby played a major role in one of the most traumatic experiences in the boy’s life. Thus, when Nephi kills Laban, Morain argues that Joseph is actually killing the parts of his father (and the surgeon) that he rejects, while being able to retain what he cares for. “Not only does Nephi confiscate the fearsome weapon from this surgeon/father representation,

but he destroys the representation with it as well. In performing the unthinkable act, the hero not only takes his revenge on his evil father but also carries the age-specific oedipal imagery into the fantasy."\(^{34}\)

Though Dan Vogel's interpretation of the narrative shares some aspects of the psychoanalytical perspective, he also sees the episode somewhat differently. While Joseph's father can be seen in both Lehi and Laban, the killing of Laban, according to Vogel, may be understood as Joseph's attempt "to free the Bible from the intellectualizing grip of his father and those like him, to interpret the scriptures for himself more literally and through the spirit of God."\(^{35}\) For Vogel, in keeping with psychoanalytical criticism, this episode of Nephi and Laban serves as an extension of Joseph Smith's personal life and how he dealt with his challenges.

Of the interpretations I have discussed, the psychoanalytic is the least promising to me. The parameters are too loose, with conjecture replacing historical or textual evidence. It would be a different matter if historians discovered a journal written by Joseph Smith supporting claims that certain characters in the Book of Mormon represented individuals in his life, but such historical evidence simply does not exist. As one critic observed, "one may indeed question those who believe that lifeless documents can substitute for the give-and-take between an inquisitive trained psychologist and his patient lying patiently on the psychologist's couch."\(^{36}\)


Taking a Narrative Approach

I believe that what Leland Ryken said about the Bible as literature applies to the Book of Mormon equally as well: “A working definition of literature . . . is that it is an interpretive presentation of experience in an artistic form. This means there are two criteria that must be insisted on if we are to distinguish between the literary and nonliterary parts of the Bible: (1) literature is experiential rather than abstract, and (2) literature is artistic, manifesting elements of artistic form.”

Nephi’s account of his coming upon Laban in the street provides an excellent example of scripture as literature. It is experiential in that it both depicts the experience for us as readers and it provides an experience for us. We experience the thrill Nephi feels as he comes upon the sword for the first time, the terror and confusion he senses when he is commanded to take another man’s life, the rationalization he works through as he tries to come to terms with what he has been told to do, the logic he remembers as he collects his thoughts, and the resolution he arrives at as he commits to obey the voice of the Spirit. Nephi creates for us what Robert Alter would call a “proper narrative event” because the “narrative tempo slows down enough for us to discriminate a particular scene,” giving us “the illusion of the scene’s ‘presence’ as it unfolds.”

When Nephi first comes upon Laban, he is completely enthralled with the sword—like any young man who has an interest in all things metal would be—and appears to have little interest in the body before him. He pulls the sword from the sheath and admires the hilt, which

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appears to him to be “of pure gold” with “workmanship” that is “exceedingly fine.” He notes that the blade consists of what appears to him to be “the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9). As far as we can discern from the text, Nephi has not considered what he should do with Laban at this point. Nephi’s apparent disinterest in Laban does not correspond with the idea of a person focused on searching out an enemy in order to execute him.

What comes next is a fascinating element of the narrative event. Alter points out that “as a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue, so the transitions from narration to dialogue provide in themselves some implicit measure of what is deemed essential.” At this stage of the Nephi/Laban narrative, an unusual kind of dialogue develops—it is, in fact, more like a combination between both dialogue and monologue. The dialogue occurs between the Spirit and Nephi, but Nephi never responds to the Spirit. The Spirit speaks to Nephi, but never once does Nephi directly respond to the Spirit—at least, not in a verbal response. Nephi’s response has two parts: first, it occurs in the form of a monologue in which he narrates for us what is going through his mind; and, second, it occurs through the form of the actions he takes.

Early in this dialogue, Nephi is “constrained by the Spirit” to kill Laban. At the time of Joseph Smith, the word “constrain” conveyed an

39. Concerning both the hilt and the blade, I am cautious to qualify Nephi’s descriptions as limited to what appeared to him to be the case. I do not believe the text necessarily signifies that the hilt was tested and found to be made of actual “pure gold,” or that the blade had been analyzed, and the test results had come back that “the most precious steel” had been used. This is a text, not lab results. I am willing to believe the text represents either what Nephi as a young man believed the sword was composed of or Nephi as a more mature man believed as he remembered his first impressions or, perhaps, as he held the sword in his hands moments before he wrote the account.

40. By contrast, McGuire postulates that if “we accept the chronology provided in the text literally, then there is a real issue of whether or not Nephi entered the city fully expecting to kill Laban” (McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath,” 26). I do not see the text supporting this view, especially in light of Nephi’s statement that he was “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6).

41. Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 182.
intense meaning: "To compel or force; to urge with irresistible power, or with a power sufficient to produce the effect." The use of the term "constrain" thus indicates that Nephi likely does not feel he had a real choice, in any meaningful sense of the word. The use of the word "constrained" appears to be even stronger than commanded—being constrained by the Spirit may be more forceful than being commanded by the Lord. While "to command" signifies "to bid; to order; to direct; to charge; implying authority, and power to control, and to require obedience," to constrain involves force and compulsion—the power to produce the effect. It is clear from various stories throughout the scriptures that commandments can be broken. The Lord requires obedience, yet individuals repeatedly fail to comply. Nephi's use of a word later rendered as "constrained" may imply he felt a requirement that extended beyond the force of a commandment. It is important to consider it likely that Nephi applies some hindsight here in his use of the word "constrained." As he writes this account, he knows that he will eventually take Laban's life even though he initially hesitates. "Constrained" conveys the concept that the source making the request has the power to "require obedience." Perhaps Nephi selects "constrained" purposefully, wishing to communicate that he felt as though the Spirit from the very beginning possessed the power needed to require obedience from Nephi. In other words, Nephi would be saying that, in hindsight, the Spirit's initial words, as will be discussed in detail below, were sufficient to cause him to take Laban's life without any need for


43. Of course, I recognize that Nephi did not choose the word "constrained." However, he chose the word that was translated, somehow, into the word "constrained." I do not make the claim carelessly, though, when I say that Nephi chose that word; by virtue of the fact that he chose the original word that was ultimately translated to "constrained," he, in effect, chose the final word.

further prodding. In this reading, Nephi knew he was going to kill Laban from the beginning when the Spirit first spoke, but he still felt the need to work through the process mentally prior to taking action.

Nephi writes of his hesitancy to follow the direction of the Spirit. It is impressive that Nephi, many years after the fact, writing as a prophet and leader of his people, presents this narrative with such unflattering candor. Without concern for preserving a perfect image of himself as one who has always followed the Lord without question, he openly admits in his record, with the intention that it will last for thousands of years for all the world to read, that his first inclination was to not be inclined to follow what he was told to do. “I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him” (1 Nephi 4:10).

Nephi’s hesitancy is in direct contrast to his earlier bold proclamation: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7). He tells his father that he will go and do what the Lord commands him to do, but, in the very next chapter, the Lord commands him to take Laban’s life, and he immediately balks. When Nephi is “constrained by the Spirit” to kill Laban, the earlier Nephi who proclaimed his unwavering obedience comes face-to-face with a Nephi who has encountered something he likely thought impossible—a divine mandate to take another man’s life. This teenager is about to find out if 1 Nephi 3:7 is true, and the stakes are, in many ways, much higher than simply risking his own life to obtain the plates.

Note that, according to 1 Nephi 4:10, there is no mention that the Spirit gives Nephi any indication of a reason (outside of the command

45. Of course, this is speculation on my part. Perhaps the word "constrained" was not selected with this meaning in mind. However, this possibility is worth considering. While the Spirit did say more than what he did initially, and while Nephi did continue to think through the situation, it is worth considering what Nephi might be communicating after the fact by choosing "constrained" to tell his story years later.
itself) as to why Nephi should take Laban’s life. By “reason,” I mean there is no mention of the Spirit saying, at this point, that Nephi should take Laban’s life because, for example, Laban had threatened anyone’s life or stolen any property, or that it was better for one person to perish than a nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief. All we know is that the Spirit “constrained” Nephi to kill the man.

We do learn from the next verse, however, what was originally said: “And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands” (emphasis added). We now learn that when the Spirit first spoke to Nephi, the message was “behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.” 46 When Nephi hesitates to kill Laban, the Spirit repeats the words again. The first two times that the Spirit commands Nephi to slay Laban, we now know that the message was the same: that the Lord had delivered Laban into Nephi’s hands. 47 It is significant that when Nephi heard that message from the Spirit the first time, he understood it to mean that he “should kill Laban” (1 Nephi 4:10).

The Spirit is apparently reminding Nephi of a promise the Lord had made to him earlier. When Nephi and his brothers had offered Laban their family riches in exchange for the brass plates, Laban cast them out and sent his servants to kill them so he could steal their property. The brothers successfully escaped, but Laman and Lemuel were extremely angry with their younger brothers and struck out violently against them, beating Nephi and Sam with a rod. After chastising

46. I have not found another writer who has noted that the Spirit talked about the Lord delivering Laban into his hands in the very beginning of his interaction with Nephi. For example, Richard Dilworth Rust writes: “The first is a simple injunction: Kill Laban. The second is the impression that the Lord has delivered Laban into Nephi’s hands” (Richard Dilworth Rust, Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City, and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997], 28).

47. Steven Olsen interprets the word deliver as a leitwort, a “technical term for a word that an author uses repeatedly throughout a narrative as a way of concentrating the reader’s attention on its central themes” (Steven L. Olsen, “The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation,” FARMS Review 21/1 [2009]: 185). His article discusses, in part, how the Spirit’s choice of words must be seen in the context of the surrounding chapters to be understood as a part of a pattern that reveals God’s power of deliverance.
the two and telling them that Nephi will be a ruler over them, an
angel makes a promise: “Ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the
Lord will deliver Laban into your hands” (1 Nephi 3:28–29). Since the
Lord had already told Nephi, through an angel, that he would deliver
Laban to his hands, perhaps the message delivered by the Spirit is
meant to remind Nephi of this previous promise, and thus indicate
that his finding Laban passed out on the street is no accident.48 If this
reading is correct, then Nephi is meant to see the hand of the Lord in
this event and in what he is being instructed to do. Since Nephi is not
going to concern himself with following the law anyway (i.e., he is not
going to turn himself over to the Jewish authorities, be tried, allow
himself to be exiled to the designated city of refuge, and so forth),
perhaps the assurance is not so much a matter of justifying Laban’s
death under the Mosaic Law as it is confirming for Nephi that what is
happening is from the Lord.

The Spirit’s words provide more than a reminder, however. The pre­
cise wording is of the utmost importance: “Slay him, for the Lord hath
delivered him into thy hands.”49 In this sentence, the Lord, through
the Spirit, is giving Nephi the reason to kill Laban: Kill him, because
the Lord has delivered him into your hands for this purpose. Kill him,
because the Lord is commanding you to kill him.

48. Olsen also notes the similarity between what the angel had told Nephi and his
brothers and what the Spirit told Nephi (though he refers to the Spirit as an angel as
well). See Olsen, “Death of Laban,” 185–86. Millet and McConkie understand the Spirit’s
telling Nephi that the Lord had delivered Laban into his hands as indicating that his
finding the drunken man was no accident; it was reassurance that the Lord was involved
in him finding Laban (Doctrinal Commentary, Vol. 1, 44).

49. It is noteworthy that several writers simply do not analyze this key statement by
the Spirit even though they discuss the narrative sufficiently that it would make sense
for them to consider the statement. For example, Ricks, Book of Mormon Commentary,
69–71; Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 39; Sperry, Book of
Mormon Compendium, 102; Hugh Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, ed. John W. Welch, with
Darrell L. Matthews and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City, and Provo, UT: Deseret
Book and FARMS, 1988), 98–99; Turner, “Prophet Nephi,” 85; Monte S. Nyman, I,
The Only Justification for Nephi’s Action

In my view, there is only one justification for what Nephi did: God commanded him to kill Laban. As Welch states, “in the end, Laban was killed for one and only one reason, namely because the Spirit of the Lord commanded it and constrained Nephi to slay him, for ‘the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.’”50 According to my reading, there is no other justification; it was an act of obedience.51 If there were some other justification available, then there would be no need for God to tell him to kill him. If Laban’s stealing of their property justified the killing, or if his sending his servants to kill Nephi and his brothers or his refusal to obey God’s commandments by not turning over the plates justified Nephi killing him, then there would be no need for God to command Nephi to perform the act. If Nephi were indeed a sovereign who had

50. Welch, “Legal Perspectives,” 131. McConkie and Millet concur: “In general, Nephi was justified in slaying Laban (without rational explanation) because God had commanded it” (McConkie and Millet, Doctrinal Commentary, Vol. 1, 44).

51. Looking at this story through a Girardian lens, Stirling rejects this reasoning: “The traditional LDS interpretation of this event, which sees Nephi as the virtually perfect example of human obedience, cannot be harmonized with the Girardian. In traditional LDS thought, Nephi was able to listen to the Spirit and obey the voice of God against the voice of his culture, which told him not to kill Laban (1 Nephi 4:10). . . . In contrast, Girardians will continue to see Nephi as a tragic illustration of the fact that even the most devoted individual may slide unconsciously into scapegoating and the violent sacred” (Stirling, “Violence in the Scriptures,” 97). It should be noted, however, that Eugene England also analyzed the Nephi/Laban encounter through a Girardian lens and arrived at a different conclusion than Stirling: “What if it was a test, like the command to Abraham to kill Isaac? What if it was designed to push Nephi to the limits of the human dilemma of obedience versus integrity and to teach him and all readers of the Book of Mormon something very troubling but still very true about the universe and the natural requirements of a saving relationship with God? What if it is to show that genuine faith ultimately requires us to go beyond what is rationally moral, even as it has been defined by God—but only when God himself requires it directly of us? And what if each reader is intentionally left to solve the dilemma on their own through a vicarious experience with the text? . . . Girard recognizes, with seeming anguish, that much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, describes a natural order in which God seems to compromise to bring about ultimate change” (Eugene England, “Why Nephi Killed Laman: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” in Making Peace: Personal Essays [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995], 15–16).
the authority to execute Laban, then there was absolutely no need for the Spirit to tell him to do it. Perhaps there was a personal need for the Spirit to tell him—perhaps Nephi was so hesitant that he could not bring himself to do it without that added catalyst—but if that were the case, the nature of what the Spirit told him would certainly be different. Rather than “slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands,” the instructions would be more along the lines of “slay him, for as sovereign, you have the authority to execute him.”

Before Nephi leaves for the promised land, a place where he will eventually act as the prophet and leader for his people, he needs to learn that when he proclaimed he would “go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for [he knows] that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7), he was speaking the truth. As Jeffrey R. Holland said when he was president of Brigham Young University, “if Nephi cannot yield to this terribly painful command, if he cannot bring himself to obey, then it is entirely probable that he can never succeed or survive in the tasks that lie just ahead.” 52

After the Spirit tells Nephi to slay Laban because the Lord has delivered him into his hands, Nephi reflects on Laban’s prior treatment of him and his family (see 1 Nephi 4:11, as discussed above). Then the Spirit speaks again: “Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:12–13). It is at this point where some may interpret the Spirit as providing Nephi with reasons other than obedience for going through with the act. 53 These


53. Hardy, for example, writes that the “angel” (though he is actually the Spirit, not an angel) offered “revenge and expediency” as “justification” for Nephi slaying Laban (Hardy, Understanding, 285n15).
are the Spirit’s last words to Nephi during this narrative, and these are the words that seem to bring him to the turning point that gets him to finally act. Therefore, a closer reading of these words is in order.

"Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." As discussed above, the Spirit is saying, in effect, "slay him, because the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." This statement focuses on the reason Nephi should kill Laban: because the Lord has commanded him to do it. The reason he is to kill Laban is because God has delivered him to Nephi for that precise purpose: to kill him.

"Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes." First, note that the Spirit’s words mark a precise attribution for the act of killing itself: "the Lord slayeth," not "thou slayest." According to the text, it is the Lord who is ultimately committing the act of slaying. Just as the sword acts as an instrument in the hands of Nephi, Nephi acts as an instrument in the hands of the Lord. Second, the structure of this sentence identifies Laban with the wicked. Nephi is being commanded to kill someone whom the Lord has pronounced as wicked. Though Nephi considers his personal list of the wrongs Laban has committed, he does not pronounce legal judgment. Instead, the Lord decrees that Laban is wicked. And, third, the act of slaying Laban is categorized as serving the righteous purposes of the Lord. Nephi need not worry about whether this is an act of revenge or selfishness; this is, indeed, an act that serves the Lord’s righteous purposes.

"It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief." These words do not provide the reason for Nephi, as Nephi, to kill Laban. Rather, they provide the Lord’s reason—or, at least one of his reasons—for deciding to end Laban’s life. As Monte Nyman writes, "the Spirit a third time commanded and gave

54. Of course, this is putting aside the theory above based on the word “constrained” that Nephi, in hindsight, realized that he knew he was going to take Laban’s life from the moment the Spirit spoke but simply had to work his mind through the process of accepting this reality.
the Lord's justification for taking Laban's life."55 Keep in mind that the Spirit's statement follows logically from his previous one asserting that the Lord slays the wicked in order to bring forth his righteous purposes. This ordering is not just a mere matter of semantics. If the Spirit were telling Nephi he would be justified in killing Laban due to the principle that it would be better for one person to perish than a nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief—if that were the justification for the killing and not the fact that God was telling him to do it—then this event would not be a test of obedience. As discussed above, the Lord would not need to command Nephi to take Laban's life; rather, Nephi could simply take his life through the justification of saving the nation.

It appears that the Spirit offers the Lord's justification for taking Laban's life to help Nephi understand the Lord's purposes and to help him work through this difficult challenge, but the reason remains the same: "Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." After Nephi learns from the Spirit the Lord's justification for ending Laban's life, Nephi remembers what he has been told and logically thinks through the ramifications of his people not having the plates:

And now, when I, Nephi, had heard these words, I remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness saying that: Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise. Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And I also knew that the law was engraved upon the plates of brass. And again I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause—that I might obtain the records according to his commandments. (1 Nephi 4:14–17)

55. Nyman, Lehi and Nephi, 74. There may be many other reasons for the Lord deciding that now is the time for Laban's life to end. Perhaps ending Laban's mortal probation now is the most loving action to take on the Lord's part—that the Lord knows giving him more time to live will do nothing but make his eternal situation worse.
While it is important to understand Nephi's thought process here, it is imperative to remember that these thoughts are all internal to the mind of Nephi himself. The Spirit is not the one expressing these ideas; rather, these thoughts demonstrate the ways in which Nephi mentally works through the Spirit's information that the Lord is willing to slay wicked people to accomplish his righteous purposes and that it is better for one person to perish than an entire nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief. These verses provide Nephi's attempt to align what he is being commanded to do with the Lord's justification. He sees the way in which the potential fate of his people as lost without the guidance of the plates matches what he has just learned is a justification in the Lord's eyes for the Lord ending Laban's life.

But the next statement from Nephi is crucially significant. He does not say "therefore I did slay Laban because it was better for him to perish than for my people to dwindle and perish in unbelief." He says "therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit" (1 Nephi 4:18; emphasis added). The word "therefore" is important: it demonstrates a logical connection between Nephi's thoughts and his final decision. His reasons in the previous verses have helped him make up his mind. However, ultimately, the choice to kill Laban was still a matter of obedience for Nephi, and not one of logic or utilitarian calculation. "Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit."

It is important to note that to assert that the Lord had a justification for ending Laban's life is not to say that Laban's life had to be ended. While it may be true that it is better for one person to perish than an entire nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief, it is not necessarily true that the only way to stop an entire nation from dwindling and perishing in unbelief is for that person to perish. If one accepts the premise of the Book of Mormon while reading it—namely, that God is a God of miracles and unmatched power who is not limited by the imaginations and expectations of humankind—then it is not difficult to believe that such a God could find many different ways to save that nation from unbelief without having to take the life of that person: for example, finding an alternative method of retrieving the plates, producing another set of the
plates, and directly revealing the content of the plates to someone else belonging to that nation are just three possibilities. To say that Nephi had to obtain the brass plates or that Lehi's descendants would have unavoidably dwindled and perished in unbelief is to make the same two fundamental mistakes as the argument that Nephi had to kill Laban, or Laban would have followed him. First, it ignores the worldview of the Book of Mormon already mentioned above. And, second, especially germane to this article, it discounts the real reason the text provides for Nephi slaying Laban and offers ulterior motives that undermine that sole reason. 56

It is important to understand how narrow the ramifications of this narrative are. I am not proposing that some sort of "Nephi doctrine" can be derived from the text, nor that such a construct could be applied by other people to their individual circumstances. This article does not support the notion that one may justify one's actions by claiming obedience to the commands of a higher human authority; no perpetrators of war crimes can rely on Nephi to save them from consequences. Other humans cannot claim the omniscience of God. While God perfectly knows when it is the right time for a person's life to end and can, with perfect justice and perfect love, make that determination and choose another person to be an instrument in his hands to end a person's life, as God did with Nephi and Laban, another human being does not have that perfect knowledge and cannot exercise that power with perfect justice and perfect love.

56. As Commissioner of Church Education, Jeffrey R. Holland wrote a brief article that discussed different aspects of this story. He concluded that "it would seem, finally, that obedience to divine revelation, not death, is the focal point of this story. God can restore life in time and eternity; he can do almost nothing with willful disobedience. The quality of our obedience to God's commandments is still the clearest expression of the quality of our faith in him." (Jeffrey R. Holland, "How Can I Explain Nephi's Killing Laban to My Nonmember Friends?," Ensign [September 1976], 83-84). As president of Brigham Young University, he would later write: "I believe that story [of Nephi slaying Laban] was placed in the very opening verses of a 531-page book and then told in painfully specific detail in order to focus every reader of that record on the absolutely fundamental gospel issue of obedience and submission to the communicated will of the Lord" (Holland, "Will of the Father," 78).
Nor do I suggest that Nephi’s story supports those who might claim innocence by maintaining that what they did was commanded by God. I am not proposing a legal defense for anyone. What I am proposing is the sole justification for Nephi’s actions, and that justification is a divine one, not a legal one. The text demonstrates an explicit act of justification, but it is a justification that occurs independent of any legal authority. If Nephi had been prosecuted under the Mosaic Law, the legal consequences for his action may very well have been unfavorable. The justification as narrated in the text, however, was a justification between Nephi and God, not between Nephi and the justice system of his time, nor of ours. It is not a public justification; it is a private one. It is not a justification that must be recognized in a court of law. When God commanded Nephi to take Laban’s life, it was a test of Nephi’s willingness to obey; it was a unique moment in scripture, not a prototype for all to follow in terms of how to treat human life.

Søren Kierkegaard explores this problem when writing about Abraham and Isaac in his book *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard notes that the ethical “is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone,

57. As Welch has noted (see footnote 7).
58. Larsen does not see the Nephi/Laban episode as parallel to Abraham/Isaac: “The test of Abraham made a profound theological point: more than any other episode in scripture, it makes clear the cost God paid when he sacrificed his son in order to balance justice with mercy. And in the end, Isaac—and more profoundly, Abraham—was spared. Asking Nephi to kill Laban—violating his conscience, judgment, and God’s law—does not have an equally clear theological purpose, and Nephi is not spared the trauma of actually carrying out the killing” (Larsen, “Killing Laban,” 28). As already noted, England, on the other hand, wonders if the Nephi story might not be an Abrahamic test (England, “Why Nephi Killed Laban,” 15). There is no question in my mind that, initially, what Abraham is commanded to do is a far greater sacrifice than that of Nephi. To be commanded to kill your child is an unfathomable, horrific nightmare—far worse than being commanded to kill someone who has stolen from you and tried to kill you. Still, being told to kill anyone would be a terrible commandment to receive. Yet the great difference, of course, is that Abraham was given a ram in a thicket and Nephi was not. For the sake of this discussion, however, it is not crucial to determine if the Nephi/Laban story is equal to the Abraham/Isaac story in all respects; it is sufficient to realize that they are equal in the fact that they each center around an essential theme of obedience.
which from another angle means that it applies at all times.”\footnote{59} However, he also makes this all-important observation: “The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual . . . determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute.”\footnote{60} While the ethical is universal and applies to all people, the individual is superior to the universal and is in relation to God, who is the absolute. Faith requires that relationship. In that way, faith supersedes the ethical. So, while the ethical course of action is for Abraham to refuse to sacrifice Isaac, faith requires him to obey God. Similarly, ethics requires Nephi to restrain himself from killing a man passed out in the street, but his faith demands that he obey God.

Some may argue that if Nephi killing Laban is justified by obedience to God alone, then there is nothing to stop God from being a sadistic entity who has people killed for no reason. If there is an additional reason, such as those reasons that have been discussed in this article, then at least there could be a rationale for the killing that could be found acceptable. However, the opposite is true. If an actual revelation from God were not necessary for such a killing to occur, there would be nothing to stop people from creating these alternative reasons and using them to justify murdering other people, perhaps in the name of God, perhaps not. Instead, the very nature of God stops him from being sadistic, and limiting the reason for Nephi’s actions to a command from God guarantees that the motivation behind it on God’s part will be perfectly just because he is perfectly just. What Kierkegaard said of Abraham provides insight into the plight of Nephi:

Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God’s sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake. He does it for God’s sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it. The unity of the two is altogether correctly expressed in the word already used to describe this relationship. It is an ordeal, a temptation. A temptation—but what does that mean? As a rule, what tempts a person is something that will hold him back from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would hold him back from doing God’s will. But what is duty? Duty is simply the expression of God’s will. 61

Nephi’s “temptation” is to do the ethical thing and let Laban live, but instead he obeys God and acts as the instrument by which Laban’s life is ended.

Conclusion

The story of Nephi killing Laban is one of the most difficult stories in all of scripture. The fact that so many scholars have invested time and effort into trying to understand the story and arrive at various explanations as to why Nephi killed Laban—reasons other than he had to obey a command from God—illustrates the reality that people find the story disturbing and feel the need to come to peace with it. It is understandable that we look for other justifications for what Nephi did. If we can find other reasons that justify the slaying, then we no longer need to rely on obedience to God as the explanation. Deciding on an alternative explanation may bring peace to some readers, but it is equally likely to be troubling to others due to the subjective nature of the new explanation. I believe a careful reading of the text itself provides the best insights into the story and into Nephi’s motivations.

If one is inclined to conclude that reading Nephi’s justification here in terms of obedience to God is not important, all one needs to do is imagine if such were the case with the powerful story of Abraham and

Isaac. We know we can learn much from that biblical story, and that there are multiple layers of meaning, but the reason that Abraham offers up Isaac as a sacrifice is to be obedient to God. If there were another justification for Abraham to take Isaac’s life—for example, if Isaac had broken some commandment that carried the penalty of death—then that additional reason would have destroyed the meaning and purpose of the story as one of obedience. It would not be an Abrahamic sacrifice in which Abraham was sacrificing his son out of obedience, but it would rather be an Abrahamic punishment in which Abraham was to kill his son for disobedience to the law. It is difficult to make an argument that both a sacrifice of obedience and a punishment for breaking the law occur simultaneously, because it is understood that if the young man had to pay for his disobedience in breaking the law by being executed, then the element of sacrifice is nullified. The sacrifice cannot exist in a narrative where Isaac was required to die anyway.

If this element of sacrifice through obedience were removed from the Abrahamic narrative, no longer could we point to the story as a type of God’s sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ, because now the parallel would be corrupted with the conflict of Isaac being guilty of breaking a law and deserving of punishment by death. For the story of Abraham and Isaac to remain in harmony with its fundamental truth, it must be limited to its core story—to its essence—of the father being willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to the will of God. Similarly, for the story of Nephi slaying Laban to remain in harmony to its fundamental truth, perhaps it, too, must be limited to its essential story of the young man being willing to sacrifice what he initially thinks he is supposed to do—keep the commandment to not kill—in order to obey the will of God.

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Introducing Schmidt

Arno Schmidt (1914–1979) was one of the most important, prolific, and original of postwar German authors. His magnum opus, *Zettels Traum* (1970), appeared in 1,360 large-font, signed typescript copies that each weighed 12 kilos and resembled another intimidating modernist text, James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, in its experiments with genre, fascinating density, multilingual citations, jokey allusiveness, and mythic grandeur. Like Joyce, Schmidt pushed boundaries of all kinds and sometimes got

I’d like to thank Erhard Schüttpelz for first drawing my attention to Schmidt’s essay and to him, Benjamin Peters, Joseph Spencer, and Kirk Wetters, for useful feedback on earlier drafts. I thank the Internationale Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie in Weimar, Germany, for offering hospitable conditions for writing this essay.
into hot water with those who found his writings sexually and religiously indecent. As an author, his work is hard to classify; he is sometimes called an “avant-garde traditionalist.” In personal belief, he was an atheist, though one who was curious about the many forms that belief can take; he opens his essay on the Book of Mormon, for instance, by confessing his soft spot for holy books. A fierce critic of both West and East Germany, he was politically neither a Marxist, nor a social democrat, nor a straight-up conservative, though his attacks on mass society and choice to live his last two decades in relative isolation in a remote hamlet in Lower Saxony have led some critics to detect conservative sympathies. But he was also a clear anti-Nazi and was disgusted at what his country had done. Perhaps by living in a remote spot with his wife, Alice, also a writer whose work was not appreciated until later, he simply wanted to maintain his artistic integrity and stay aloof from the cultural establishment. By any account, he was a lone wolf, anxious not to be pinned down.

Schmidt read deeply in American and British literature and, besides his many novels, stories, and essays, his great literary gifts also took form in the translation of various English works, including American authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Faulkner. Like many of his countrymen, Schmidt found the American West fascinating, especially Native Americans and their history, and he wrote a controversial psychoanalytic biography of Karl May (1842–1912), the still widely read author of western adventure novels who did so much to establish this fascination in German culture and elsewhere. As a holy book about the ancient history of the Americas that is also a one-of-a-kind genre-breaker uniquely ambitious in its claims regarding what a book can be, the Book of Mormon combines many of Schmidt’s interests.

Thomas O’Dea’s observation deserves quoting yet again: “The Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion on it.”1 Harold Bloom, in one of his many brilliant but hard-to-verify generalizations,

declares that the Book of Mormon “exists in more unread copies than any other book,” a statement partly verified by his own admission not to have read the whole thing.\(^2\) To be fair, having opinions about books one has not read is a major part of intellectual life,\(^3\) but critics of the Book of Mormon sometimes flaunt their lack of reading to an unusual degree.

This is one reason Schmidt’s essay is remarkable. Here, we have a first-class mind and writer who read the book—twice. He does the book the honor of being taken seriously, and considered it part of the canon of American literature well before this approach was even somewhat normative for scholars of literature and history.\(^4\) It is difficult to think of another major non-Latter-day Saint author who has engaged the Book of Mormon with such patience. Schmidt read the Book of Mormon not as a dangerous or preposterous text to be contained or debunked, as many have from the beginning, nor as necessary homework for a larger travel narrative, as did Richard Burton or Mark Twain in their visits to Salt Lake City in the early 1860s, but rather as an exploration of the many ways human beings create worlds out of words. Schmidt clearly thinks the Book of Mormon is outlandish, but no more so than any other religious scripture, and he is funny and generous about it. (That human beings build outlandish worlds to live in is one anthropological generalization we can all agree on.) As far as I can tell, he stood completely alone in appreciating a book that had absolutely no advocates outside the Church and no public intellectual presence in postwar Germany. The open-mindedness of the essay reminds one of the liberal


call of John Stuart Mill to learn from the most disparaged and neglected voices. In its droll dissidence, the essay rebukes the German public for its ignorance and seeks to correct a long-standing fog of misinformation surrounding a significant religious minority.

Apparently, Schmidt first planned the text as a radio talk in 1958—radio was a robust forum for intellectual life in West Germany, and Schmidt often wrote for the medium—but he had no takers, so he wrote it as a long-form magazine piece in May 1961. It was published first in March 1962 in konkret, a far-left tabloid that played an important role in Germany’s student movement and was one of the leading outlets for German postwar authors of many stripes. It was then published in a book collection of his short pieces, Trommler beim Zaren (1966), and again finally in the authoritative Bargfelder Ausgabe (Bargfeld Edition), which is the text we used for this translation. The magazine konkret had both a tough-minded political side and a playful experimental side, and Schmidt’s essay fit more with the latter. Judging from his detailed knowledge of the Latter-day Saint tradition, including the Tabernacle Choir, the hymnal, and Der Stern, the German-language publication from 1867 to 2000 (now renamed Liahona), one wonders if, buried in some postwar missionary journal somewhere, there might not be entries about lively discussions with a certain Herr und Frau Schmidt . . .

Schmidt’s take is at turns perceptive, spiky, funny, wise, and even affectionate. The essay is rather scattered in structure, and often jumps from point to point in one lightning flash after another without filling in the gaps. In four sentences, he can go from discussing the Book of Mormon’s thought-world, to its moral harmlessness, to the Tabernacle Choir, to an extended quote of a Utah-praising hymn from a

5. John Stuart Mill, On Liberty (1859; New York: Norton, 1975). See chap. 2: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it” (Mill, On Liberty, 11); on Latter-day Saints, see Mill, On Liberty, chap. 4.

late nineteenth-century German hymnal. This rapid-fire juxtaposition keeps the reader hopping and also suggests Schmidt's sense of humor. Of all modes, humor is the hardest to translate, and Schmidt plays with different levels of style that are difficult to render in English. He can be faux-bureaucratic, mock-scholarly, prophetically portentous, and jokily insinuating, in addition to being lucidly descriptive. The accompanying translation, drafted by Hans-Wilhelm Kelling, revised by Joseph Spencer, and polished by me, tries to render Schmidt's sense clearly, and footnotes, all of them from the translators, explain some (not all) of the obscurities. Those interested in the nuances will have to learn German!

Schmidt claims not to take sides and presents himself as a mere reporter, but he clearly goes beyond that. There is something thrilling about reading over the shoulder of a first-rate mind reading a book that demands a special reader. He has clearly done his homework and, unlike most other arms-length commentators, makes relatively few and only minor goofs. Like many others in recent Book of Mormon criticism, Schmidt is less interested in the book's complicated origin story than in the text itself. His embrace of the theory that Joseph Smith was a writing medium might seem too easy, but it gets him off the hook of explaining the book's authorship. Like other literary commentators on the book, Schmidt is less interested in the black box of how it came to be than in reading the text for what it says. So many get stalled by the gold plates and angel Moroni that they fail to read the book at all; Schmidt's account of authorship fits his program of reading the text as a literary cosmos rather than as history or ultimate truth. He sees the book as an expansion—a Haggadah, he calls it—of the Bible, a notion suggested by such later towering critics such as Krister Stendahl and Harold Bloom as well as Latter-day Saint apologists such as Blake Ostler.7

Schmidt also notes the two items that any postwar European would know about the Church—polygamy and the Tabernacle Choir. As a missionary in the Netherlands in the late 1970s, I can attest that these were pretty much all the general Northern European public knew with regard to the Church, in addition to a rare smattering of knowledge of the Osmonds, the musical group. (Schmidt’s discussion of polygamy includes a bit of familiar quasi-feminist wit that many wives would ease the housework.)

Furthermore, he is well informed about the publishing history of the Book of Mormon (even if his passing nomination of Orson Pratt and Sidney Rigdon as the movement’s two chief “dogmatists” seems rather arbitrary) and of its history of translation into German, including some witty comments about the effect of “and it came to pass” on total word count. It is not clear how he determined that the Lehites landed in Peru or Chile, since no such specificity is authorized by the text, but he makes some prescient observations about the fraught project—one combining philology and detective work, as he puts it—of localizing Book of Mormon geography. He enjoys the book’s roll call of exotic names and figures of speech. The claim in 3 Nephi 8:21 that there could be no light because of the darkness, he savors for poetic possibilities instead of scoffing at it, and indeed his mode is to bring his best interpretive game; he practices a hermeneutics of charity, not one of suspicion here. He is not interested in drive-by shootings of the book’s apparent rhetorical infelicities that are so frequent among lesser critics. He understands well that the book’s narrative arc culminates in the appearance of the resurrected Christ to the Nephites in 3 Nephi. He concludes with a sure sign of strong reading: an appropriation from the text itself to authorize the mode of reading that he has employed. Texts teach you how to read them, and his concluding quotation from 3 Nephi 10:14 is an affectionate tribute to the power of the text, honoring both its medium and its message.

8. The widespread use of archaeological videos such as *Ancient America Speaks* (1972) in missionary work was yet years away, but it is possible that Schmidt had access to archaeological paratexts in *Der Stern* or oral lore.
Schmidt brings perhaps no single insight that is absolutely new to Book of Mormon studies, but the overall effect is to shine a light on the book that is unlike any other and to offer many observations that are acute and well expressed. We might once again repurpose the words of Luther about non-canonical writings: Schmidt may not be holy writ, but he is good and useful to read.

The Tradition of Comic Commentary

Here, I want to reflect on Schmidt’s question about the literary productivity of the Book of Mormon. That is, I want to think about comedy.

Schmidt wonders about the “poetic usefulness” of the Book of Mormon, that is, its ability to inspire other texts. He notes the Bible’s fertile literary offspring and some of the Qur’an’s. Schmidt’s basic idea anticipates Bloom’s famous notion of the ways that strong texts make later texts indebted to them (the “anxiety of influence”). Schmidt knew of no downstream literary effects from the Book of Mormon and missed its multi-media offshoots in literature, pageantry, cinema, painting, sculpture, and illustration. And since Schmidt’s essay, there have been numerous Book of Mormon spin-offs within science fiction, such as Orson Scott Card’s sci-fi Homecoming series or, in a more episodic way, the TV series Battlestar Galactica. But perhaps one of the clearest ways that the Book of Mormon has been poetically useful is the very tradition that Schmidt sits in but does not recognize: the comedic mining of the book. Is there any book so widely regarded as humorless that has inspired such funny spin-offs?

Presiding among comic commentators is Mark Twain’s satirical burlesque of the Book of Mormon in Roughing It. (Schmidt was an early

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and appreciative reader of Twain and alludes to Roughing It in a 1970s text, but there is no mark of direct influence from Twain on Schmidt’s Book of Mormon essay.) The tradition of comic commentary on the Book of Mormon that Twain founded runs up through the Broadway musical The Book of Mormon, which draws on, invents, parodies, amplifies, and distorts the potential for earnestness, clunkiness, cluelessness, cheeriness, high stakes and drama, profound spiritual direction, and hearty good feeling of the Book of Mormon without engaging the text directly at all. I defy anyone to read Twain’s comments without laughing out loud, even if he is obviously unfair, a cherry picker, and fond of tall-tale exaggeration. Twain may have given Book of Mormon critics one immortal line— “chloroform in print”— but he also opened a lasting way of dealing with the book: humor. Twain, to be sure, had no less mercy on Mary Baker Eddy’s Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures and satirized the Qur’an and the Bible with equal vigor. His treatment of the Book of Mormon is part of a more general modus operandi of what the late BYU English professor Richard Cracraft called “gentle blasphemy.”

My vote for the most distinguished practitioner of Twainian religious criticism today would be Harold Bloom, whose The American Religion (1992) has many brilliant and witty things to say about Latter-day Saints, though he saves his funniest lines for New Age spirituality. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk might come in second place, though his flowing pen has yet to touch the Latter-day Saint tradition. Twain, Schmidt, Bloom, and Sloterdijk are united in having no interest in the angry Enlightenment-style critique of religion that rails about “hellish deception” (Schmidt) and is mirrored in the Book of Mormon figures of Sherem and Korihor (see also Helaman 16); indeed, Sloterdijk’s break-

through book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) shows why old-style unmasking or debunking had run out of steam. No, these Twainian figures do not denounce religion: they see it as one of the many crazy and charming things that human beings do. They personally may or may not believe, but they take religious experience as a primary anthropological fact, and humor as one of the many ways to understand it.

A full inventory of the Twainian tradition of reading the Book of Mormon deserves a more thorough study than I can do here, but let’s take a few high points.¹⁵

Twain (1871): “And it came to pass; after a great deal of fighting, that Coriantumr, upon making calculation of his losses, found that ‘there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children’—say 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 in all—‘and he began to sorry in his heart.’ Unquestionably it was time.”¹⁶

Volk (1900): “A Lamanite general is scalped after the most approved Indian fashion, though the plucky fellow refused to retire, and did his most effective fighting after, minus a scalp!”¹⁷

Brodie (1945): Smith “began the book with a first-class murder, added assassinations, and piled up battles by the score. There was plenty of bloodshed and slaughter to make up for the lack of gaiety and the stuff of humanity. . . . Ammon, an American counterpart of David, for want of a Goliath slew six sheep-rustlers with his sling.”¹⁸

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Harrison (1954): “If the passage from the Book of Mormon above is really an abridgement, what did the unabridged record look like? Perhaps it gave the individual names and addresses of the two hundred and twenty thousand slain!”

Schmidt (1962): “And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing, and I saw many harlots.” Ooh la la!

Neal Chandler (1991): “The fact that not one of the amputees [by Ammon’s sword in Alma 17], except, of course, the one who loses his head, actually dies of his wound seems to underscore a certain kind of divine charity attendant on this violence or at least to indicate an advanced state of Lamanite emergency medicine hitherto unrecognized by Book of Mormon commentators.”

Michael Hicks (2012): “Oh, one more thing: these plates I am engraving this on are the smaller of two sets. Always good to write in duplicate, I learned as a boy” (1 Nephi 9).

The question is, where does the funniness of the Book of Mormon come from? Is the book inherently funny or does its lack of humor compel the clever critic to provide it? Is the lack of humor itself funny? Philosopher Simon Critchley writes in an affectionate Twainian piece: “The very mention of the Book of Mormon invites smirks and giggles, which is why choosing it as the name for Broadway’s most hard-to-get-into show was a smart move.” For another Twainian critic, historian Donald Harmon Akenson, “mostly one just chaffs under [The Book of Mormon’s] remorseless humorlessness. . . . If the Almighty in the Book of Mormon

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is given even a single chance to show that he understands that his creation and his creatures have some amusing foibles, I have missed finding it. 24 Akenson writes wittily about the book’s lack of humor. Perhaps nature abhors a vacuum: the critic rushes in to fill the lack. You can see such strategies in the critics quoted. Twain jumps on loose temporal coordination. Schmidt treats a scene meant to be horrifying as alluring. Chandler uses strategic anachronism to explain a textual incongruity. Hicks renders Nephi’s momentous description of his records as banal wisdom. The Book of Mormon is a bit of a sitting duck for this kind of treatment. Perhaps earnestness always invites a take-down, especially if clumsily presented. Anyone who spent time as an overly serious child in a schoolyard (authorial confession alert!) understands this dynamic!

To devout members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, comic reading might seem to have missed the boat. Many would endorse the words of BYU literature professor Marilyn Arnold: “Of the many hundreds of texts I have read, none has touched me more profoundly than the Book of Mormon. Without question, it is the greatest book I have encountered.” 25 Opinions shatter on the nature of the book. It is an unusual book that can be so meaningful to some and so deadly dull to others. Indeed, the Book of Mormon always poses in the most extreme terms the question of what it means to read. It claims that you can possess and read holy books cluelessly (2 Nephi 29:3ff.); berates its readers for missing the point (2 Nephi 32:1–9); frankly admits its lack of literary prowess and polish (2 Nephi 33:1–2; Ether 12:23–28); and even questions whether reading it is necessarily the right thing for everyone (Moroni 10:3). The book sets the highest possible standards for its proper reading. One must recognize the book’s place within the divine plan of history. One must see it as critically continuous with the Bible as another installment of God’s word. One must tremble at the ultimate

guarantee that the book’s veracity will be confirmed at the final judgment (2 Nephi 33:11–15; Moroni 10:34). The Book of Mormon is not content to be a book among books, to be a work of imaginative genius, as Schmidt, Bloom, Critchley, or many others would read it. It repels the genre category of fiction, and it even elbows aside the Bible’s claim to be the uniquely divine book. As a genre, fiction is too ontologically fickle—the Book of Mormon wants to grab hold of reality, including the reader. Above all, to read the Book of Mormon properly according to its own demanding logic is to come to Christ. Good reading requires a transformation of the reader, a change of heart, a conversion.

The Book of Mormon thus provides one account of why people fail to enjoy it: the price is too high. The aesthetic failing of the text is actually the spiritual failure of the reader. The book’s apparent dullness is a secret test of the heart’s receptivity.26 “Unreadability is the reader’s problem,” as Jonathan Sudholt puts it in an innovative analysis of how the Book of Mormon’s laments about communication breakdown comment on the dysfunctional public sphere in 1820s America.27 Perhaps the communication breakdown is intentional: the Book of Mormon leaves it up to the reader to build the connection. It invites the reader to be a co-author, to bring the text to life. To this way of thinking, a comic response to the Book of Mormon would be at best a warped response to the book’s invitation to fill in the gaps. Laughter would be a defense mechanism against its absolute demands, a way of fending off a book so relentlessly and unapologetically in-your-face. One of Schmidt’s most astute observations is that the book is well armed against its accusers! It anticipates its critics and outfoxes them by putting the onus on them. Its plainness, it cunningly suggests, might well be a trap laid for the

26. Akenson, Some Family, 25, floats the hypothesis that the Book of Mormon is a failed three-volume novel in the nineteenth-century style. What readers after modernism and cinema fail to recognize is that dullness and duration are aesthetic experiences in their own right and were actively cultivated in long-form nineteenth-century literature. See Stefanie Markovits, The Victorian Verse-Novel: Aspiring to Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

wise and the learned. This is the old Christian principle taught by St. Paul—that the folly and scandal of the Gospel are by design. Maybe the joke’s on the scoffers.

That the book is a stumbling block on which its readers either shipwreck or build a sure foundation is one compelling account of how the Book of Mormon wants to be read. In accordance with this logic, I have no interest in adjudicating here which way it should be read: that is a job for every reader. The book tempts the idea that the sheep read for divine truth and the goats read for fun. There is a vengeful strain in the Book of Mormon that a good reader would be dense not to see. As a rule, readers have not sufficiently grappled—theologically, hermeneutically—with the violence of the text. Indeed, it may be that the general lack of rigorous close reading in Latter-day Saint culture functions well to avoid or ignore theological and ethical problems closer readings would bring out (see 3 Nephi 9, for instance). The Book of Mormon musical, though again taking little from the Book of Mormon except perhaps for the self-righteousness of the young Nephi in its figure of Elder Price, makes fun of the missionaries’ oblivious optimism in the midst of appalling suffering and violence in “Africa.” In the same way, devout readers of the book can take edification and comfort from a text marked by remarkable scenes of violence and threats against the wicked.

But the Book of Mormon also has a generosity and good humor that richly deserves to be cultivated. The comic commentators recognize this. Perhaps Twain and his followers have something to teach. (Twain has been a topic of significant interest by devout Latter-day Saint scholars.) As a rule, Latter-day Saints know how to take a joke, as evidenced by their generally good-natured response to the Book of Mormon musical. (They certainly have had plenty of practice.) The ulti-

28. I personally find the musical’s depiction of Africans more troubling than its portrayal of Latter-day Saints.

mate division, in any case, is always within people, not between people. We are all ongoing projects, and, for that reason, I am grateful that the Book of Mormon provides for both entertainment and edification. As readers, as humans, we are always in the middle of the journey.

By way of conclusion, we can perhaps celebrate comedy, at least of a certain kind, as a genre with a particular affinity to Christianity. Certainly, the great literary critic Erich Auerbach thought so in his landmark book *Mimesis.* Comedy is not for heroes and demi-gods; they enjoy the elevated styles of tragedy and epic. Comedy in its classical form explored low and vulgar characters and situations and was particularly well equipped to show the eruption of the banal and the ordinary amid any lofty aspiration. For Auerbach, the biblical story of Jesus, born in a manger, a friend to fishers and farmers, changed all the rules: it invented a new way of writing and thinking, the *sermo humilis* or humble discourse, that transfigured comedy's interest in everyday reality. In this mode, the humor of bathos is both inevitable (because we are mortal and embodied) and redeemable (because Christ was once both of those things). For Auerbach, the incarnation of Christ marked a new genre (e.g., in the Gospels) both sublime and humble, both freighted with the most intense meaning and housed in the most ordinary circumstances. Dante was Auerbach's chief example of a Christological and comedic imagination. Indeed, comedy, as Søren Kierkegaard wrote of irony, is about the absurd mismatches of existence. Laughter can be cruel, but so can many things. When combined with charity, comedy might be just what the doctor ordered. Jesus, let us not forget, was a ferocious ironist unafraid of absurdist figures of speech (a log in the eye? A camel passing through the eye of a needle?). And Harold Bloom called Joseph Smith a "robust American humorist." His followers might well take that label as high praise.

The genre of the Book of Mormon is an open question: chronicle, voice from the dust, biblical expansion, tragedy, family history, critique

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of modernity, political rhapsody, racial allegory, civilizational analysis, holy writ, and many more. For now, we might follow Auerbach’s reading of Dante and propose the genre of Divine Comedy.\textsuperscript{32} Dante’s conception of comedy doesn’t fit exactly, since we moderns find it hard to imagine the human condition as entertainment for the divine spectator, but the idea that that there might be something funny even in the most holy things is surely worth considering.

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\textsuperscript{32} Another scholar who suggests the relevance of comedy (by way of Kenneth Burke) for the Book of Mormon is David Charles Gore, The Voice of the People: Political Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, forthcoming).
I could no longer respect myself were I to learn of a book I did not know, but of which there were a hundred thousand copies in the world.

—Lichtenberg

The Mormons are right!

—Schopenhauer

1

If perhaps I am certain of nothing else, I am indeed certain of one thing: I cannot resist holy books. Understand me correctly, however. I regard all of them highly—the fiery bass voices of the Qur’an; Gautama’s all-tolerating claptrap of wisdom; the large compendium of Jewish cultural history called the Old Testament—but I refuse steadfastly to link the word “truth” with any of them. Whoever imagines that he possesses the truth has lost it in that very same instant. Truth has no meaning for us. Nothing would be more unfortunate than some kind of 5 percent clause of the Spirit,¹ and nothing more ridiculous than when one prophet

¹. Schmidt is referring to the German law that a political party must reach 5 percent to be viable in Parliament.
calls out another as a fanatic. Not one Church, but rather fundamentally Churches; not one Sacred Scripture, but rather numerous Sacred Scriptures. Hence, if you wish, a resigned—but in my experience quite therapeutic—agnosticism as foundation, yet at the same time a tireless hunt for one’s own mistakes and one’s own lack of knowledge—and, besides that, working diligently.

In my specific case, this means to produce literature or to report about it.

2

Without question, the Book of Mormon has so far received the worst reception of all sacred books. While other sects from the same period like the “Báb” or “Bahá’í” are taken fairly seriously, the Mormons have almost always been denied such justice—whether from the old “Rohnert”² or the latest Fischer Lexikon, we have been consistently misinformed already for fully 130 years now. In this case, to leave reporting to theologians while hoping for objectivity is unrealistic. And one can look wherever one wishes: none of the authors can ever have taken the trouble to even glance at the Book of Mormon, let alone to read it carefully—which I, for one, did twice (once in German, once in English). For the remainder of my life, however, I shall hardly find time to pick it up again.

The most frequent expressions of solemn abhorrence completely miss the crux of the matter. Of course, the language of the Book of Mormon reflects the language of the Bible, but not with the skill of the malicious ventriloquist. Nor is the hairsplitting art of an intellect that loves to stroll into the unverifiable (if not the absurd) considerably greater here than elsewhere. Certainly, one can regard the whole thing as a Haggadah to the Old and New Testaments, and the local-patriotic attempt to connect the USA closely with the Christian tradition is unmistakable. Nevertheless, the oft-mentioned connection of the Book of Mormon with Solomon Spaulding’s lost manuscript would be partly

². Author of Kirche, Kirchen, und Sekten (1888).
correct at best. In reality, as far as this text is concerned, we might be dealing with “automatic writing,” as even the “generally well-informed” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls it. In other words, Joseph Smith, from whom the Book of Mormon stems, was (as even the so-called “Deseret Script” might indicate?) presumably a “writing-medium.” Parapsychology is quite familiar with such phenomena.

But all that is rather unimportant in the last analysis. For once, let us seriously consider the Book of Mormon as a thought-world in itself—a task for which the depressing Lichtenberg motto above is valid to a surprising degree. No one need be concerned about being worse-off for reading the Book of Mormon. And anyone who, after the last war (so far), heard the Mormon [Tabernacle] Choir sing is likely to agree with the judgment of Karl May’s wife: “It was as if we were hearing other-worldly singing.”

Far far away in the west  
There is a land so fair  
Many a weary pilgrim  
Has turned his count' nance there.  

   Atop its highest summits  
   Gleams white eternal snow  
   And lovely in the valleys  
   The placid lake does glow.  

They’ve raised up new cottages  
With love and faithfulness

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3. Spaulding’s work is referred to as the *Lost Manuscript* in English in Schmidt’s original essay.  
4. The phrase “automatic writing” is in English in the original.  
5. Schmidt seems to be referring, anachronistically, to the Deseret alphabet.  
6. Compare Mark Twain’s judgment: “The Mormon Bible is rather stupid and tiresome to read, but there is nothing vicious in its teachings” (Mark Twain, *Roughing It* [New York: Harpers, 1871], 119).  
7. This remark was uncited by Schmidt—it was possibly a spoken comment from a private conversation.
In my mind's eye I behold
Dear friends of worthiness.

Of course I will remember
The land of friends and youth
But my people are out west
Where I have found a home.\textsuperscript{8}

That was once [verse 2 of] number 107 in the [German] hymnbook of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Corporation of Public Law, Berlin-Dahlem, Am Hirschsprung 60—the present address, which now sounds somewhat curious.\textsuperscript{9} But what would not be curious in Germany?

3

In the last analysis, what is decisive for the inquiring reader is a reading's "poetic usefulness"—that is, what it offers by way of "thought games," interpolations, suggestiveness, or to what degree it inspires poets and authors.

For us—and rightly so—the Bible indisputably dominates on this point: "Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn" (Wordsworth)\textsuperscript{10}—the many Cain's (Byron's was not the first), Klopstock's \textit{The Death of Adam}, Bodmer's \textit{Noahide}. But

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Schmidt quotes "Süss warst du Heimat mir" or "Sweet were you, my homeland, to me." We quote from \textit{Gesangbuch für die Schweizerische und deutsche Mission der Kirche Jesu Christi der Heiligen der letzten Täge}, 5th improved and expanded ed. (Bern: Suter, 1890), 200–02. Schmidt's hymnal, as noted, was published in Berlin. We have tried to preserve the meter and, loosely, the rhyme scheme, of the original hymn. Verse 3 explicitly mentions Utah; it is clearly a call to come-to-Zion-in-the-West. Thanks to Kristine Haglund and Ardis Parshall for helping us track it down.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Presumably, the legal language from before the formation of the Federal Republic sounds strange; Schmidt's point is that the German past is problematic!
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Schmidt quotes here, in German paraphrase, from John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," which he misattributes to William Wordsworth. We have provided the Keats original.
\end{itemize}
no need, in this connection, to argue that the Qur’an is rich in potential by referring to Hafez or to Omar the Tentmaker. ¹¹ A more immediate nice example is [Karl] May’s Am Jenseits (although May directly treats the Mormons in this volume maliciously; he depicts many diabolically beautiful rogues—after all, it was May’s lot to be poorly informed most of the time). From the Buddhist world, let us vicariously mention Gjellerup’s The Pilgrim Kamanita ¹² (wholly refined persons read Indian love lyrics “before” that novel). It remains to be investigated whether the Book of Mormon could also provide a stimulating effect.

And I refer—I emphasize this—not to the external history of Mormonism, although much of interest might be offered there: the great trek to Utah under Brigham Young; the “Miracle of the Seagulls”; the horror stories of “Danites” with one shot of “Feme”; Joaquin Miller, “The Danites in the Sierra” (drama, 1877); Karl Löfler-Tornow, Der Geisterseher; oder: Die Mormonen-braut (1869; The Ghost-Seer, or the Mormon Bride); Thomas Dunn English (compare Poe), The Mormons (drama, 1858); Johann Brandl, Die Mormonen (opera, 1879; The Mormons); Oppermann, in his One Hundred Years (1870), benevolently lectured about the publication (“Hauptstelle,” Vol. VIII, pp. 231–70); an early and—because of its daring affirmation of such “conditions”—strange yet detailed portrayal can be found in the extensive half-novel “Californien und das Goldfieber” (1863; California and the Gold Fever) by a certain “Dr. Zimmermann” (i.e., W. F. Vollmer). He has one of his heroes, the German physician Franke, marry three beautiful sisters at the same time and with the best bourgeois success. Do I still have to mention the delicious catchword “polygamy”? (That, by the way, is the only thing an average German mind will know about Mormonism. Let me emphasize that not one word about it can be found in the Book of Mormon. ¹³ It was really only a brief

¹¹. Hafez is the great Persian poet of the fourteenth century; Omar the Tentmaker was a 1922 silent film.
ⁱ². The Pilgrim Kamanita is a 1906 novel written in Danish by Karl Adolph Gjellerup. Gjellerup won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1917 (for his poetry).
¹³. Schmidt misses Jacob 2:23–35.
interregnum, which, by the way, is capable of very, very thoughtful aspects. The above citation by Schopenhauer refers precisely to it. And the argument that Pastor Zimmer so indignantly relates, with which a Utah-German woman coolly confronted him—"Pluralism? That is, after all, something beautiful. I would not object if my husband were to become a Mormon and take one or two additional young women. Then the housework would be a bit easier for me"—one can’t help but smirk at her naively down-to-earth realism.) In the following, I therefore intend to proceed strictly as reporter and to confine myself to the Book of Mormon.

4

For this reason, let me introduce it externally:

The Book of Mormon may be obtained at the address noted above, in paperback—£2.00 the German edition, £3.00 the English edition, prepayment required. I quote from an English paperback version (Utah 1950) and two German hardbound versions (Basel 1946 and Berlin 1950). The first English edition of five thousand volumes was published in 1830 (and apparently has become a rarissimum). At the time of publication, Joseph Smith, obeying an explicit divine injunction, set the price at $1.25. In 1879, the Book of Mormon appeared for the first time divided into chapters and verses (which is known to have occurred with the Bible only in the sixteenth century as well) by Orson Pratt, one of the great dogmatists of Mormonism, as Sidney Rigdon was as well. From 1920 onward, a handy two-columned edition became available. It contained historical dates, a table of contents, pronunciation of proper names—a helpful additional apparatus indeed. For example, the double-columned index contains forty-five pages. And since a “good index” is generally regarded as having one page of the index for every twenty pages of text, this edition is even among “the best.” The footnotes contain a huge number of parallel verses. As always, somewhat forced “references” are not lacking, such as “Are unbaptized children damned? Read Moroni 8.” But after all,
this is a common custom, and this is found also at the beginning of my King James Bible: "Is business slow? Read Psalm 37." The numerous references to Bible verses form a study in themselves. The "dovetailing" is as good as a theological mind could ever want—for example, that Isaiah 29:4 predicts Smith's finding of the "plates of Nephi" on September 22, 1827, in the Hill Cumorah, etc., etc.

Unfortunately, I have had no access to the first German translation by Taylor & Dykes from 1852 (translations into more than a dozen languages are available). This translation was later reworked by Schönfeld. The version presently available is by Jean Wunderlich, 1924. It was revised once more in 1950.

The experienced translator will immediately notice that the German edition has almost exactly the same number of letters as the English original, which is impossible! Because of the well-known "monosyllabic" nature of English, every translation must in principle accept an enlargement factor of 1.10 or very close to it. To determine whether the translator has abbreviated or diluted the text, no more certain a criterion exists than counting letters. If therefore the German translation of the Book of Mormon has only a factor of 1.00, the text must somehow have been "abridged"—and a closer examination reveals that the biblical phrase "and it came to pass," recurring in the English text several thousand times, has been replaced in the German translation by "( )," and thus has become, thank goodness, more readable. The countless phrases have been honestly identified for the philologist, and thus the issue with the enlargement factor is accounted for. We, the other translators, need not be ashamed!

One of the first things not to be scornful about that strikes the seeker after inspiration right away is the roll call of names: "Lehi and Morianton, Amaleki and Helaman, Zoramites and Rameumptom, Curelom

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and Cummom."\textsuperscript{15} Not for nothing did Schlagintweit already write: "The huge number of melodious names is astonishing!"\textsuperscript{16} Yes, yes, but such "astonishment" is only another expression for the genuinely embarrassing fact that a million people live in word-worlds of which we know nothing! We are so miserably informed that, as ridiculous as it sounds, it constitutes a pronounced "feat" if I allow a brief synopsis to follow regarding the contents of the Book of Mormon and its fifteen books, containing a total of 239 chapters and 6,604 verses:

1. 1 Nephi (22 chaps. / 618 verses, 600–575 BC): 1–16 Lehi, his wife Sariah, and his four sons, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi, leave Jerusalem and travel into the Arabian desert. Lehi’s sons return once more and fetch the sacred brass plates. Continued travel; the Lord presents them with the Liahona, the guide. / 17–18 Irreantum or the Great Waters. Voyage through the Indian Ocean to the American West Coast. / 19–22 Nephi’s prophecies (cf. Isaiah 48–49).

2. 2 Nephi (33/779, 575–545 BC): 1–4 Lehi’s teachings and death. / 5 Nephi leader of the people; his brothers rebel, and are punished with dark skin, that is, become “Lamanites”-Indians. / 6–24 Jacob, Nephi’s brother, preaches and admonishes (cf. Isaiah 50, 51, and 2–14). / 25–33 Nephi’s prophecies.


\textsuperscript{15} Schmidt’s misspelling of “cummom.”

\textsuperscript{16} Robert von Schlagintweit, nineteenth-century travel writer, author of \textit{Die Mormonen} (1874).
7. Words of Mormon (1/18, c. AD 385): Later redactional note.
9. Alma (63/1,975, 91–53 BC): Report of Alma the younger, the high priest and chief judge of the people of Nephi. / 1–7 He preaches successfully. / 8–16 Battle with the godless city of Ammonihah. / 17–26 Adventures of the sons of Mosiah; battles with the Lamanites. / 27–29 Alma’s commands to his sons, Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton. / 43–44 Helaman’s battle with the Lamanites. / 45–62 Helaman’s account of the Nephite people, their dissensions and wars. / 63 Emigration of numerous Nephites to the northern part of North America.
11. III Nephi (30/785, 1 BC–AD 25): 1–7 Nephi’s reign; sign of the birth of the Savior. Internal disputes among the Nephites. / 8–28 Natural upheavals proclaim the crucifixion of Christ: his appearance to the Nephites; repetition of the Sermon on the Mount; institution of the Communion; calling of twelve disciples, etc. / 29–30 Warnings of Mormon, the plates’ redactor.
12. IV Nephi (1/49, AD 35–321): Short chronicle: Two-hundred-year long prosperity of the Church of Christ; thereafter, however, dissention and degeneration.
13. Mormon (9/227, AD 322–421): 1–5 Internal unrest; as well as battles against the Lamanites and Gadianton robbers. / 6
Final battle at the Hill Cumorah; The Lamanites’ victory. / 7–9 Moroni completes the account of his father Mormon. 17

14. Ether (15/433, c. 2280–600 BC?): 1–6 Account of the first immigration from Palestine to the USA. / 7–15 Development of the kingdom; battles; here also last battle near Cumorah. Ether’s final words.

15. Moroni (10/163, AD 400–421): 1 The desolate state of Moroni, the last of the Nephites. / 2–9 Teachings and exhortations to future, still-unborn people. / 10 Moroni’s final words; he seals the record.

Two things should be added. First, that—unsurprising to any expert on Holy Writ—here, too, books were lost: for example, the oft-cited prophets Zenos and Zenock. And, finally, that an uncomfortably wide back door is left open with the claim that not all plates have yet been “unsealed.” This may be acceptable to established clerics, but my inexpert hunch is that a philological “quagmire” certainly opens up with that sort of thing.

Here and now, let me quickly point to only two-and-a-half topics—first, the First Book of Nephi and the settlement of America in three waves from Palestine.

In about the year 597 BC, when Zedekiah was king in Judah, there lived a pious Jew named Lehi with his extended family in Jerusalem. He rightly became increasingly uncomfortable about the “political situation,” a feeling that was confirmed by a few unpleasant visions. Lehi, just to be cautious, “moved away” to near the Red Sea, to the southeast. (Forgive my mode of expression, but the term “emigration” always reminds one all too fatally of “our” time.) “Visions of the tree, the river, and the iron rod.” The real hero is Lehi’s youngest son, Nephi, who zealously continues writing on the mysterious “plates.” One of the nice

17. A minor error on Schmidt’s part. Moroni’s writing starts in chapter 8, not 7.
episodes is the “Liahona Legend” (a term strangely missing from the index; one must look it up under “compass.”)

1 Nephi 16:9–12; 17:4–5: “And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord spake unto my father by night, and commanded him that on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness. And as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness. And we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness. And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman. . . . And we did sojourn for the space of many years, yea, even eight years in the wilderness. . . . And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum, which, being interpreted, is many waters.”

At that place, Nephi then constructs vessels, and gets with them into the—well, “we with our upper-class consciousness” would say “the prevailing westerly of the Southern Hemisphere”—and they finally land, 589 BC, in the “promised land,” which might correspond approximately to today’s Peru. (It could also be Chile; Mormon geography appears still to be in a sorry state, not only with respect to this particular counter-Kon-Tiki.)

Of course, the older brothers revolt against the inspired youngest son—it is, after all, an age-old fairy-tale motif—and not only during the long crossing (recalling Columbus parallels), which understandably wracked their nerves, but also soon after landing. The Lord, however, promptly smites them because of their sinfulness and malice,

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18. Schmidt here quotes 1 Nephi 16:9–12; 17:4–5. We have reproduced the current English text here, with one exception: We have eliminated instances of “it came to pass that” where they are missing from Schmidt’s German edition. In more recent German editions, the phrase has been restored as “Und es begab sich.”

19. Thor Heyerdahl’s balsa wood ship Kon-Tiki sailed in 1947 across the Pacific from east to west.
punishing them with a “skin of blackness” and above all with “general wildness”20—and thus the Indians’ origin is explained in the Book of Mormon. But before the anthropologist’s head shakes too violently, I would like to offer for consideration that the source and origin of the Indians had become one of the very great enigmas of ethnography immediately after the discovery of America: nomads, of brownish-red skin, with considerably hooked noses, unusually well-spoken, “in tents,” “mound builders,” no less than unpleasantly skilled “scalp-takers.”

“Zebulon shall dwell at the haven of the sea” [everything Genesis, chap. 49 now]: Had they not welcomed the first white men, whether Captain John Smith by his Pocahontas or the pilgrim fathers by Massasoit? / “Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward”: Could one thus portray much more precisely the stalking of the Reds against the Whites, who strangely ride on horseback? “Gad, a troop shall overcome him”: How often regular troops were mobilized against them. / “Benjamin shall ravin as a wolf: in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at night he shall divide the spoil.” / “Naphtali is a hind let loose; he giveth goodly words.”21 / And all that must now be done is to make their language unintelligible and to spread them out over the surface of the wide world—as famously happened with Etemenanki’s construction.22 / And the “lost ten tribes of Israel” are also frequently mentioned. / And whoever still doubts—such can only be a malicious or senseless person!—let him open Psalm 68:22: “But God shall wound the head of his enemies, and the hairy scalp of such an one as goeth on still in his trespasses.”23 (And the race-proud who wish to mutter about “oriental gruesomeness” might reflect that even the Visigoth Fuero Juzgo knows of the punishment of capillos et cutem detrahere.24)

20. Schmidt uses the term Verwilderung allgemein, also used in German discussions since the late eighteenth century in reference to how civilized people can run to seed.
21. Schmidt here quotes Genesis 49:13, 17, 19, 27, 21. We have followed the KJV.
22. This is the tower of Babel, via the name of the ziggurat in Babylon.
23. The passage is Psalms 68:21 in the KJV.
24. Latin for to remove skin and hair. In choosing a Goth, Schmidt reminds his readers that Germanic peoples are perfectly capable of cruelty and violence, an obvious anti-Nazi comment.
Anyway, the theory is old, and the Book of Mormon is but a final, not insignificant summary. One can already read about it in Simplicissimus or in Lessing's reviews. Its inventor was a certain Montezinius, and the first publication about it was the Spes Israelis of Manasseh ben Israel (Amsterdam 1650). With such minimal erudition, I merely wish to hold to one point: the "Lamanites" of the Book of Mormon are not half as absurd as those of other faiths—who have their own peculiar whims as well—would like to persuade us. And the point of view must still be considered that we might be dealing here with an honorably crafty attempt to provide an adequate genealogy for the new, great continent in a local-patriotic way. (If, then, all things being equal, the foreword to the Book of Mormon again claims that the history of America is "foretold" in it—1 Nephi 13 is supposed to point to Columbus in verse 12, to the Puritans in 16, to the Revolutionary War of 1776–1783 in verses 17–19—then this foreword, written in 1830, so clearly "after" the book appeared, bites off a bit too much.)

During the slow, elaborately portrayed, continued colonization, the descendants of Nephi twice more meet other Palestinian emigrants: Omni 1 and Alma 27, a people in the land of Zarahemla; and, at last, opening a final grand prospect, a Book of Ether is discovered. Jared, familiar from Genesis, moved with his brothers about the time of the Flood and the construction of the Tower to the northwest—thus to Europe. He reaches the coast (one might imagine Brittany or, for my part, Ireland), and thus speaks the Lord (Ether 2:16ff.):

Go to work and build, after the manner of barges which ye have hitherto built. . . . And they were small, and they were light upon the water, even like unto the lightness of a fowl upon the water. / And they were built after a manner that they were exceedingly tight, even that they would hold water like unto a dish; and the

26. The word "foretold" is in English in the original.
bottom and the sides thereof were peaked; and the top thereof was tight like unto a dish; and the length thereof was the length of a tree, and the door thereof, when it was shut, was tight like unto a dish. / . . . / For behold, ye shall be as a whale in the middle of the sea. 28

Shining stones are half found, half produced, serving as lamps during the voyage.

And he did put forth the stones into the vessels which were prepared, one in each end thereof; and behold, they did give light unto the vessels. And thus the Lord caused stones to shine in the darkness / . . . / And they were many times buried in the depth of the sea, because of the mountain waves which broke upon them, and also the great and terrible tempests which were caused by the fierceness of the wind. / . . . / And thus they were driven forth; and no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them. 29

And this, again, is indeed not an image to be scoffed at: hollow dugouts (as Wayland the Blacksmith 30 in the North knows them), illuminated by shining crystals, with “the raging deep in the darkness” all around (Ether 3:3). 31

The history of the subsequent dispersion is summarized in Ether 15:20 in words that are probably valid for all “pioneers”: “They slept on their swords.” Endlessly confusing and complicated crisscrossing movements

27. Schmidt here skips over a few words in the text, which read as follows in English: “and the bottom thereof was tight like unto a dish; and the sides thereof were tight like unto a dish; and the ends thereof were peaked.”
29. Here, Ether 6:2–3, 6, 10.
30. Figure in Norse mythology.
31. “The raging deep in darkness” is in English in the original.
from A to Z: "the battle at Mount Riplah," small and large cities are founded: “And the people who were in the land northward did dwell in tents, and in houses of cement, and they did suffer whatsoever tree should spring up upon the face of the land” (Helaman 3:9); “and Mosiah built a tower near the temple; yea, a very high tower, even so high that he could . . . overlook the land of Shilom” (equivalent to a skyscraper; Mosiah 11:12). And over the course of the centuries, the generations are “bumped off” in the well-known fashion, factually and relentlessly: “Coriantur was the son of Moron. / And Moron was the son of Ethem. / And Ethem was the son of Ahah. / And Ahah was the son of Seth. / And Seth was the son of Shiblon. / etc., etc.” 33 And “judges” are appointed; everything is consolidated, measures and weights: “Now the reckoning is thus—a senine of gold, a seon of gold, a shum of gold, and a limnah of gold. / A senum of silver, an amnor of silver, an ezrom of silver, and an onti of silver. / A senum of silver was equal to a senine of gold, and either for a measure of barley” (Alma 11:5ff.). 34 This Alma shares traits with Moses in that, like Moses, his own death is recorded in his book. No one sees him die; he disappears: “Kings should disdain to die, and only disappear.” 35 And again the Lamanites attack, “and they came up upon the north of the land of Shilom, with their numerous hosts, men armed with bows, and with arrows, and with swords, and with cimeters, and with stones, and with slings; and they had their heads shaved that they were naked; and they were girded with a leathern girdle about their loins” (Mosiah 10:8)—but, alas, as previously stated, even apparently such instructive verses as Alma 22:27–34 hardly clarify the geography of the Book of Mormon—this would be a fruitful field of activity for a patient detective-philologist. Because everything must be localized in “God's own Country,” one reads many verses with a knowing smile:

32. Schmidt confuses King Noah and Mosiah here.
33. This is Ether 1:7–11.
34. This is Alma 11:5–7.
35. The quotation—which comes from Thomas de Quincey (Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, ed. Richard Garnett [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1885], 254)—is in English in the original.
“Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven” (Ether 2:12; compare also Alma 46:17—“No kings to rule America!—Read 2 Nephi 10:10”). 36

How much the Lord regards his “New World” to be at least equal to the Holy Land—if he does not in fact prefer it?—can perhaps be extracted from 2 Nephi 10:3: “Wherefore, as I said unto you, it must needs be expedient that Christ—for in the last night the angel spake unto me that this should be his name—should come among the Jews, among those who are the more wicked part of the world; and they shall crucify him”—and, as can be seen from the chronological note on the bottom right on that page, the “last night” occurs “between 559 and 545 B.C.” To which we casually join Mosiah 3:8ff., where “Mary” is already known, and the designation “Christians” is accepted from 124 BC—which brings me to the last of my topics, which will indeed be interesting to many.

Already from the table of contents, it will have become apparent that the Third Book of Nephi, which spans the years from 1 BC to AD 35, must be one of the most significant ones. It impressively portrays how those in the USA sense what is taking place over yonder in Palestine from omens, miraculous events, and atmospheric occurrences: “For behold, at the going down of the sun there was no darkness; and the people began to be astonished” (3 Nephi 1:15), “and also a new star did appear” (3 Nephi 1:21), “and they knew that it was the day that the Lord should be born” (3 Nephi 1:19). Then another thirty years of thoughtlessness, “and now it was in the days of Lachoneus . . . , for he did fill the seat of his father and did govern the people that year” (3 Nephi 6:19; probably

36. “God’s own Country” is in English in the original, as is the quoted explanatory reference at the end of the parenthetical: “No kings to rule America!—Read 2 Nephi 10:10.”
a Pilate parallel; by the way, as reported in 3 Nephi 2:8, all at once in that miraculous night, a new calendar had begun). Now moving on, beginning from chapter 8:

And in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land. / And there was also a great and terrible tempest; and there was terrible thunder, insomuch that it did shake the whole earth as if it was about to divide asunder. / And there were exceedingly sharp lightnings... and the city of Zarahemla did take fire. / And the city of Moroni did sink into the depths of the sea, and the inhabitants thereof were drowned. / And the earth was carried up upon the city of Moronihah, that in the place of the city there became a great mountain. /.../ But there was a more great and terrible destruction in the land northward; for behold, the whole face of the land was changed, /.../ and the highways were broken up, and the level roads were spoiled, and many smooth places became rough. / And many great and notable cities were sunk, and many were burned, and many were shaken till the buildings thereof had fallen to the earth, and the inhabitants thereof were slain, and the places were left desolate. /.../ And there were some who were carried away in the whirlwind; and whither they went no man knoweth, save they know that they were carried away.37

(Here, permit me to make an incidental remark—and I really do not intend it to be a bad joke!—that the similar story of Flying Robert was for me always by far the most fascinating account in the whole of Der Struwwelpeter.38 I am most strongly predisposed to grey and windy matters. Thus, “pleasant regions” are not for me.) And after three hours of intensity, darkness covers the land, “insomuch that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness; / And there could be no light, because of the darkness, neither candles, neither torches; neither could there be fire kindled with their fine and

37. Here, Schmidt quotes 3 Nephi 8:5–10, 12–14, 16.
38. Classic German children’s stories by Heinrich Hoffmann (1844).
exceedingly dry wood, so that there could not be any light at all.”

I would like to stress that an expression like “that there could be no light, because of the darkness” does not by any means constitute “significant nonsense,” but is rather a fitting subtlety, if not sheer profundity. After those signs, a voice is heard throughout the land—the voice of Christ; afterward, some hours of rest; and so on for three days.

Now chapters 11–28 follow, the three appearances of the resurrected Savior in the USA: “And as they understood they cast their eyes up again towards heaven; and behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them.”

He preaches a sermon (closely based on Matthew 5–7), heals the sick, and also at this point calls twelve disciples and apostles: “Nephi and his brother . . . , whose name was Timothy, and also his son, whose name was Jonas, and also Matthoni, and Mathonihah, his brother, and Kumen, and Kumenonhi, and Jeremiah, and Shemnon, and Jonas, and Zedekiah, and Isaiah” (3 Nephi 19:4). Then he leaves the Nephites and ascends to heaven; returns again, 19–26; and then a final, third time in 3 Nephi 27–28 (at this last point, however, there is the rather odd move that, according to their own explicit desire, three of the named disciples will not taste death; rather, they will wander and teach on the earth until Judgment Day).

Here, in Third Nephi, where most of the basic Mormon teachings are proclaimed, there would, of course, be endless opportunities for theologians from other churches to “butt in”—such as: that little children have no need for baptism, yet that deceased persons can be quasi-“after-baptized”; 3 Nephi 24:8, the introduction of a church tax; 3 Nephi 18:1–14, sacraments; chapter 21, on the New Jerusalem; or even “life-after-death concepts”—all tricky questions, about which there still exists no consensus. (But Cave! The Book of Mormon knows very well how to fight back if necessary, should an adversary become too aggressive. “And I beheld this great and abominable church; and I saw the devil

39. This is 3 Nephi 8:20–21.
40. 3 Nephi 11:8.
41. Schmidt is referring to tithing.
that he was the founder of it. / And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing, and I saw many harlots.” Ooh la la! Thus, 1 Nephi 13:6–7.

9

“Enough for now,” many will say. “Enough reported,” I also say.

A final, summary judgment perhaps could be given in Luther’s words concerning other “apocryphal writings”: “They are not to be regarded as equal to Holy Writ; they are, however, good and useful to read.” Whoever wants to can mutter “amusing and peculiar”—and whoever cannot help himself at all, may thunder about “hellish deception.” Should someone be very enthusiastic, he can additionally order—for exposition or expansion—Doctrines and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. (However, as stated above, this requires prepayment; both books are bound in one volume: English £2.50, German £5.25—and, on request, you will receive a few free trial copies of Der Stern, the monthly Mormon magazine.)

Whoso readeth, let him understand; he that hath the scriptures, let him search them.

—3 Nephi 10:14

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42. Schmidt’s spelling.
43. The titles are in English in the original.
44. This website wonderfully archives all issues of Der Stern in pdf format, http://www.lafeuilledolivier.com/Olivenblatt.html.
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The enigmatic relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible\(^1\) goes all the way back to one of its earliest reviewers, Restorationist Alexander Campbell, who noted inconsistencies between the two. Campbell addressed the Book of Mormon text’s conflation of the Old and New Covenants, differing on details such as Jesus’s birthplace and, in particular, how much the Book of Mormon’s pre-Christian peoples

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anticipated New Testament events. The Book of Mormon prophet Lehi, Campbell wrote, “developed the records of Matthew, Luke, and John, six hundred years before John the Baptist was born.” From the time of Campbell and into the present day, much of Book of Mormon scholarship has pivoted around this issue. How could a text that claims origins prior to the canonization of the New Testament interact so explicitly with the New Testament text? And what of the Old Testament content, in particular Isaiah, strewn throughout its pages? For many years, those who saw the Book of Mormon as purely the product of the mind of Joseph Smith interpreted these interactions as a sign of indirect influence at best and plagiarism at worst. In response, those who were willing to subscribe to divine origins developed several possible solutions, such as the ideas that Book of Mormon authors had access to “untainted” biblical manuscripts that have since disappeared; or that they had a level of prescience in writing. However, in recent years, this apologetic-or-critical sentiment of arguing why the Bible is present in the Book of Mormon has begun to wane in favor of further exploring how the Bible is present in the Book of Mormon. The intent of this literature review is to lay out the different scholarship trajectories related to the presence of the Bible in the Book of Mormon.

Because this is such a broad field, there is not space to mention every work that has been written on the topic. It is hoped that this review will bring up to date those interested in engaging this field more seriously, by reviewing the most relevant scholarship. This review will be divided into two sections, the first dealing with the Old Testament text and the second, with the New Testament text. I will also divide each section into smaller sections that deal with topics particularly relevant to each of the two texts.

Part I: The Old Testament

The Intertextual Relationship between Scriptural Authors and Their Texts

The many similarities between biblical and Book of Mormon narratives, doctrine, and language have spurred numerous academic studies. Due to the chronological point of convergence between events of the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, the early chapters of First Nephi have received particularly intense study. Representative of such work is the volume of essays compiled in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem.* Several of the essays deal with historical or cultural issues surrounding Lehi's life and subsequent departure from Jerusalem, including the role of women, religious life in general, Lehi's prophetic calling, biblical justification for the destruction of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem's turbulent political situation. The majority of these essays engage the role of the Old Testament in the Book of Mormon on at least an implicit, if not explicit, level.

Mark D. Thomas's book, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives,* is a valuable example of a literary study of the Book of Mormon that considers biblical (primarily Old Testament) forms and

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ideas. The book includes several “literary forms” found throughout the Book of Mormon, such as Lehi’s dream, conversion stories, and warning prophets. Thomas analyzes each one within the Book of Mormon context while also bringing in insights from the Old (and New) Testament and nineteenth-century religious culture. It is clear that Thomas sees the latter two elements as a large influence on the composition of the Book of Mormon: “The Book of Mormon uses the Bible as proof text, as a springboard to new revelation and creativity, and as a mosaic in creating a new spiritual world for its latter-day readers.” Thomas states that he intends his work to be “part of the foundation for a new tradition in Book of Mormon studies,” and rightly states that this can only be done “with rigorous, critical scholarship.”

In addition to Thomas’s work, scholars have focused on individual Old Testament stories that re-appear, often radically refashioned, in the Book of Mormon. Several scholars have noted that the Book of Mormon reproduces the story of Moses and the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt in its account of Lehi’s flight from Jerusalem. S. Kent Brown, the author of several excellent literary studies, sees Lehi’s flight as a “conscious reenactment” of the exodus story by Nephi, and observes that later Nephite writers would make this connection even more apparent. In his own study of Nephi’s journey, Alan Goff noted


his belief that biblical themes, such as the exodus, were so apparent to Nephi that it was "impossible that Nephi was not aware of them and did not intend that we see them in the story as he wrote it for us to read." 13 In an intriguing essay, Noel Reynolds argues that Nephi carefully constructed his history in a way that would "justify his ascent to leadership" and provide "a founding constitution for the Nephite people." Reynolds notes how part of this argument involved alluding back to biblical narratives. 14 In a separate essay, Reynolds argues that textual similarities between the Bible and the Book of Mormon can be best understood by the hypothesis that "the Book of Mormon writers had access in the brass plates to a document substantially the same as the book of Moses given to Joseph Smith by inspiration in 1830." 15

Other studies include a comparison of the abduction of the Lamanite daughters (Mosiah 20) with the similar story of the actions of the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20); 16 several essays explore Lehi's throne theophany in 1 Nephi 1 and similar biblical accounts. 17 In his MA work comparing the Bible and the Book of Mormon. See also "The Prophetic Laments of Samuel the Lamanite," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992), 63–80; "Moses and Jesus: The Old Adorns the New," in *The Book of Mormon: 3 Nephi 9–30, This Is My Gospel*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1993), 89–100. Many of Brown's essays have been republished, along with several previously unpublished essays, in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998).


thesis, Wesley P. Walters identifies Old Testament parallels throughout the Book of Mormon not only with the exodus story but also with the accounts of Joseph, Daniel, Noah, and several incidents from Judges.18 Benjamin L. McGuire has written an excellent article comparing Nephi’s slaying of Laban with David’s slaying of Goliath. McGuire sees Nephi casting himself as David as a way of legitimizing his rule over Laman.19 McGuire’s work is significant because he proposes a sound methodology for identifying literary allusions. In the process, he becomes one of the first scholars to develop a grounded, intertextual study of the Bible and the Book of Mormon. McGuire’s study has been followed more recently by the work of Shon Hopkin and John Hilton III.20

In addition, Grant Hardy’s groundbreaking Understanding the Book of Mormon contains many remarkable insights, including his discovery that Moroni may have structured the opening chapters of Ether with an eye toward the first ten chapters of Genesis. Working backwards from Genesis 10 to Genesis 1, Moroni’s abridgment of Ether’s record begins with a reference to the Tower of Babel. By the time the brother of Jared has his theophany in Ether 3, readers have reached the creation: “Step by step, Moroni’s account takes us back toward creation, reversing the effects of the Fall and restoring the close communication between God and men that was present in the beginning.”21

Much of the recent scholarship has been devoted to the years leading up to the Babylonian captivity, examining how closely Book of Mormon Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon,” Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture 27 (2017): 155–80.


21. Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 242. Of the Book of Mormon’s use of the Bible, Hardy writes: “It is striking that even though Joseph Smith sees the Authorized Version as authoritative, at the same time he appears comfortable modifying sacred writ” (Hardy, Understanding, 68).
Mormon events and declarations reflect the cultural and legal circumstances from which the Lehites departed. One of the most impressive examples of this approach is found in John W. Welch's *The Legal Cases of the Book of Mormon*, where Welch argues that several legal trials that occur in the Book of Mormon follow the legal regulations detailed in biblical books such as Exodus and Deuteronomy. He persuasively argues that "it now seems clear that each legal case in the Book of Mormon can be amply understood in the context of pre-exilic Israelite law."  

David Rolph Seely has contributed two shorter studies in this area, one devoted to the legality of Lehi offering sacrifice outside of Jerusalem, and another focusing on the language of Deuteronomy in the Book of Mormon. Other similar studies include Taylor Halverson's examination of Deuteronomy 17:14–20 in the context of Nephite kingship and Neal Rappleye's study of the impact of the Deuteronomist reforms on Lehi's family.

In this category, we should probably include the work of Methodist scholar Margaret Barker. Over her lengthy career, Barker has developed the thesis that the Israelite religion looked much different prior to Josiah's reforms. She argues that the religion acknowledged multiple deities (including a female one), had a drastically different priesthood and

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24. See David Rolph Seely, "Presentation on Deuteronomy in the Book of Mormon," presentation given at BYU Law School, November 18, 2015, archive.bookofmormoncentral.org. Seely has also begun working on the relationship between Jeremiah and the Book of Mormon, as evidenced by his paper at the 2017 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston.
series of temple rituals, and held a belief in *theosis*. In Barker’s opinion, Josiah’s reforms led to the eradication of these elements from Israelite practice and theology, and the Deuteronomist editors subsequently successfully removed many of these elements from their scriptures. Barker’s thesis appealed to Latter-day Saint Book of Mormon scholars who saw in her work a way of explaining how so much of the Book of Mormon, especially the writings of Nephi, could contain elements that would seem out of place in Second Temple Judaism. 27

**Traditional Scholarship and New Scripture**

For a long stretch of the twentieth century, Latter-day Saint writers have had a complicated relationship with higher criticism. 28 Much of that relationship has been detailed in other works, so I will mention only a couple of them here. 29 In his 1947 book, *Our Book of Mormon*, Sidney B. Sperry critiqued the position of what he called “liberal” scholars who advocated multiple authorship of the Pentateuch. Sperry acknowledged

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28. For example, Bruce R. McConkie’s entry on “Higher Criticism” in *Mormon Doctrine* cross-references “Apostasy” and includes the statement that higher criticism “should more accurately be called destructive criticism” (*Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], 353–54).

that biblical scholarship as a whole was moving away from the belief in
the unity of the Pentateuch authorship, but Sperry himself said that he
still preferred the “conservative position.” As was customary in Lat­
ter-day Saint Book of Mormon studies, Sperry’s opinion largely became
normative for several years. Opinions of how higher criticism could be
usefully incorporated changed in 1977 with a landmark article writ­
ten by Brigham Young University anthropology professor John Soren­
son. Sorenson seriously engaged the Documentary Hypothesis and,
in something of a bold move, did not shrug it off, but instead argued
that the Book of Mormon “may thus support rather than challenge the
notion that more than a single source underlines the Old Testament.”
In Sorenson’s opinion, the brass plates may actually represent the “E”
source hypothesized in the Documentary Hypothesis. The Northern
Kingdom provenance of the “E” source, along with Nephi’s geneal­
ogy through Joseph, provided the necessary link in his thesis. A few
years later, S. Kent Brown wrote an essay describing the Documentary
Hypothesis and other current trends in biblical studies, although he was
more hesitant than Sorenson about seriously engaging it.

30. Sidney B. Sperry, Our Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Steven & Wallace, 1947),
146–52. Sperry’s feelings about historical-critical methods of biblical scholarship can
perhaps be seen most clearly and forcefully in his “Scholars and Prophets,” Dialogue 2/1
(1967): 74–84. Sperry is reacting to the work of Heber Snell and addresses, among other
things, authorship of Deuteronomy, Isaiah 54 in the Book of Mormon, and authorship
of the book of Revelation.


32. The Documentary Hypothesis is an attempt to make sense of the seemingly
different texts that may have provided the sources for the current Old Testament. The
“E” or “Elohist” text refers to one of these possible sources, named because of its use of
“El” or “Elohim” to identify the God of Israel prior to Moses’s experience at the burning
bush. The “E” text is believed to have origins with the northern tribe of Ephraim. A
second text, known as “[J],” refers to the Israelite God as “Yahweh” and focuses upon the
southern tribe of Judah.

Three: Genesis to 2 Samuel, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City:
Sunstone essays of the early 1990s laid out the difficulties of reconciling belief in the Book of Mormon with higher criticism. In 1992, David P. Wright penned an intriguing essay entitled “Historical Criticism: A Necessary Element in Search of Religious Truth.” Wright laid out two ideological positions when it came to how people approach scripture: Traditionalist (to read the text uncritically) and Critical (evaluating the contextual evidence). Among other issues, Wright personably and honestly treats how certain questions, such as the issue of multiple authors of Isaiah or the presence of New Testament content, impact the Book of Mormon. Wright ended his essay with a plea: “But reasoned critical study must be allowed to guide us in our search for historical understanding and matters related thereto.” In a response to Wright's essay, William J. Hamblin critiques Wright's methodology, finding his Traditionalist and Critical dichotomy to be a false one. Instead, Hamblin prefers to speak of secularist and supernaturalist paradigms. He criticized Wright for essentially trying to “have his cake and eat it too” in his creation of a “post-critical apologetic” position, stating: “Unlike most who walk this path, however, Wright is unwilling to take the final step and admit that if his secularist assumptions are correct, the gospel must be simply untrue.” Wright responded to Hamblin by noting that examples of Hamblin's supernaturalist scholarship were more secular than Hamblin may have thought. Wright's final words seem almost prescient, looking back twenty-five years later: “I am worried that alienating critical scholars who would constructively imagine new avenues of faith will leave the Church unprepared to deal effectively with critical conclusions like those described in my paper as they urge themselves more and more on the community.”

35. Wright, “Historical Criticism,” 35.
Two recent treatments of this question demonstrate how belief in both the Book of Mormon and higher criticism have been resolved. First, in a 2000 *Dialogue* article, Latter-day Saint scholar Kevin L. Barney notes how he reconciles belief in the Book of Mormon with the Documentary Hypothesis:

In the case of the Book of Mormon, I see no necessary conflict between that book's essential historicity and the Documentary Hypothesis. The dating of the sources raises a potential conflict, if one accepts a late date for P [Priestly source] or the growing trend, described by Dozeman, of a late date for J [Yahwist source]. But in the model of the theory I accept, the sources are all pre-Exilic, and, as I have indicated, I tend somewhat towards a certain agnosticism on the dating of the sources anyway.

Second, mention must be made of David Bokovoy’s work in his monograph *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy*. Bokovoy recognizes that while “Historical Criticism (and by extension, Higher Source Criticism) presents some difficulties for the Book of Mormon’s claims,” he also believes that “a careful reading of the text and a consideration of the work as revelatory literature can resolve some of these issues.” Bokovoy helpfully observes that it is not the Documentary Hypothesis itself that is the issue; rather, “it really is the dating of the Pentateuchal sources that presents the only major challenge for the Book of Mormon’s claims for ancient authenticity, not the hypothesis itself.” Bokovoy concludes with the observation that possible inconsistencies,

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38. See also David Rolph Seely, “We Believe the Bible to Be the Word of God As Far As It Is Translated Correctly”: Latter-day Saints and Historical Biblical Criticism,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 8 (2016): 64–88.
such as those raised by higher criticism, can be eased when Joseph Smith’s role is taken into account: “Joseph was doing the very thing that the ancient authors of the Hebrew Bible did by taking a previous source and making it relevant for a contemporary audience. Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and Joseph Smith were all continuing the tradition of using archaic sources to create new scripture.”

The Old Testament and Book of Mormon Isaiah

Without a doubt, the most serious arena of contention regarding how the Old Testament is included in the Book of Mormon involves the Book of Mormon’s incorporation of texts that its authors logically wouldn’t have had access to. Texts such as Second and Third Isaiah as well as Malachi are generally believed to have been composed after 600 BC, meaning that their appearance in the Book of Mormon could be viewed as anachronistic. The first serious attempt by a Latter-day Saint scholar to engage the “Isaiah Question” is found in the work of Sidney Sperry. Beginning with his 1926 MA thesis written at the University of Chicago and further developed in subsequent publications, Sperry tackled the two thorniest questions surrounding inclusion of the Isaiah passages. First, how could Second and Third Isaiah be present in a text that claimed to have cut off all ties with Jerusalem around 600 BC? Second, how should the Book of Mormon’s “translation” of Isaiah that so closely resembled the King James Version be approached? Sperry’s answer to the first was to challenge those who would “dismember” Isaiah and instead asserted a sole author for Isaiah’s sixty-six chapters. To the second question, Sperry conceded the near impossibility of Joseph

42. Bokovoy, Authoring, 213.
43. Some preliminary work had been done by B. H. Roberts; see New Witnesses for God, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 3:449–460.
Smith translating the Isaiah chapters into the exact same language as the KJV, and instead argues that Joseph Smith simply opened up to the appropriate KJV chapters of Isaiah and copied directly from the text. Sperry does, however, isolate several instances where the Isaiah text within the Book of Mormon differs from the KJV Isaiah passages, and, in those instances, Sperry asserts that Joseph translated those verses from the gold plates. Sperry devoted much of his career to the Isaiah problem, including supervising his own students' MA theses, such as H. Grant Vest's MA thesis written at Brigham Young University in 1938.45

Sperry's work on Isaiah was viewed as thorough enough that his conclusions went largely unchallenged for decades.46 Even the prolific scholar Hugh Nibley largely followed Sperry in his own writings.47 However, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw two new positions become firmly established. The first position was carved out when John Tvedtnes48 carefully gathered information from roughly two hundred places in the Book of Mormon where text from Isaiah appears, and then honed in on where the Book of Mormon differs from the KJV. By comparing the variants in the Book of Mormon to other, more ancient texts of Isaiah, such as the Masoretic and LXX (Septuagint)

45. H. Grant Vest, "The Problem of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon" (Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1938). Vest's work is more than just an extension of Sperry's work, and deserves to be read in its own right.


47. See Hugh Nibley, Since Cumorah, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 126–34. Nibley even makes the comment that he has largely avoided the Isaiah Question "since this has been in capable hands in the past" (Nibley, Since Cumorah, 121). However, what Nibley does say about the Isaiah Question is certainly worth reading.

Texts, Tvedtnes concluded that the changes Joseph Smith made to Isaiah were actually supported by the earlier versions of Isaiah. In other words, the Isaiah variants in the Book of Mormon actually represent an earlier, more accurate version of Isaiah that the KJV Isaiah lacks. The other side of the argument has been most forcefully argued by David Wright, who sees the Book of Mormon Isaiah not as representative of an earlier text, but as a thorough redaction of the KJV Isaiah. Wright interprets the variants as a result of Joseph changing or "re-working" the italicized wording of the Isaiah passages and sees any potential connections between the Book of Mormon Isaiah and ancient texts as "insubstantial." 49

One variant in particular, 2 Nephi 12:16 (Isaiah 2:16), has garnered a large amount of attention due to a possible link between the LXX and 2 Nephi 12:16. The phrase "upon all the ships of the sea," is absent from the KJV Isaiah but is present in both the LXX and 2 Nephi 12:16. This is especially prevalent in Dana M. Pike and David Rolph Seely's "Upon all the Ships of the Sea, and Upon All the Ships of Tarshish": Revisiting 2 Nephi 12:16; and Isaiah 2:16," Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 14/2 (2005): 12–25; as well as in Ronald V. Huggins's "Without a Cause' and 'Ships of Tarshish': A Possible Contemporary Source for Two Unexplained Readings from Joseph Smith," Dialogue 36/1 (2003): 157–79. 50


50. Sperry was the first to notice this intriguing variant. See Sidney B. Sperry, Our Book of Mormon, 172–73. See also David P. Wright. "Does 'and upon all the ships of the sea' (2 Ne. 12:16 // Isa. 2:16) Reflect an Ancient Isaian Variant?," Mormon Scripture Studies (2001), http://www.mormonscripturestudies.com.

In recent years, some scholarly attention has turned toward the question of how the Book of Mormon is using Isaiah, rather than looking for reasons why it is there. Grant Hardy has argued that the inclusion of the Isaiah chapters, particularly those in 2 Nephi, cannot be simply understood through an appeal to a “proto-text” or to Joseph simply copying straight from the KJV, stating that “it is clear that [the Book of Mormon] offers something of a midrash on Isaiah.” Unlike most scholars who write on Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, Hardy is not satisfied with simply pointing out the similarities between the two texts. Rather, his focus is on how Nephi uses Isaiah and what that usage can tell readers about Nephi’s self-understanding. By the time readers reach 2 Nephi 25, Nephi’s writing “represents a deliberate, creative synthesis of his own revelations, the writings of Isaiah, and the prophecy of Joseph.”

In 2011, the Mormon Theology Seminar published a series of papers entitled *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: 2 Nephi 26–27*, ed. Joseph

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52. Hardy, *Understanding*, 69.

M. Spencer and Jenny Webb (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011), which also focuses on the question of how Nephi uses Isaiah. One of the founders of the Mormon Theology Seminar, Joseph Spencer, has been particularly devoted to the role of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. Spencer views the Abrahamic Covenant as a prominent, if not the prominent, theme in the Book of Mormon, and he argues that the Book of Mormon authors use Isaiah’s writings as a theological framework to advance their larger project. Those wishing to engage Spencer’s work on Isaiah should see his An Other Testament: On Typology (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016); and The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford, 2016). The highly fruitful works of both Hardy and Spencer suggest that Book of Mormon studies will thrive by continuing to move on from the Isaiah Question and source-critical approaches in order to focus more on theology and intertextuality.

As opposed to the mammoth amount of literature devoted to the “Isaiah Question,” questions surrounding Malachi in the Book of Mormon have received much less attention. Wesley P. Walters noted in his MA thesis that Jesus gives Malachi 3 and 4 to his Nephite audience because they were scriptures “which ye had not with you,” but that Malachi 4:1 had appeared as early as 1 Nephi 22:15: “Thus the Book of Mormon itself recognizes that the Jewish people in ancient America could not have had Malachi’s words, yet the Book of Mormon managed to refer to those words in America one hundred years before Malachi had written them.”

More recently, Colby J. Townsend employed a nice blend of source criticism and intertextual work on Malachi to demonstrate the explicit dependence of the Book of Mormon upon the KJV Bible.55


Sidney B. Sperry performed the first serious study of the topic in his work *The Problems of the Book of Mormon*. Sperry readily conceded that the New Testament was present in the Book of Mormon, in particular, 1 Corinthians 12 and Moroni 10, 1 Corinthians 13 and Moroni 7, as well as Matthew 5–3 and 3 Nephi 12–14. Sperry provided three possible answers, all of which influenced how this problem was handled for the next few decades. First, Sperry suggested that the similarities could be due to Jesus relaying the same teachings to both the Jews, Christians, and the Nephites. Second, he suggested that Moroni and Paul could both be tapping into an existing cultural tradition about spiritual gifts or charity. In other words, the similarities between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon are due to a “common body of teaching” that both texts relied upon. Christianity “was in the world from the beginning,” and so it was totally logical that both texts would overlap in narrative and language.  

Finally, Sperry offered a solution similar to that of the “Isaiah Question”: When Joseph Smith “came to a passage which contained statements which reminded him of similar ones in the New Testament, he was doubtless influenced by their wording and used them whenever it was possible to do so.” Additionally, small differences that existed between similar texts, such as 1 Corinthians 13 and Moroni 7, would be attributed to Joseph inserting the Nephite reading.

As it was with Isaiah, Sperry’s work on the New Testament in the Book of Mormon influenced those who followed. When Daniel L. Ludlow published his *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* in 1976, he followed Sperry’s lead. In commenting on 3 Nephi 12–14, Ludlow stated: “When the resurrected Jesus Christ appeared to the Nephites, he gave them the same sermon. . . . However, the account of this sermon in the Book of Mormon is much more complete and makes


In his discussion of Moroni 7 and 1 Corinthians 13, Ludlow wrote that “the statement on faith, hope, and charity may not have been original with either Mormon or Paul; it may have been contained in an ancient record available to both of them, or it may have been included in the teachings of the Savior that are not recorded either in the New Testament or in the Book of Mormon.” Ludlow also suggested, as did Sperry, that “the Holy Ghost may have revealed this idea in essentially the same way to both Mormon and Paul.” Speaking on the same topic, Bruce R. McConkie wrote: “Both Paul and Mormon expounded with great inspiration about faith, hope, and charity, in many verses using the same words and phrases. If there is any difference between them it is that Mormon expounds the doctrines more perfectly and persuasively than did Paul. It does not take much insight to know that Mormon and Paul both had before them the writings of some Old Testament prophets on the same subject.”

A shift in how the New Testament problem was viewed occurred with the publication of two landmark papers by noted biblical scholars Krister Stendahl and James Charlesworth. Prior to Stendahl’s and Charlesworth’s essays (the latter of which I’ll discuss in the next section), much of the discussion concerning the New Testament in the Book of Mormon revolved around the question of historic authenticity—if the Book of Mormon really did cite phrases and lengthy passages from the New Testament, what did that say about its claims? For this reason, authors who supported a divine provenance for the Book of Mormon

58. Ludlow, Companion, 263.
59. Ludlow, Companion, 336.
60. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Doctrinal Restoration,” in The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 18. In a multi-volume commentary on the Book of Mormon penned by Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, the authors note of Moroni 7:45 that “Mormon’s language here is unmistakably similar to Paul’s language in his epistle to the Corinthians. Certainly both could have received independent revelations from the Lord on the same manner” (Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon. Vol. 4: Third Nephi through Moroni [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992], 4:343).
looked for alternate reasons why the texts might be similar, such as an earlier source or prophetic inspiration, while those who challenged the book’s provenance found the New Testament to be proof positive that Joseph Smith constructed the text. The brilliance of both articles is that they avoided this question of historic plagiarizing and instead focused on how the Book of Mormon uses the Bible.

Krister Stendahl’s article easily stands as one of the most nuanced readings of the Book of Mormon ever undertaken by a non-Latter-day Saint scholar. Stendahl takes as his texts of comparison Matthew 5–7 and 3 Nephi 12–14. He makes some preliminary observations, such as 3 Nephi’s emphasis upon the non-Matthean belief, its tendency toward expansion (“filled” vs. “filled with the Holy Spirit”), and its preoccupation with correctly understanding the relationship between Jesus and the Law of Moses. Stendahl then moves on to his major point of emphasis, an astute observation that while 3 Nephi 12–14 may look on the surface like a plain reproduction of Matthew 5–7, subtle additions and nuances reveal that the speaker of the Nephite sermon is not the Matthean Jesus, as one would expect, but the Johannine Jesus. Stendahl observes: “The real analogy between the Johannine Jesus and the Jesus of 3 Nephi is found in the style of discourse.” Stendahl notes, among other traits, a self-referential style of discourse, an emphasis upon the centrality of faith, and the use of rhetorical elements such as “verily, verily” and “behold, behold.” Significantly, Stendahl also observes that 3 Nephi 12–14 eliminates specific references to first-century Jewish issues, such as the references to Pharisees and scribes. Stendahl’s reading of 3 Nephi 12–14 is a reminder that, while the Book of Mormon may adopt King James biblical language and style, and in some places might even seem to reproduce lengthy quotations, readers must be mindful of how the language of the Bible is being used and reproduced throughout the Book of Mormon.

As for the work of others following Stendahl, John W. Welch penned a significant book comparing Matthew 5–7 and 3 Nephi 12–14. Welch openly acknowledges the similarities between the two texts (“pervasively similar”) and offers a variety of solutions to the problem, including Joseph
Smith's familiarity with the King James Bible and a remedy for the inadequate manner in which "translation" has typically been understood. Stan Larson took a more text-critical approach, isolating several variants from Matthew 5–7 and comparing them to the Book of Mormon. The result, Larson argues, is that "the Book of Mormon text of the sermon is not a genuine translation from an ancient language but Smith's nineteenth-century targumic expansion of the English KJV." Writing about the connections between 1 Corinthians 13 and Moroni 7, Brant Gardner states: "Undoubtedly 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 is the model upon which Moroni 7:45 is written. Obviously, the same reason for similarity of language exists here as on other occasions where New Testament passages appear in the context of the Book of Mormon text. Joseph's familiarity with King James Language has supplied the vocabulary for this concept."

The Presence of New Testament Language in the Book of Mormon

As far back as the work of B. H. Roberts, it has been noted that the language of the New Testament is present in the text of the Book of Mormon at a phrasal level. Roberts observed several narrative similarities between the two texts, such as the destruction that accompanied the death of Jesus, the fate of John and the three Nephites, and the departures of Moses and Alma. He also noted textual similarities, such as that between Matthew 17:20 and Ether 12:30. Instead of trying to explain these similarities away, Roberts suggested that "the New Testament might well be thought to supply the suggestions and the Book of Mormon a kind of elaboration, or enlargement, of the incidents."

Latter-day Saint scholars were slow to respond to Roberts's groundbreaking work, although this was not the case for those outside the Latter-day Saint academic community. Several scholars brought the presence of the New Testament in the Book of Mormon to the forefront, including Thomas O’Dea and Fawn M. Brodie. In 1968, Jerald and Sandra Tanner compiled a list of several hundred parallel phrases shared by the Bible and the Book of Mormon, parallels that in their minds supported the assertion that Joseph Smith copied the Book of Mormon from the KJV Bible. While somewhat useful, the Tanners’ list suffers from the lack of a sound methodology and the inclusion of any two- or three-word phrase, no matter how common. While it focuses primarily on the Old Testament, Wesley P. Walters’s MA thesis (1981) observes that in addition to New Testament phrases located in the Book of Mormon, “New Testament concepts, interpretations and theology are all worked into the text itself. Moreover, the New Testament’s interpretation of Old Testament events and teachings are expanded upon, and in some instances mistakenly expanded.” This led Walters to conclude that “the Book of Mormon, through this process of expansion of New Testament material along with its misinterpretation of that material, clearly demonstrates that it is not an authentically ancient work.”

An important contribution in this area is the work of Hugh Nibley. While Nibley largely followed Sperry in searching for an early source common to both the Book of Mormon and the New Testament, unlike Sperry, Nibley was able to put forth more definitive possibilities, relying primarily upon recent archaeological discoveries. Nibley recognized full well that “The New Testament flavor of so much of the Book of Mormon has been until now the strongest single argument against its authenticity.” The solution, for Nibley, was obvious. The monumental textual finds at Qumran and Nag Hammadi provided tantalizing clues to the provenance of the Book of Mormon, and Nibley found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi literature clear and obvious parallels to the Book of Mormon. The seemingly anachronistic presence of the title “Christ” in 2 Nephi could be explained by a passage in the Gospel of Philip, while Alma's reference to faith in terms of a seed could be found in the Apocryphon of James. Speaking of the Pauline “faith, hope, and charity,” Nibley wrote that this is a formula “on which the new Coptic texts cast some light, and which was known to be not a Pauline invention but a well-known expression in very ancient times; most recently the Dead Sea Scrolls have amply shown that many supposedly unique Pauline expressions were actually borrowed by Paul from much older sources.” The clear association between Ether 12:6 (“The Book of Mormon passage most often attacked as evidence of fraud”) and Hebrews 11:1 could be explained because “the Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament speak a common language.”


71. Hugh Nibley, “Since Cumorah: New Voices from the Dust,” *Improvement Era* 69/3 (1966), 197. When Nibley published the 1st edition of *Since Cumorah* in book form in 1967 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), he toned down the language to suggest a more generic ancient source for Paul's writings, rather than the Dead Sea Scrolls, suggesting that he may have realized he had overreached with his claims. See also Nibley, “The Literary Style of the Book of Mormon” (*Church News* 29 [1961]: 10, 15), where he calls the parallels between 1 Corinthians 13 and Moroni 7 a “striking vindication” of the Book of Mormon's inspiration, due to the reliance of Paul upon “some older but unknown source” (Nibley, “Literary Style,” 15).

ever, all this is not to say that Nibley didn’t fall back on Sperry’s position from time to time. On one occasion he wrote that “what is thought to be a very serious charge against the Book of Mormon today is that it, a book written down long before New Testament times and on the other side of the world, actually quotes the New Testament! True, it is the same Savior speaking in both, and the same Holy Ghost, and so we can expect the same doctrines in the same language.” While many would look at Nibley’s reasoning and find it the outdated product of mid-twentieth-century comparative studies, Nibley stands apart among his peers for not simply claiming an urtext for the Book of Mormon, but actually trying to locate it, even if more modern scholarship has proven some of his views to be mistaken.

As mentioned earlier, important contributions to this topic were coming from biblical scholars such as Krister Stendahl and James Charlesworth. The appearance of explicit Christian messianism in the chapters prior to 3 Nephi was of key interest to Charlesworth. He observes that Jewish pseudepigraphic texts such as 4 Ezra and 3 Enoch and Christian compositions such as 1 Enoch and the Odes of Solomon do use terms such as “the Messiah,” “the Anointed One,” and “the Christ.” However, Charlesworth notes that “we need to be cautious and recognize that most of the pseudepigrapha do not contain these technical terms.” Charlesworth then turns his attention to the Book of Mormon. He correctly notes that 1 Nephi 10 marks an entry point for messianism in the Book of Mormon, and then identifies several sections that he believes demonstrate a “later Christian influence,” such as 2 Nephi 25:16–19; 26:3 and Mosiah 3:8–10. Charlesworth suggests that this explicit messianism, one pre-dating the birth of Jesus Christ, could be the product of editors such as Mormon or Joseph Smith and proposes that this explicit messianism be studied more closely by redac-

tion critics. Charlesworth further notes two particular areas where the Book of Mormon and the pseudepigraphic literature overlap, specifically the idea that Jesus will visit the lost tribes of Israel and the idea that the coming of the Messiah could be perceived as a return of the Messiah. Charlesworth suggests that many of the similarities between the pseudepigraphic literature and the Book of Mormon are the result of common origins, particularly the Bible.

Beginning in the early 1990s, Latter-day Saint scholars began to turn more of their attention to the language of the New Testament in the Book of Mormon, largely in response to those who were trying to use the presence of New Testament language in the Book of Mormon as proof of fraudulence. In a response to the Tanner's *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, Matthew Roper argues that much of the New Testament language likely had a Semitic background that could explain its presence in the Book of Mormon: “I would like to see an in-depth study of the Semitic background behind the New Testament passages which most resemble those in the Book of Mormon. I believe that such a study would show how frequently the New Testament draws on older material.” 76 In a review of the same work, John A. Tvedtnes proposes a slightly different solution: “My response to this criticism is that Joseph Smith deliberately used the King James Version wording because it corresponded to the Bible known to his contemporaries. . . . The use of precise New Testament phraseology is not negative, however, as long as the idea fits the passage.” 77 In another essay dealing with specific similarities between Jacob 7 and Romans 11, Tvedtnes argues that, while “the grafting of the branches appears to be related to Paul's comments in Romans 11:17–24,” in his opinion, “Paul was more likely

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inspired by the writings of Zenos. Tvedtnes surveys a number of biblical and non-biblical sources in presenting his argument that Jacob 7 represents an engagement with earlier texts and traditions already in existence prior to Paul's letter.

The last decade or so has seen a shift by Latter-day Saint scholars toward the position that the New Testament plays a significant role in the composition of the Book of Mormon. In his analysis of Ether 12, Grant Hardy does not hesitate to tackle what he terms "a couple of glaringly problematic chapters from the New Testament's Epistle to the Hebrews." The problem, Hardy notes, is that Moroni writes Ether 12 as if he "is as fully familiar with the text of Hebrews as he is with Nephi's or Mormon's writings." In contrast to many who have written on this topic, Hardy claims that the presence of New Testament phrases "are not simply the haphazard result of a biblically literate translator putting ideas into an idiom respected by his readers," but rather "a creative adaption." Hardy concludes with the statement that "Ether 12's clear and thorough dependence on Hebrews 6 and 11 . . . has simultaneously supplied some of the most compelling evidence that the book has its origins in the nineteenth century." Hardy's meticulous attention to detail, his uncanny awareness of nuance, and his willingness to carefully read the text as it is written make his monograph an absolute must-read and a model for how an analysis of the use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon can be responsibly done.


79. Books critical of the Book of Mormon continue to be published as well, although many of them largely recycle the arguments found in previous works. See, for example, Earl M. Wunderli, An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), esp. 73–77.

80. Hardy, Understanding, 255.

81. Hardy, Understanding, 256–57.

82. Hardy, Understanding, 260.
Brant A. Gardner has written a six-volume commentary on the Book of Mormon. In his discussion of 1 Nephi 10:8–9, which bears close similarities to Isaiah 40:3–4 and Mark 1:2–7, Gardner writes:

> The relationship of text to translation is not a literal word-for-word translation of each word on the plates but a casting of the meaning of those words into phrasing that Joseph knew and understood. A number of these referents are from the New Testament, and it appears that Joseph was more conversant with the New Testament than the Old. In this case, Mark became the model for the English text, although Isaiah had to have been the model for Nephi's text, since he would not have had access to Mark's. 83

In a recent monograph on the translation of the Book of Mormon, Gardner re-affirms this same position on why the New Testament is present in the Book of Mormon, writing that

> I see the process of translating these passages as consisting of two parts. The first is that there was a meaning on the plates that could be appropriately rendered into English. Then, Joseph's familiarity with the New Testament passages primed his memory with the familiar phrases. Those phrases were available and appropriate to the meaning Joseph understood and therefore became the way the plate text meaning was expressed in the English translation. 84

My own work has sought to further explore the complexities involved with the Book of Mormon's use of the New Testament. In a 2016 monograph, I analyzed all the places where the Johannine Prologue appears in the Book of Mormon and divided those usages into various categories based upon how the Johannine phrase was integrated into the text. 85

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85. Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016). For a similar attempt at a close intertextual study, but on a much smaller scale, see Nicholas J. Frederick, "If
While I see the overall project as the author of the Book of Mormon seeking religious authority and legitimacy through allusion to a well-respected religious text, I am struck by how thoroughly and organically the New Testament phrases are woven into the Book of Mormon. I sought to understand this “weaving” a little better in a 2018 *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* article, where I argue that the Book of Mormon is a complex redaction of the KJV New Testament. In the process, I identify several different types of “weavings” performed by the author, from simple phrasal insertions to entire sentences constructed out of multiple New Testament documents. I also included an appendix of approximately seven hundred places where the Book of Mormon has incorporated the New Testament. In an attempt to demonstrate how fruitful it could be to read the Book of Mormon intertextually with the New Testament, Joseph M. Spencer and I co-authored an article looking at how John 11 is adapted in Alma 19 in a way that provokes theological and eschatological questions and answers.

_A Methodology for Responsibly Identifying Texts within the Book of Mormon_

Serious study of the New Testament language in the Book of Mormon has largely been hamstrung by the lack of a sound methodology for

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identifying responsibly how one determines that a phrase is, in fact, from the New Testament and not the Old Testament or just the product of a text written in King James language. The first real step in this direction was taken by Noel B. Reynolds in his essay “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis.” Reynolds argues that textual similarities between the Bible and the Book of Mormon can be best understood by the hypothesis that “the Book of Mormon writers had access in the brass plates to a document substantially the same as the book of Moses given to Joseph Smith by inspiration in 1830.”88 In order to better grasp the intertextual relationship between the brass plates, the Book of Moses, and the Book of Mormon, Reynolds laid out a methodology for determining dependence. His seven criteria included repetition of phrases, similarity of context, and distinctive terminology. While Reynolds’s thesis that the Nephites had access to a document similar to the Book of Moses in the form of the brass plates may seem untenable by today’s standards, Reynolds deserves a great deal of credit for recognizing that this type of close, intertextual study requires a firm and thorough methodology.

A second major step forward was taken with the 1993 publication of David P. Wright’s article “‘In Plain Terms That We May Understand’: Joseph Smith’s Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12–13.” Wright states up front that he intends to demonstrate that “the dependence of Alma 12–13 on Hebrews constitutes an anachronism and indicates that the chapters are a composition of Joseph Smith.”89 Had he stopped here, Wright’s work would not have differed much from the work of his predecessors, such as Wesley Walters. What makes Wright’s work so valuable is that he was also interested in the question of “how Joseph

Smith used Hebrews in his composition of Alma 12–13: What parts of that epistle did he pick up? How did he represent and transform these elements in the Book of Mormon chapters? What new ideas grew out of his use of the biblical text? Looking at the Melchizedek material, Wright finds that “Smith does not simply cite the passage from Hebrews but gives it a new context and meaning.” Wright also provides a detailed critique of the traditional idea that similar content in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon is due to a “proto” text, an approach that Wright claims has “several difficulties.” The best part of Wright’s article is the conclusion, in which he lays out four different traits determining how Joseph Smith uses the language of Hebrews: textual conservation, solving problems, midrashic transformation or expansion, and recontextualization. Wright included his desire that “such classification provides a basis for further study,” but his work has unfortunately not received the reception it deserves.

Benjamin L. McGuire is another key participant in the methodology conversation. In an essay arguing for literary allusions to the story of David slaying Goliath in Nephi’s slaying of Laban, McGuire sets out his own methodology based upon the groundbreaking work of Richard Hays and Ziva Ben-Porat. McGuire seeks to find what he terms the “literary allusion” through which the Book of Mormon can be interpreted. He proposes a series of “signals” and “markers” as well as a way of evaluating how those literary cues can be interpreted. McGuire is on point when he says that “any study that deals with intertextuality

90. Wright, “In Plain Terms,” 166.
93. One scholar whose work could be viewed as following Wright’s model is Mark D. Thomas. See Thomas, Digging in Cumorah, esp. 16–24. See also Thomas, “Mosaic for a Religious Counterculture,” 47–68.
and authorial intent will always remain hypothetical.” These words are especially germane to the Book of Mormon, a text for which the original is not available. McGuire followed up his *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* essay with a lengthy (and quite valuable) two-part essay in the *Interpreter*. Although the immediate occasion of the article is a critique of Rick Grunder’s *Mormon Parallels: A Bibliographic Source*, McGuire uses the opportunity to warn against those who engage in comparative studies irresponsibly, as such studies inevitably lead to flawed results. McGuire’s two-part piece should be required reading for anyone attempting to venture into the waters of scriptural intertextuality.

In a 2015 essay in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, I also ventured to lay out a methodology for serious intertextual work, although mine was limited to the New Testament, which I see as presenting a different set of problems than the Old Testament. Due to how thoroughly the Book of Mormon integrates the New Testament, I suggested abandoning the typical hierarchy of Quotation, Allusion, and Echo—terms that typically rely on strings of consecutive words—in favor of either “Allusion” or “Interaction.” This change allows readers to bypass the distracting question of how Lehi can be “quoting” John in 2 Nephi 2 or how Nephi can be “quoting” Paul in 2 Nephi 4. However, as long as the terms are clearly defined, the terminology itself is less important. Additionally, I also laid out a series of criteria for establishing a threshold for what phrases should be considered actual interactions, while at the same time weeding out those that likely are not. Again, due to the complexity of the topic, I suggested employing terms such as “Precise.”

“Probable,” and “Possible.” In my opinion, only the first two categories are of any value, and those that fall under the umbrella of “Possible” should not be seriously considered as data points.

Conclusion

Interest in the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon shows no signs of going away. The scholarship being produced on the topic continues to be more informative and refined. However, there is, in my opinion, much more that needs to be done. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, so much space has been devoted to the Isaiah Question, yet what of texts such as Joshua, Ezekiel, or Job? Are those texts (or others) present? If so, how are they incorporated into the text? Are there theological or eschatological applications, or is their presence largely rhetorical? David Rolph Seely has begun to explore other Old Testament books, but there remains plenty to be done. Furthermore, the work of Grant Hardy and Joseph Spencer has demonstrated that studying how an Old Testament text is used in Book of Mormon, rather than just where, can be a remarkably fruitful endeavor. Likely, further success in this second point will depend upon how thoroughly scholars engage the first.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the majority of the work in recovering New Testament phrases has, I think, been largely accomplished. The task now is to determine what to do with this information. Again, studies of how individual authors are represented would be a productive starting point. We need to determine if, say, the majority of Book of Mormon phrases that were drawn from the Gospel of Mark came from narratives, while those drawn from the Gospel of Matthew came from Jesus’s speeches, would that matter? How is Paul’s theology represented in the Book of Mormon, and how does that representation work in relation to places where Paul’s epistles are actually cited? Is there any correlation at all, or does the Book of Mormon provide its own language when engaging Pauline thought? And what of the Book of Revelation, whose language courses throughout the Book of Mormon?
Does its language simply exist to provide eschatological punch to the Book of Mormon message or does it serve to position the text as a revelation itself? Once Book of Mormon scholars reach a point where there exists a consensus on what Book of Mormon passages are drawn from the New Testament, then this type of work can begin in earnest. On this point, then, I see study of the New Testament in the Book of Mormon to have advanced beyond that of the Old Testament, which, to my knowledge, still lacks a catalogue of which Book of Mormon passages can be identified as having an Old Testament provenance. Obviously, there is a different set of problems when it comes to Old Testament content in the Book of Mormon, but those problems are by no means insurmountable, and the initial methodological work has already been completed. It's just a matter of taking the next steps.

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With fears of faith crisis and disaffection rising like seawater, Latter-day Saint apologetic discourse has gone forth, like Noah’s dove, in search of living branches in which the sap runs. Defenders of the faith, including those addressed here, have returned with new academic
Consider first Lehi's dream. Among other striking features, it is curiously free of explanation. Without narrative or psychological preamble, an unnamed guide bids Lehi follow without inquiry into his desired destination. After wandering for hours in darkness, Lehi prays not for direction or knowledge, but for mercy. And when he beholds the tree, its qualities seem to be immediately plain to him: the “fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Lehi goes to the tree and eats the fruit instinctively, without instruction or interpretation. The experience is visceral, grounded in an existential force that acts on both Lehi and the reader from outside the mental operations of explanation or comprehension. It is the taste of the fruit, not its analysis, that beckons from the page.

Consider, now, Nephi's vision. Unlike Lehi, Nephi actively seeks to know a particular set of things: he wants to “know the things that my father had seen” (1 Nephi 11:1). The kind of knowledge Nephi seeks becomes clear as his vision unfolds in dialogue with the Spirit of the Lord. “What desirest thou?,” the Spirit asks. Nephi responds, “I desire to behold the things which my father saw” (1 Nephi 11:2–3). It emerges that Nephi already believes that his father has seen the tree—he does not doubt Lehi's veracity—but desires some further epistemological grasp of the image of the tree that Lehi has described. Nephi, in fact, desires something very specific with regard to the tree: a statement of its meaning. The Spirit of the Lord asks again, “What desirest thou?” Nephi responds, “To know the interpretation thereof” (1 Nephi 11:11).

This moment should, I think, elicit a mental gasp of astonishment and perhaps dismay from the reader. Within the logic of Lehi’s dream, desire is directed again and again to the fruit of the tree: the fruit is thrice
described as “desirable;” and, upon eating it, Lehi is twice described as “desirous” that his family eat it also (see 1 Nephi 11:10, 12, 15, 17). Yet Nephi, repeatedly asked by the angel what he desires—as if, perhaps, answering incorrectly the first time—responds not with desire to eat of the fruit, but with desire to know of the fruit. Indeed, Nephi himself never partakes of the fruit within the events of his own dream. He receives instead knowledge of the tree’s meaning in the linguistic form of a statement: “Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” (1 Nephi 11:21). Is it coincidence that Nephi’s desire to “know the interpretation” of the tree is followed by the abrupt departure of the Spirit of the Lord, whose presence is now, it seems, summoned to appear in the pageant of Christ’s life that immediately follows? Has Nephi forfeited the presence of the Lord in favor of an interpretive representation of the Lord?

The latter suggestion is speculative, of course, but it seems to me significant that Nephi’s and Lehi’s juxtaposed responses to the tree dramatize two distinct modes of spiritual understanding, figured in Nephi’s knowing and Lehi’s tasting. Nephi wants, above all, to know the fruit’s meaning. He believes Lehi’s words, but that’s insufficient: Nephi wants to know the true interpretation of the tree. The true meaning of the prophetic word will become an important theme in Nephi’s sweeping vision of the Restoration, a major purpose of which is to convince the Gentiles and Jews that “the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (1 Nephi 13:39). Nephi’s approach to the fruit is fundamentally semantic, centered around meaning, communication, and truth. Lehi’s relationship to the fruit, by contrast, is visceral and non-semantic, concerned not so much with meaning as with experience. Lehi seems to understand much about the tree’s sacred nature, but its meaning is never explained to him. Rather, the fruit stimulates the intimate sense of taste and fills Lehi with happiness and desire. The tree seems simply to act on him with its own particular happy power. The fruit is neither true nor false in a semantic sense; it’s felicitous. It works. It does things.

Some readers may here recognize my gesture toward J. L. Austin’s critical work on performative utterance, collected in a book titled How
to Do Things with Words (Oxford University Press, 1975), from which I've drawn the title of this essay. As the title indicates, Austin is interested in the power of words to do things other than convey semantic statements of meaning, which he calls its "constative" function. He's interested, rather, in the "illocutionary" function of language, the way language can act directly—rather than representationally—on reality. This ability is sometimes called the "performative" power of language. The classic example of a performative utterance is the sentence "I do take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife" in the course of the wedding ceremony. In this example, language does not describe or represent something true; instead, it creates a new condition that, as a result of the utterance, is now the case. It is not falsifiable in a conventional sense, because its very utterance performs the act it contains. We'd ask not whether the sentence is true or false, but whether it worked or it didn't. Austin calls this criterion the "felicity condition," rather than the "truth condition," of the utterance.1

The purpose of my brief comparative reading of Lehi's and Nephi's different approaches to the fruit of the tree of life is to suggest that the Book of Mormon itself recognizes something like Austin's distinction between the performative and constative modes of language. For Lehi, the fruit exercises a performative or illocutionary power, a power that works outside the operations of explanation, verification, and meaning. It would make little sense to ask Lehi if the fruit is "true": the live question instead is whether the fruit works to make one happy and stimulate desire. Is the fruit felicitous?, we might ask. For Nephi, the fruit's value seems largely to be semantic: the fruit matters for what it means, for what can be explained, verified, and known about it. For Nephi, the question "Is the fruit true?" would probably make quite a bit of sense, and be rendered as something along the lines of "Is the interpretation of the fruit's meaning valid?" This is a question that matters to Nephi.

I’d like, at last, to bring the categories of semantic and performative linguistic modes—now preliminarily grounded in Latter-day Saint scripture and, I hope, justifiably invoked here—to bear on the topic at hand, which is a recent raft of books published for Latter-day Saint readers about or around religious doubt and disillusionment. These books, five of which I’ll discuss in this essay, approach difficult matters in Latter-day Saint history, ecclesiology, and scripture with candor and with compassion for Latter-day Saints who find themselves in spiritual distress. Published by a handful of prominent Latter-day Saint presses and imprints, including Deseret Book, Brigham Young University’s Religious Studies Center and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and FairMormon, these books take diverse approaches to a common pastoral concern to comfort Latter-day Saints in spiritual upheaval, repair their trust in the leaders and teachings of the Church, and address the struggles of doubt. The question of what to do with doubt—Should it be tolerated? resolved? dignified? praised?—appears to be an open question among this cohort of Latter-day Saint authors. Much has been written about the phenomenon of faith crisis in contemporary Latter-day Saint culture and the effectiveness of various responses. It is my aim in this review essay not to ask what to do about doubt, but instead to ask how to do things with doubt. I propose to use the approaches modeled by Nephi and Lehi, refracted through the language of Austin—the performative and semantic modes—as the axis of analysis. Through this lens, how successful are these authors at doing things with doubt?

A note, first, on apologetics. Discussion of religious doubt is often tied to discussions of the legitimacy of apologetics, a polarized and acrimonious topic. The breadth of that polarization, as well as the epistemological morass that can engulf discussion of apologetics, is aptly demonstrated in a 2017 offering from Greg Kofford Books, Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics, edited by Blair G. Van Dyke and Loyd Isao Ericson. This collection of essays brings together a wide range of prominent Latter-day Saint or former Latter-day Saint scholars, many of whom have appeared on opposing sides of recent debates over the
proper role of apologetics in academic study of the Latter-day Saint tradition. The table of contents features defenses of traditional apologetic approaches to Book of Mormon historicity and similar issues by authors like Daniel Peterson and Michael Ash, together with sharp critiques of such approaches by authors like Benjamin Park and David Bokovoy; it features a few essays that deal with particular apologetic issues, such as Fiona Givens on gender and David Knowlton on Lamanites and anthropology; and it features a number of interesting reflections on Latter-day Saint apologetics as a social practice, including Julie Smith on women in apologetics and Joseph Spencer on a radical apologetics that eschews palatability.

Several of the implicit conversations within the volume are brought into the open in Loyd Ericson’s essay “Conceptual Confusion and the Building of Stumbling Blocks of Faith.” Ericson makes a vigorous critique of the traditional apologetic approach that answers rational or inductive challenges to faith claims, such as denial of Book of Mormon historicity, with rebuttals of the same epistemological kind. Such an approach is misguided, he argues, because it treats faith as the kind of thing that can be verified—and, it follows, falsified—with observation or syllogism. This approach hollows out faith, leaving it fragile and prone to epistemological crisis and disruption whenever opposing reasons are newly generated by ongoing empirical inquiry. Instead, he urges the faithful to simply turn aside such empirical challenges and recognize that “religious claims are things of the soul and can only be evaluated and known by the experiences of the soul” (p. 220). Ericson seems to share my suggestion above that a Nephi-like obsession with the true—that is, empirically confirmed—meaning and interpretation of religious claims may inadvertently banish God’s real presence to a pantomime of representations.

While I’m sympathetic to Ericson’s concerns, it seems to me that his essay demonstrates the limitations of Nephi’s epistemological lens on these questions. Ericson argues for a two-tiered epistemological regime, but, within the terms on each side, there is great slippage: religion, soul, transcendence, spirituality, and faith are set against secularism,
non-religion, the facts of history, evidence, scholarship, and similar
terms. Each of the two alliances is highly debatable: one could readily
argue against the affinity of religion and spirituality, for instance, or
the enmity of faith and history. This is because epistemologies do not
coolly describe timeless categories of knowing; rather, they must be
actively built and maintained to produce knowledge. Just as Ericson
accuses apologists of re-inscribing empiricism in responding empiri­
cally to challengers, Ericson may himself re-inscribe epistemology in
responding epistemologically to apologetics. Ericson, it seems to me,
would like to convince the faithful to savor the fruit of faith, like Lehi,
rather than obsess about its meaning, like Nephi, but his critical para­
digm keeps him busy in refereeing epistemological boundaries.

What if we were to set aside the semantic questions addressed by
the *Apologetics* volume—what is meant by faith and reason, and which
interpretation should prevail—and instead look at its performative
qualities. What does the book *do*, rather than say? For one thing, it
places apologetics in a multi-volume series on Latter-day Saint theol­
ogy with five projected volumes, only two of which—*Apologetics* and
*Scriptural Theology*—have been realized. It thus participates in both the
failures and the hopes of Latter-day Saint theology. Furthermore, in
bringing together intellectual adversaries within the covers of a single
volume, the book dramatizes in miniature the capacity of a community
to encompass conflict. And the book’s imperfectly edited text, sprinkled
with typos and grammatical errors, performs the endearing scrappiness
and amateurishness—in the best sense of being motivated by love—of
the querulous intellectual community from which it arises. Those fail­
ures and hopes, that scrappy community, can be *tasted*. This is one way
to approach the performative work of a book, though not every per­
formance-oriented reading need focus on these particular illocutionary
features.

I’ve briefly demonstrated, I hope, something of a performance-ori-
tented reading, and suggested why I’ll decline in this essay to adjudicate
the particular polemical claims and interpretations at play in the books
I consider. Now, then, what do these books do with doubt? To begin a
comparative consideration, we might order the books along a spectrum from the purely topic-based, organized around a list of answers to difficult issues, to the purely framework-based, which set aside particulars in favor of exploring the mental contexts of faith and doubt. Such an ordering roughly describes a movement from semantic to performative approaches, from Nephi to Lehi.

At the topic-based, semantic end of the spectrum are Laura Harris Hales’s edited volume *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine & Church History* (2016) and Michael R. Ash’s book *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt* (2013). Hales’s volume boasts an impressive list of contributors, including Richard Bushman, Steve Harper, and Paul Reeve, tackling difficult topics ranging from scriptural discrepancies like anachronism in the Book of Mormon, to scandalous historical practices like polygamy and the race-based temple and priesthood ban, to present-day cultural conflicts around gender and sexuality. Ash’s book opens with a long discussion of the cognitive biases—particularly cognitive dissonance—that inflect one’s processing of information, which he relates to the entrenched disputes between Latter-day Saint apologists and critics who were formerly Latter-day Saints. The second part is organized topically around a similar stable of difficult issues in scripture and history. Hales’s volume benefits from the professional expertise of her contributors and in general offers more sophisticated treatments, but the two volumes are substantially similar in their approach. Comparable to online resources like the Gospel Topics essays at lds.org and Book of Mormon Central’s KnoWhy series, these books are intended to be used primarily as reference materials for Latter-day Saints who encounter troubling information online and seek interpretations to neutralize a challenge to their faith.

Like all the books considered here, these volumes take a compassionate view of doubters and recommend an open and flexible approach to faith. They offer a summary of current academic research as well as a range of strategies to resolve doubt and reduce its personal turmoil. These strategies include normalizing the experience of doubt; inoculating readers to troubling information available online; offering historical contexts that recast difficult practices in a more palatable or plausible light; and emphasizing the institutional Church’s increasing historical transparency. Their aim, in other words, is to reduce or resolve doubt—to do something about doubt, not to do anything with it. For a Saint who presently enjoys a vibrant spiritual connection to God’s love manifested in the Church, such volumes and the online reference materials they resemble certainly provide useful and enlightening interpretations to enrich understanding. But for a young Latter-day Saint whose experience of God is just emerging, or a Latter-day Saint whose faith crisis has damaged her trust and sense of belonging in the Church, these books, with their emphasis on the semantic over the performative, are unlikely to nourish. In response to problems, they seek, Nephi-like, admirably accurate “interpretation[s] thereof” but offer little by way of Lehi’s fruit to stimulate the desire of the soul.

Two volumes fall roughly between the semantic and performative poles. Terryl and Fiona Givens’s *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (2014) and Patrick Q. Mason’s *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (2015) are erudite, compassionate, and deeply faithful observations from several leading Latter-day Saint thinkers. Both books have stimulated much insightful conversation. Each volume attempts to make something constructive with doubt rather than to interpret it away. For the Givenses, doubt works performatively—and paradoxically—to allow space for elective faith. In the presence of doubt, no single interpretation may compel intellectual assent, and thus “faith that we elect to profess in the absence of certainty is an offering that is entirely free, unconditioned, and utterly authentic” (p. 144). In a twist, then, the performative work of doubt is ultimately deployed to enhance the value of the semantic, the divine “principles and values and ideals”
that constitute their fresh articulation of the Restoration. The Givenses, indeed, sound a Lehi-like note to conclude their volume: citing Joseph Smith’s famous comment that “you say honey is sweet, and so do I,” they conclude: “We believe the doctrine of the Restoration to be true for the same reason: It tastes good” (p. 145). In the end, however, it is the true “interpretation thereof” that matters when one has passed through the crucible.

If Patrick Mason does not go quite so far as the Givenses in elevating doubt to the role of midwife to authentic faith, he does work carefully to demystify and destigmatize the experience of faith crisis. Mason sees doubt as morally neutral on an individual level, neither virtue nor vice in itself, but potentially salutary at the community level, by introducing spiritual diversity into Latter-day Saint pastoral settings. The friction produced by doubters in settings of faith provides occasion for the practice of charity, as Latter-day Saints “learn from the unique gifts of others and then glorify God for the gift of his diverse creation. Part of what it means to have charity is to learn to cherish the unique gifts found in all our sisters and brothers . . . especially those within our faith community who see things differently than we do” (p. 41). While he offers several paradigms for interpreting prophetic authority, Church history, and other matters, Mason places his primary focus not on the *epistemological* contest between faith and doubt but on the *social* negotiation between the faithful and the doubter. “More than anything,” he writes, “this book is intended as an act of friendship” (p. 6). Mason’s choice to prioritize relationality over epistemology exemplifies, I’d argue, something like Lehi’s performative desire over Nephi’s semantic pursuit of meaning. Mason’s irenic yearning stimulates the spiritual desire of the reader, wholly aside from the meaning he proposes for the Restoration.

disaffection and rapprochement with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, McConkie adapts a staged framework similar to James W. Fowler's 1981 *Stages of Faith*. He identifies five stages of faith development for Latter-day Saints, moving from a dogmatic focus on orthodoxy and obedience through a fully "integrated" perspective that discovers truth in every context. Doubt is celebrated, but its difference is neutralized as it becomes indistinguishable from faith: "Faith is at the heart of doubt and doubt the heart of true faith, like the yin in the yang. The Strategist experiences both increasingly as one and the same movement" (p. 112). McConkie's vision resembles and surpasses that of the Givenses in both its lionization of doubt as an essential stage of human enlightenment and in its revelation of the authentic self as the means and the end of faith: "Your life is a great Mystery inviting you into always more subtle discoveries of who you really are. And to become who you inherently are is the deep joy of Mormonism" (p. 20).

There is much to admire in McConkie's book. The lessons of his personal journey, including deep immersion in Eastern religion and mindfulness practices, are evident, as is the depth of his conversion and the sincerity of his desire to help the reader. McConkie is a Lehi: he clearly grasps the power of performative apologetics to act directly on the soul and stimulate spiritual desire. Yet his book illustrates both the appeal of the performative mode and its risks—namely, that performances can fail. And when performative utterance fails, it is not merely a mistake, but a miscarriage. The thing he tries to do with doubt doesn't work. Certainly, different readers' perspectives will vary; McConkie's approach will certainly move and inspire some. But for this reader, despite McConkie's evident goodwill, the limitations of the staged structure of his argument are decisive. While he hedges with many disclaimers that one need not pass through the stages sequentially and that advancement does not confer superiority, the logic of the stage format inevitably sweeps these disclaimers aside. What are stages, if not sequential and progressive? If not sequential and progressive, then why frame them as stages? One ultimately cannot escape the conclusion that advancement through McConkie's stages of intellectual enlightenment
confers a moral or existential advantage over those stuck in the early stages—the majority of Latter-day Saints, in McConkie’s view. Such an approach, I fear, often breeds smugness and self-congratulation inimical to the charity that must thrum at the center of any performative apologetics. The fruit must be love, or the performance is in vain.

A fit comparison to McConkie’s book is Adam Miller’s *Letters to a Young Mormon* (2nd ed. 2018). Like McConkie, Miller offers few particular interpretations of controversial issues. Miller’s approach, like McConkie’s, is personal, non-dogmatic, and sincere. Both books operate at psychological and existential levels, foregrounding life as it is lived and ruminating on life lived faithfully. But whereas McConkie’s book is structured around the individual progress of the self toward enlightenment, Miller’s is framed as a series of letters to his child. This relational device offsets the smugness that lurks in McConkie’s device. For Miller, religious doubt is neither to be praised nor feared, only to be used in the service of life: “In itself, doubt is neither good nor bad. Its value depends on what you do with it. . . . You can use doubt to protect you from the truth or you can use doubt to leave you vulnerable to it. You’ll have doubts regardless. Repurpose them for the sake of faith” (pp. 23–24).

Miller articulates what Lehi enacts in his dream of the tree: faith must be eaten, not just described. Faith does not—or does not merely—report on the facts from the most enlightened perspective; it acts on the ground. Declaring one’s faith “commits you to living in such a way as to make that love true” (p. 24). Faith itself is performative.

While writing this essay, I couldn’t resist the reference to Austin in my title, but I confess that it is misleading. This is merely a review essay, not a manifesto or how-to guide for a new movement in Latter-day Saint apologetics. Nevertheless, a few general remarks about performative apologetics might be hazarded by way of conclusion. A performative apologetics, one that aims to act within the reader rather than simply explain away doubt, must channel Lehi at least as much as Nephi. The reader’s desire must be directed toward the fruit itself, the love of God, not simply toward the correct interpretation thereof. This is no easy
task. It can only be accomplished through the non-coercive workings of charity, thus ruling out dogmatic assertion, emotional manipulation, unfair play, or coercive appeal to authority. (This is not to say that performative apologetics must always be warm and fuzzy—far from it!) A performative treatment of doubt must have some excess, some element that exceeds its semantic meaning, to carry the taste of the fruit into the reader’s mind and heart. This excess may reside in the book’s literary style, its originality or artfulness, its wit, erudition, or personal vulnerability, its enthusiasm for the subject matter, its community-building, or indeed the meticulous care of its research. One might conclude from this essay that a research-based book, trading as it does in interpretation and meaning, will have no performative power. Not so. But over and above its impeccable scholarship, it will exercise some illocutionary power for good. It will succeed on conditions of “happiness” as well as conditions of truth. It will act as much as it will mean. It will taste as much as it will say. It will lead readers to the fruit of the tree and bid them to eat for themselves.

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Different approaches to reading the Book of Mormon have influenced the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ teachings from 1830 to the present day. Scholars have long recognized that the definition of “Lamanites,” one of the primary groups described in the book, has shaped missionary work, Church policy, and public outreach. Indeed, in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith received a revelation sending four missionaries to preach “among the Lamanites,” perhaps the first justification for preaching among Indigenous peoples.¹

Recent teachings have expanded the definition of Lamanite to include Native and Indigenous peoples on both American continents as well as Polynesians.2

Two recent books and a book chapter use the Book of Mormon to analyze Latter-day Saint beliefs about race, particularly among Indigenous peoples and Polynesians. To assess the ways that historians are currently studying race in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I examine how each author uses the Book of Mormon's text, or the interpretation of its text, to consider how Latter-day Saints have thought about race in relation to their sacred scripture.

Matthew Garrett's *Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program* represents the integration of Book of Mormon studies into broader historical fields (in this case, Indigenous studies). In *Making Lamanites*, Garrett examines the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP) as Native participants experienced it. Accordingly, most of his sources are oral histories, correspondence, and documents created by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that highlight how the program grew out of Church leaders' interpretations of the Book of Mormon. Crucially, he centers on the voices and experiences of Native people in his telling of ISPP history.

Garrett defines colonialism in the ISPP context as the ways that white Latter-day Saints sought to impose "physical/material changes . . . upon Indian bodies" and teach ideas about the desirability of integrating into white society (p. 4). Despite the changes that white Latter-day Saints sought to impose on Native Americans, Garrett argues that Indigenous children and their parents had agency in their experiences and created both Latter-day Saint and Indian identities through participation in the program. In doing so, he emphasizes the ways that the ISPP benefited Indians and empowered Native students even while acknowledging that the program led to cultural disconnect in Indigenous communities.

In his first few chapters, Garrett explains how nineteenth-century white Latter-day Saints interpreted Book of Mormon passages dealing

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with Lamanites. "Mormons viewed themselves," Garrett argues, "as res­
cuing Native Americans from depravity and spiritual darkness" in order
to prepare for the Second Coming (p. 34). In doing so, Latter-day Saints
aligned with Protestant or Catholic programs designed to assimilate
Indians into white society by working to "kill the Indian and save the
man," that is, to help Native children learn to succeed in white culture
through education and discipline and by giving up "backwards" prac­
tices and beliefs.

In the twentieth century, apostle and future Church president Spen­
cer W. Kimball championed programs designed to uplift Indigenous
peoples, especially the ISPP, based on his reading of the Book of Mor­
mon. Fascinatingly, Garrett uncovers the ways that Kimball worked to
gain approval for the ISPP before it received official Church sanction,
by building bridges between state Indian programs and the Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, highlighting the many parties involved
in creating a Latter-day Saint foster system. Although Kimball and
his compatriots had a theological impetus for creating the ISPP and
believed they were working as partners with Natives in their own escha­
tological preparations, white Latter-day Saints played "the dominant
role in the relationship as saviors sent to indoctrinate and civilize their
lost Israelite brethren" (p. 35). This reading of Book of Mormon teach­
ings, combined with American racial attitudes toward Native peoples,
led to the expansion of the ISPP.

Garrett shows that the Church's program was not as violent as other
similar assimilation projects. Most white Latter-day Saints tolerated or
encouraged some Native practices that did not overtly conflict with
Latter-day Saint teachings; many white Latter-day Saints wanted to
transform Indigenous peoples into a group that could thrive in white
American society. Native Americans, however, largely participated in
order to take advantage of "an exceptional educational opportunity"
(p. 56). Doing so allowed Native ISPP participants who converted to
the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a way to more broadly
navigate American society and Indian identity, "two worlds that many
Indians eagerly sought to traverse" (p. 126). I admire Garrett's approach
to studying the ISPP by seeking to understand how those who experienced it felt about it, but wish that he had more carefully considered the power dynamics in the program, both among the Church and among the Native peoples involved. Garrett’s analysis acknowledges colonialism but does not grant sustained attention to the damage the ISPP sometimes caused in Indigenous communities, such as creating a disconnect from family lives and cultural backgrounds (pp. 158–60). That criticism aside, his highlighting of Indigenous voices deserves high praise. Historically, scholars have rarely included the ways that non-white Latter-day Saints have interpreted scripture in their Book of Mormon studies scholarship. As Garrett shows, writing a history of how the Book of Mormon shaped Latter-day Saint racial relations is incomplete without hearing from non-white peoples.

From the field of religious studies, Max Perry Mueller’s *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* introduces new methodologies for approaching the study of race and the Book of Mormon. Mueller examines the ways that the Book of Mormon and other “texts” like patriarchal blessings created “the archive” of Latter-day Saint memory. Mueller has two definitions of “archive.” First, he uses the term to mean physical repositories, such as university special collections. The second use is in a memory studies vein: there, “the archive” is a term that signifies a collected set of remembrances and narratives used to explain the past. Through this usage, he shows how those who produce and interpret records continually remake the arguments based upon texts found in archives.

In the first few chapters, Mueller argues that early members of the Church “read race on and onto the bodies of ‘black’ and ‘red’ Americans. Africans’ and Indians’ dark skins told the history of their ancestors’ sins” (p. 19). According to Mueller, race as presented in the Book of Mormon is a “holistic problem with a holistic solution”; divine curses could be lifted by conversion to the Church. Whiteness, Mueller argues, is the default race for humanity in the Book of Mormon. He contends that whiteness is the default race in the Book of Mormon, and that this “white universalism” suggests that all non-white people are somehow
recipients of a divine curse (p. 26). However, Mueller argues that baptism provided a way for those believed to be cursed to be “redeemed” from their dark skin.

Mueller’s use of “white universalism” is a valuable framing device, describing Latter-day Saint beliefs while also connecting their theology to the white Protestant Atlantic World that most of them occupied. Others viewed whiteness as the default race, while non-white people were cursed, as allegedly were the descendants of Ham or Cain. In that way, early Latter-day Saints did not need “any more Bible” (2 Nephi 29:3) to justify their white universalism, though it may have informed their religious and racial worldviews. It is important to note, though, that, contrary to Mueller’s claims, there are no contemporary examples of early Latter-day Saints using the Book of Mormon to justify their treatment of black peoples of African descent (though he does footnote a Huffington Post article from 2012 suggesting that Latter-day Saints believed this). Thus, while Mueller profitably finds a connection between sacred scripture and the making of racial difference, it’s unlikely that the Book of Mormon was used to justify the priesthood and temple restriction, even as early Latter-day Saint readings supported missionary work among Indigenous peoples.

In later chapters, Mueller argues that non-white Latter-day Saints fought for inclusion in the Latter-day Saint “archive.” Non-white Latter-day Saints created texts meant to circumscribe them in sacred memory through the creation of documents. However, because he does not specify which form of archive he refers to in each instance, it is difficult to assess his arguments because the term slips between signifying repositories and the more ethereal memory “archive.” In the case of the archive of Latter-day Saint memory, his argument is more compelling. Certainly, the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints of color that the Church knows best are those who created documents or had documents created about them. In doing so, Mueller points to the issues of the ongoing construction of the archive of Latter-day Saint memory: those with relative privilege and power are able to tell the stories of those who cannot, or did not, tell others how they felt about their contributions to
the physical archive. Although a more precise use of both definitions of the archive would have made his arguments stronger, Mueller’s analysis and innovative methodology have much to teach Latter-day Saints and scholars of American religion.

Patrick Q. Mason’s article in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* examines the role of the Book of Mormon in which Restoration scripture, particularly the Book of Mormon, has shaped Latter-day Saint beliefs regarding race. He begins with an overview of how Native American General Authority George P. Lee’s reading of the Book of Mormon differed from that of the First Presidency, highlighting the several readings of the book by racial groups. He follows with a description of how readers interpreted the Book of Mormon’s text in nineteenth-century America, connecting curses associated with wickedness and idleness to non-white skin. Although many scholars have begun to dismantle those readings, the “persistent correlation of righteousness and whiteness means that the Book of Mormon’s dominant narrative troubles but never entirely overturns the white racial ideology” espoused by the book’s narrators and nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint readers (p. 162).

Mason argues that the assumption of Nephite whiteness coincided with the bulk of early Latter-day Saint missiological success in the United States and Western Europe. However, as historian Paul Reeve has demonstrated, many Americans did not view Latter-day Saints as “white,” and an ever-shifting definition formed to create space between powerful groups and those they viewed as inferior.³ This experience led to Latter-day Saint racial theologies and practices that justified policies and programs directed toward non-white peoples as well as a subscription to American colonial strategies (as seen in the works by Garrett and Mueller). In the last forty years, following the canonization of Official Declaration 2, Mason argues that the Church has worked to highlight

the racial diversity of its membership in the United States and across the globe. He notes, though, that “the iconic Mormon pioneer” remains white and that one of the twenty-first century Church’s biggest challenges will be to pull white Americanism apart from its global message (p. 168). He also suggests that one of the greatest challenges for scholars studying the Latter-day Saints will be the ways that they incorporate critical race studies and find, nurture, and encourage scholars of color.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon is a powerful text that enables Latter-day Saints to better understand the world around them. The three works examined herein reveal certain trends in the field of Book of Mormon studies. First, and most importantly, each author examines the ways that non-white Latter-day Saints read and interpreted sacred texts, particularly the Book of Mormon, in ways that asserted their intrinsic worth and theological place in the Church. This new emphasis on how Indigenous peoples felt about Lamanite identity will be crucial to the development of the field through future works. This is important for many reasons. First, Mormon studies and Book of Mormon studies are still developing as academic fields, and the work of recovering lost voices remains essential to expanding the literature. Second, re-discovering the multiplicities of Book of Mormon readings opens up new possibilities for modern interpretation and exegesis. Each author also places the Book of Mormon within broader fields, borrowing his frameworks to make the Book of Mormon more accessible—and to highlight its importance in American religion—for scholars and interested non-specialists alike.

In addition to these important historiographical additions, the field needs further studies on the reception of the Book of Mormon in non-white, non-American, and non-Western contexts to flesh out the history concerning how Latter-day Saint scripture has molded religious and racial beliefs. Nevertheless, as the study of Latter-day Saints and their beliefs continues to mature as a field, I am confident that scholars will include the voices and scholarship of non-white and non-American
Latter-day Saints who have valuable perspectives and arguments to contribute to this field.

**Joseph Stuart** is a PhD candidate in history at the University of Utah and holds an MA in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia. His work examines the intersection of race, religion, and gender in the Black Freedom Movement. His work has been published in *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* and the *Journal of Mormon History*. 
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,¹ 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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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). Stubbs's proposal falls into the “lumper” camp, as do the previous reviews of his hypothesis by Dirk Elzinga and John Robertson, though Robertson does at least acknowledge the splitter perspective. 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” and to remain unconvinced by the “extensive accurate data, to back up his extraordinary claim.” The conclusion therefore is that Stubbs's proposal is another proposal about a New World/Old-World linguistic connection that “unravels with scrutiny.”

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” 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—itself 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. Additionally, explanations regarding what these similarities might mean for the study of Uto-Aztecan languages and the historicity of the Book of Mormon 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.

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

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." 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. 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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languages somewhere in North, Central, or South America (or all of them). However, this does not limit their contact to the Uto-Aztecan 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-Aztecan languages seems to be Stubbs's personal investment in Uto-Aztecan languages and linguistics.

*Linguistic Comparisons Require Like Systems*

In the main line of reasoning for the proposal, Stubbs focuses on proto-Uto-Aztecan (a hypothetical reconstructed language). In other parts of the proposal, he focuses on specific Uto-Aztecan languages. 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. In these tables, the proposed Uto-Aztecan 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-Aztecan 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northwest Semitic</th>
<th>Proto-Uto-Aztecan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>na-</em></td>
<td>&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Ethiopic</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Assyrian</th>
<th>Hopi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>snw</td>
<td>snw</td>
<td>ʾǝnī</td>
<td>sinitu</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>saniwa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. 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.” 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.
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semitic</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Proto-Uto-Aztecan</th>
<th>Daughters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*-iima</td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>*-ima</td>
<td>&gt; -im, -m, -mi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northwest Semitic</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Proto-Uto-Aztecan</th>
<th>Daughters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>yaʃiba</em></td>
<td>&gt;</td>
<td>*yaʃ-pa, *yaʃa, <em>yaʃi</em></td>
<td>&gt; yesiva, dahiva, asiba, yasipa, daivu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.19 This leaves conservatively 1,328 similarities as evidence for the proposal.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Aramaic</th>
<th>Akkadian</th>
<th>Syrian</th>
<th>Proto-Uto-Aztecan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sursur, sursuur</td>
<td>sursuur</td>
<td>sursuur</td>
<td>sísr-aa, sísr-aa</td>
<td>&gt; *tsortsor‘cricket’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.\(^\text{20}\) 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed similarities</th>
<th>Percent accidental</th>
<th>Number of UA languages</th>
<th>Number of AA languages</th>
<th>Number accidental</th>
<th>Number of similarities remaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1,513</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1,482</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,482</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>1,390</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>1,070</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,375</td>
<td>153</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,375</td>
<td>153</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4,126</td>
<td>-2,598</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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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.\(^\text{21}\) 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

\(^{21}\) 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-Aztecan 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.


Reviewed by Brian M. Hauglid

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.
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-Aztecan 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.

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This has been evident in several ways. First, the Mormon Theology Seminar (MTS), under the direction of Adam S. Miller and Joseph M.
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.¹

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. Owen, John Christopher Thomas, Elizabeth Fenton, Susanna Morrill, and Adam Stokes.

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.”

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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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 2, 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.³ 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.

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 ethnographical 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-cen­
tury 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 theo­
logical 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 wor­
thy 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 theolog­
ical 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 recog­
nized to be. And, it will be seen, I believe, that the answer to this ques­
tion 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 dis­
tinction between time and being in the operation of the atonement”
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.

Brian M. Hauglid is associate professor and visiting fellow at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. He served as the editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* from 2013–2017.


Reviewed by Scott Hales

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Latter-day Saint literature has a long tradition of novels based on Book of Mormon stories. What is likely the first Book of Mormon novel, B. H. Roberts’s Corianton, was serialized in The Contributor beginning
in March 1889.\(^1\) 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.\(^2\) 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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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.”⁴ 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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⁴. 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.” 4 But Nephi’s message is also deeply grounded in Christian love,

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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.” 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.”

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.7 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.8 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.
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 read-
ers 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, espe-
cially 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). 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. 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.” 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

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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Introduction

Latter-day Saints affirm that “the Book of Mormon was . . . written for our day.”¹ For the believer, it is no wonder that the book contains numerous accounts of inequality. Without exception, the dynamic force in these accounts is pride, which in most cases is manifest in cultural pretentiousness and exhibitionism. While the various faces and consequences of pride and its relationship to culture in the Book of Mormon

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have been the subject of Latter-day Saint literature, there has, to date, been no reading of the Book of Mormon that attempts to provide a structural account of pride and its relationship to culture—that is to say, no analysis of the systematic relationship between the two. To do so would require reading the Book of Mormon with a sociological lens, an approach that, at least for the purposes of this paper, might be regarded as complementary to a theological interpretation.

In this regard, the work of the prominent French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is worthy of special consideration. Bourdieu's work has been identified with what he termed “constructivist structuralism,” focusing on practice as the outcome of “a dialectical relationship between structure and agency,” not being “objectively determined, nor . . . the product of free will.” Working within a Weberian strand of class analysis, Bourdieu formulated a theory according to which class is shaped by resources other than economic capital—such as cultural resources (cultural capital) and social connections (social capital). These types of capital are fought over in fields, which can be thought of as distinct areas of practice. Bourdieu's greatest legacy is perhaps his exposition of the contestation of cultural capital within the field of culture. One of his major works, Distinction, brings to the fore often-ignored correlations between aesthetic taste and social position, demonstrating how class can be structured and experienced along cultural lines. More specifically, the work reveals the strategies deployed by the dominant in society to assert cultural distinction and thereby maintain their position of power.


3. Bourdieu's work has prominence in sociological circles today, and his work has sparked a renewed interest in and reconceptualization of class in recent years in the United Kingdom and Australia.


A reading of the Book of Mormon in light of Bourdieu's work provides the contours for a revealing structural account of the relationship between pride and culture. I argue here that pride can be read as striving for cultural distinction in Bourdieu's sense. Conceptually, both pride and cultural distinction share the central feature of enmity, that is, a competitive self-interest. The benefit of using Bourdieu to shine light on examples of pride in the Book of Mormon is to offer an explanation of the factors that underpin such behavior, that is to say, a struggle for cultural capital through a mobilization of economic capital and a system of classifications of taste. All of these elements are reflected in the Book of Mormon, as I hope to show.

**Being “lifted up”: Distinction and Enmity**

Bourdieu invites the modern reader to think carefully about the social intention behind the consumption or display of cultural objects. This is because Bourdieu's view of the world is of a competitive one, in which all individuals are treated as “capital holders and investors seeking profits.” In this market-like vision of social life, culture is a form of capital—embodied in manner, speech, and judgments of aesthetic taste; objectified in various forms (clothing, art, antiques, etc.); and institutionalized in academic titles. Consumption and expression of culture and taste thus serve a particular social purpose in a wider struggle for position and power. This posturing through culture is particularly important to the dominant group in society, the exchange of financial capital for cultural capital being “inscribed as an objective demand, in the membership of the bourgeoisie.” In this way, Bourdieu notes that “objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience

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7. Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 82.
or assert one's position in social space. Indeed, many aesthetic choices are made with competitive interests in mind, "clearly marked by the intention . . . of marking distinction vis-à-vis lower groups."

Like Bourdieu, the Book of Mormon demonstrates that cultural distinction serves as an early sign of pride and social fragmentation. Indeed, at its extreme, flaunting culture is bound up in the formation of social classes, as in Fourth Nephi (see 4 Nephi 1:23–26). In an attempt to avert just such extremities, it seems, Jacob condemns a group of increasingly wealthy Nephites, who, upon discovering precious materials, begin to "suppose that [they are] better than" others "because of the costliness of [their] apparel" (Jacob 2:13). He implores his audience to "think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you" (Jacob 2:17). He further mandates that they seek wealth for the express purpose of administering "relief to the sick and the afflicted" (Jacob 2:19). In emphasizing the redirection of wealth away from the pure consumption of cultural products, Jacob appears to concur with Bourdieu's view that the exchange of economic capital for cultural capital is integral to social differentiation and fragmentation, at least when the exchange is for the promotion of one's own interests to the detriment of others. In this sense, one might say that Jacob hopes to dismantle early in Nephite history the emerging marketization of social life.

Jacob's call for an egalitarian outlook is later echoed by King Benjamin, who uses the indelible image of the beggar to teach empathy for one's neighbor, born of an acknowledgment of one's own dependence on God (see Mosiah 4:16–20). This religious call to compassion is further complemented by Alma's political wisdom. Having himself been on the receiving end of title and position under King Noah, Alma commands those who follow him (and desire him to be king) not to "esteem one flesh above another" (Mosiah 23:7). In these examples, the Book of Mormon reflects Bourdieu's own view that cultural distinction is at some level motivated by an active struggle against others. Of

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course, Bourdieu regards this struggle as an inherent feature of social life, whereas the Book of Mormon treats such enmity as both a precursor to, and a symptom of, political and religious degeneration.

Distinction through Education

Bourdieu emphasizes the role the education system plays in cultural distinction, with education itself constituting a major cultural resource. Bourdieu describes those with academic qualifications (“holders of cultural nobility”) as aristocratic, defined by a belonging to a “lineage, an estate, . . . a past, . . . or a tradition.” In contrast, there are those with “uncertified” cultural capital who demonstrate what they are by what they can do. Academics are thus “defined by the titles which predispose and legitimate them in being what they are” and thereby act to separate them “by a difference in kind from the commons of culture.” Not only does the system allow for those with a significant amount of economic capital to convert that into cultural capital, but schooling itself involves a hidden syllabus of bourgeois qualities, such as ease in approaching cultural objects or comprehension and the use of sophisticated language. According to Bourdieu, the school system is rigged to favor those with pre-existing cultural capital.

Bourdieu’s criticism of the education system can help explain the particularly poignant example of cultural distinction and stratification in 3 Nephi 6. The context for the passage could not be more ironic: the Nephites find themselves in a time of postwar era reconstruction, characterized by the introduction of laws to ensure “equity and justice” (3 Nephi 6:4). It is in this era of apparent equitable outcomes that some of

the people again allow themselves to be “lifted up unto pride and boastings because of their exceedingly great riches” (3 Nephi 6:10), in turn becoming “distinguished by ranks” in accordance with “their riches and chances for learning” (3 Nephi 6:12). In this passage, wealth guarantees “great learning” whereas poverty leads to “ignorance” (3 Nephi 6:12). Hence, 3 Nephi 6 indicates that wealth is often insufficient by itself to generate the symbolic distinctions that underpin hierarchical social boundaries such as ranks or classes. Rather, as Bourdieu would argue, it is important to consider the role of other forms of capital, in particular institutionalized cultural capital, achieved through education, as the scriptural text demonstrates. In particular, academic titles and “great learning” function as marks of distinction, a claim to possess qualities that might extend beyond the titles, separating holders of such learning from the population at large.

“Pride of their eyes”: Symbolic Classifications and Symbolic Capital

The system of aesthetic classifications that mediates cultural distinction saturates social life. A student of the French intellectual tradition of structuralism, Bourdieu maintains that people make cognitive binary distinctions of aesthetic taste such as rare or common, low or high, good or bad. Bourdieu, however, argues that taste is arbitrary, there being no substantial a priori reason why a particular accent or artistic judgment should be indicative of high culture, or vice versa. Instead of reflecting an objective social reality, symbolic binary distinctions obtain their meaning in use, in oppositional relation to each other. For instance, Bourdieu maintains that the aesthetic preference of the elite for form over function represents an intention to distance themselves from real life, an expression of a domination of necessity, enabled by a favorable economic position. Far from

a simple artistic choice, the disdain for the everyday represents a “social break”\textsuperscript{19} and “a claim to legitimate superiority over those who, because they cannot assert the same contempt for contingencies in gratuitous luxury and conspicuous consumption, remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies.”\textsuperscript{20} Hence, distinctions of taste can be paired with social position, with the political effect of transforming mere classifications into articulations of social position and power.\textsuperscript{21}

Symbolic distinctions along such lines are mobilized by the proud in the Book of Mormon. Almost always, cultural goods are ascribed a particular value. The proud are identified as those with “exceeding riches, . . . fine silks, . . . fine-twined linen, . . . precious things” (Alma 4:6); “fine pearls, . . . fine things of the world” (4 Nephi 1:24); and, most especially, “very costly apparel” (Alma 4:6; emphasis added). Juxtaposed to this quest for luxury are those who dress in a “neat and comely” style or who wear “homely cloth” (Alma 1:27). The recurrence of terms to express value in the Book of Mormon (“fine,” “costly,” and “precious”) emphasizes the distinctiveness of the objects in question in terms of their value and thereby de-emphasizes their utility. As Bourdieu would say, the focus is firmly on their value in society. This is particularly the case for the term “costly,” which distinguishes the proud in every instance. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon texts seem to concur with Bourdieu that taste is arbitrary, especially when used for purposes of social differentiation. This is evident through the constant undermining of the claims of the upwardly mobile. For example, Jacob bemoans those who “suppose” they are better than others (Jacob 2:13), while others are “lifted up in the pride of their eyes” (Alma 4:6) and set their hearts upon “vain” things (Jacob 4:8) or grow “rich in their own eyes” (Alma 45:24). In these examples, there would appear to be an attempt to depict the proud as ungrounded and their claims as nothing more than self-serving supposition.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction}, 31.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction}, 56.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Swartz, \textit{Culture and Power}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} This is not always the case. As Alma 1 demonstrates, the Book of Mormon envisions the possibility of having an “abundance of . . . gold, and of silver, and of
Symbolic Capital and Discontents

The prize of those striving for distinction is symbolic capital. Broadly speaking, symbolic capital involves the recognition and legitimacy afforded to a form of capital. As such, it relies on the approbation of others and serves ideological purposes. Presupposed in such recognition is a preceding act of what Bourdieu terms “symbolic violence,” the “cement of class relations.” Symbolic violence occurs when dominant symbolic frameworks or activities are imposed on others and inconspicuously integrated into daily life as “taken-for-granted, disinterested or apolitical.” It stands to reason that symbolic impositions can often be contested, given that what is at stake, in Bourdieu’s eyes, is identity, culture being the ultimate expression of the self and group and the main way that one classifies self and others.

There are several passages in the Book of Mormon that can be read as depicting the contestation of symbolic capital. To begin, the division in the church under Alma’s leadership is accompanied by “envyings and strife, and malice and persecutions” (Alma 4:9), with those striving for distinction being “scornful” (Alma 4:8) and “despising others” (Alma 4:12). Thus, Alma inquires of the Church if its members have been “sufficiently humble,” “stripped of pride,” “stripped of envy,” or whether any has made a “mock of his brother” (Alma 5:28–30). Likewise, the account in 3 Nephi 6 of social stratification by ranks involves a significant degree of railing, reviling, and “all manner of afflictions” (3 Nephi 6:13). From Bourdieu’s perspective, what might be said to be happening in these passages is either a contest over legitimate culture or, more

precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen,” if such possession is tempered with a material concern for the welfare of others. While this would appear to undermine the analysis of taste as a function of social differentiation, the frequency of use of such terms in other instances suggests that deliberately mobilizing symbolic distinctions is more important to the proud, who, as Bourdieu argues, set themselves apart to legitimize their position.

24. Swartz, Culture and Power, 89.
25. Swartz, Culture and Power, 89.
likely, resistance to symbolic subordination. While the sociologist might regard such events as part of class warfare, the development into ranks is described in terms of yielding to the sinful temptations of power, authority, riches, and vanity (see 3 Nephi 6:15).

Conclusion

Reading the Book of Mormon through the prism of Bourdieu's account of cultural distinction illuminates the behavior of the proud. For one, Bourdieu's structural emphasis on cultural capital as a symbolically rich competitive resource for those striving for social status and prestige helps explain why cultural showiness is the hallmark of the proud in the Book of Mormon. Culture is mobilized by the proud precisely because it enables them to establish or legitimize their position. As both Bourdieu and the Book of Mormon reveal, this mobilization occurs through the exchange of financial capital for gratuitous high-end cultural consumption. Through a system of arbitrary distinctions of taste ("fine," "precious," and "costly"), this consumption becomes code for distance from necessity, and thereby a manifestation of power. Moreover, the acquisition of access to elite education helps to create a cultural aristocracy that cements emerging social hierarchies. Further, as Bourdieu observes, what really matters to the proud is the pursuit of symbolic recognition or symbolic capital by an act of symbolic violence, whereby their dominant worldview is legitimized and becomes accepted by all. It is no wonder, as Bourdieu and the Book of Mormon observe, that the claims of the proud are highly contested, often accompanied by "envyings," "persecutions," and "railings."

However, there are limitations to this reading. For one, in line with his structuralist leanings, Bourdieu regards striving for cultural distinction as part of social life. In contrast, the Book of Mormon teaches that, while cultural appropriation is not in itself morally reprehensible, flaunting, boasting, and powermongering are not of God. In fact, where Bourdieu is somewhat silent on class formation, the Book of Mormon uniquely identifies such behavior as sinful and as the driving force behind social fragmentation. In this way, the Book of Mormon stresses the role of individual agency. As a result, unlike Bourdieu, in
its ambition to bring readers to Christ, the Book of Mormon suggests that pride is avoidable. Jacob, King Benjamin, and Alma promote the value of neighborly love manifest both in charity and in politics (in the form of egalitarian respect for others). Devoted readers, of course, also aim to have their “hearts...knit together in love” (Mosiah 18:21) and see themselves as “no more strangers” (Ephesians 2:19), aiming to neutralize or minimize cultural distinctiveness in sacred spaces by emphasizing kinship and community.  

There is a final preliminary interpretative conclusion to be drawn from reading Bourdieu and the Book of Mormon side by side. The findings point to the potential value of using contemporary social theories to shed light on passages of scripture. In turn, the Book of Mormon demonstrates its prophetic import in understanding and addressing contemporary issues. This is especially the case when the text is read using familiar secular language and conceptual tools, which can allow non-believers to appreciate the text’s prophetic insights. Some might argue that such an interpretative enterprise is anachronistic, but this objection ignores the point that the Book of Mormon is intended for a modern readership. In fact, a dialectic between modern and ancient is something the Book of Mormon itself endorses. This article has been a modest attempt to model one way of being sensitive to that dialectic.

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27. Two practical examples, whether directly or indirectly intended to emphasize community or not, are the universal wearing of white clothing in temples and calling each other “brother” and “sister” at church, instead of any other professional title.
King Benjamin’s address is well known to readers of the Book of Mormon and is often quoted in devotional contexts. The address marks the transition between two great kings of Nephite history: Benjamin and Mosiah. It is also a moment of teaching and of testimony for the old king. From that point on, the people are officially called by the name of Christ. Another moment of teaching and of popular commitment occurs in the Book of Mosiah, although it receives less attention: the address given by King Mosiah and Alma the Elder when the latter’s people arrive in Zarahemla (reported in Mosiah 25). The aim of this brief research note is to underline commonalities between Mosiah’s address and King Benjamin’s address and to suggest that both form part of a larger trend in Nephite institutions, a trend that changes the depth of Nephite religious and political institutions.

Mosiah 24 concludes with the arrival of Alma the Elder’s people in Zarahemla after their flight from the oppression of the Lamanites and their Amulonite taskmasters. Mosiah 25 consists of the record of an address by King Mosiah followed by Alma speaking to the people in Zarahemla to make known to them the history of the people in the land of Nephi. The address begins with Mosiah reading the records of Zeniff (verse 5) and of Alma (verse 6). After an account of the audience’s reaction to these records (verses 7 to 11) and a brief report regarding the children of King Noah’s priests (verses 12 and 13), the address continues...
with Alma speaking by way of exhortation (verse 16). Finally, Limhi and his people request baptism, done at the hand of Alma, and we learn that churches were established in the land (from verse 19 onward).

The obvious similarity between this event and King Benjamin's address is simply that, in both cases, a king speaks to his people. There seems, of course, to be a notable difference: not only does Mosiah speak in chapter 25, but so does Alma. A closer examination of the situation, however, shows that this detail and many others suggest a close resemblance between the two talks. Indeed, Benjamin is not the only speaker in the course of his own address. Mosiah 3:2 reports that an angel had appeared to him, whom he then proceeds to quote at length in Mosiah 3 (through to the end of the chapter). The angel's message, like Alma's in the context of Mosiah's address, is central to Benjamin's address, as it introduces the mission of Jesus Christ. King Benjamin builds on this message to deliver his own admonitions and teachings. Alma, too, is a messenger, both through the record of his people read by the king and by his own mouth when he “preach[es] unto the people repentance and faith on the Lord” (Mosiah 25:16).

This general similarity is not the only one between the addresses. Another broad but important similarity concerns the strong reactions of the audiences. At Benjamin's time, the people experienced “a mighty change [of heart]” (Mosiah 5:2), so that they had “no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.” Later, during King Mosiah’s address, the people were “struck with wonder and amazement” (Mosiah 25:7), having mixed feelings of joy and sadness, due to, respectively, the deliverance out of bondage of their brethren and the “sinful state” of the Lamanites and the deaths they caused. Further, the general setting is the same: the people come to listen to King Benjamin, being gathered “every man according to his family” (Mosiah 2:5); Alma speaks to his hearers “when they were assembled in large bodies” (Mosiah 25:15), and he even “went from one body to another,” thus denoting the fact that these bodies were separate, as were the families at the former event (“every family being separate one from another” as mentioned in Mosiah 2:5). There is also a similarity in the themes addressed. During
Benjamin's time, the people made sacrifices “that they might give thanks to the Lord their God who . . . had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies” (Mosiah 2:4). This anticipates the “power [of God] in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage” (Mosiah 25:10), which caused Zarahemla’s people to wonder so much and to “give thanks to God,” much as their predecessors did.

The greatest similarity between these two events is the fact that covenant-making follows each address. In the earlier address, the people “covenant with . . . God . . . to be obedient to his commandments in all things,” which in return gives them the right to bear the name of Christ, as they “shall be called the children of Christ.” In the later situation, the people of Limhi, who have not yet had the opportunity to be baptized, ask for baptism and receive it (Mosiah 25:17). Further, there is again here the mention of the importance of names: “Whosoever were desirous to take upon them the name of Christ” (Mosiah 25:23) would become members of a church. This point is even more interesting in light of verse 12, where we learn that the children of Amulon and of the other priests of King Noah were ashamed of the behavior of their fathers and therefore decided to “be called the children of Nephi” and become part of the Nephite people. If we combine this new identification with the mention in verse 23 of taking upon oneself the name of Christ, it seems to implicitly underline the fact that the only solution to be purified of sin or of shame is not to take upon oneself the name of a specific people—of a specific ethnicity—or even of a hero (after all, Nephi was a hero in many respects), but instead it is to take upon oneself the name of Christ, the only one powerful enough to purify a person completely.

There are therefore strong indications that the two addresses should be read together. In this regard, we should also keep in mind that Mosiah’s address took place roughly four years after Benjamin’s address and one year after Benjamin’s death. As these addresses are temporally

1. If we follow the chronological indications given in the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin’s talk would have taken place around 124 BC, he would have died around 121 BC, and Mosiah’s talk would have been around 120 BC.
close, it is plausible to assume that Mosiah’s audience would have been
much the same as Benjamin’s.

One should not forget, though, that one of the main goals of King
Benjamin’s address is to “[consecrate] his son Mosiah” (Mosiah 6:3). This
aim is already announced at the beginning of the address, when
Benjamin says “that [his] son Mosiah is a king and a ruler over you”
(Mosiah 2:30). There is thus an important aspect of institutional change
in King Benjamin’s talk. Does a parallel exist in Mosiah’s address?

We might find a parallel in the fact that “king Mosiah granted unto
Alma that he might establish churches throughout all the land of Zara­
hemla” (Mosiah 25:19). Note that he did not establish them only among
Limhi’s people, who had before been estranged from God, nor only
among his own people, but rather “throughout all the land of Zara­
hemla.” This broad scope and the use of the word “establish” seem to
indicate that a new system, or a new order, is being put into place. In
a similar fashion, Joseph Spencer sees Abinadi’s ministry (on which
Alma’s preaching is based) as a turning point in the Nephite interpre­
tation of scripture. Before Abinadi, interpretation was mainly escha­
tological; after him, it became more soteriological. To quote Spencer:
“Whereas for Nephi, the Prophets ultimately speak to a community, for
Abinadi, they speak to the individual who desires salvation.” Further,
according to Spencer, Abinadi’s move was prompted by the corrupt use
of the community-oriented interpretation by the priests of King Noah,
who saw their own state as fulfilling the promises of scriptures and
thus thought they were not in need of repentance. This duality between

the religious changes among Nephites.

3. See Joseph M. Spencer, An Other Testament: On Typology, 2nd ed. (2012; Provo,

4. Spencer, Other Testament, 163.
individual and communal salvation would then have been fully resolved only in Christ’s ministry and teachings to the Nephites.

If we look at Mosiah’s address through Spencer’s lens, we see how a church organization with an emphasis on personal salvation could be appropriate. One works out one’s own salvation by receiving personal ordinances (and not only communal ordinances, as the Jewish feasts may have been) and through the personal decision of joining the Church. We also see how the “large bodies” of Mosiah 25 were the seeds, so to speak, of the churches to be established, as is clarified in verse 21: “They did assemble themselves together in large bodies, being called churches.” And we also understand how the timing for such a change is perfect. From a state tying together the religious and the political, and with an emphasis on communal ordinances and rituals, Benjamin first introduces the individual aspect by “tak[ing] the names of all who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments” (Mosiah 6:1). This action can be seen as a preparation so that, four years later, the people, having been prepared, can now receive a new order with the introduction of the system of churches. One could then see this move in terms of a broader context, as part of a process that ultimately leads to a strong separation between church and state with the introduction of the system of judges in Mosiah’s final address in Mosiah 29. In this reading, we have a deep change in the affairs of the people that encompasses both the religious and the political aspects, which all occurs in the space of thirty-five years (according to the text’s internal chronology).


6. It has long been suggested that King Benjamin’s address might have taken place during a ritual feast, similar to the Jewish feasts.
If indeed the church system is introduced at this point, it might throw a new light on the youth of Alma₂ (Alma the Younger). We are told nothing about his sins except that “he was going about to destroy the church of God” (Mosiah 27:10). Could it be that Alma had been attached to the old practices and, in a gesture of religious conservatism, thus failed to understand the need for a church? Like Laman and Lemuel, who thought the Israelites were righteous because they kept the Law of Moses and saw no further, perhaps Alma defended the idea that the true system was the old one and that the introduction of a church was a corruption. This reading might then give new weight to the angel’s words to Alma that “this is [the Lord’s] church” (3 Nephi 27:13).

At any rate, if we accept that the system of churches is introduced into Zarahemla only after Mosiah’s address, what are we to make of the ordinance of baptism? Is it not practiced early in the Book of Mormon? References to baptism before the first baptisms practiced by Alma include only the following: 2 Nephi 31; 1 Nephi 10:9–10; 1 Nephi 11:27; and 2 Nephi 9:23–24. Of these, 1 Nephi 10:9–10 and 1 Nephi 11:27 actually apply to the Savior being baptized by John the Baptist. The more problematic references seem therefore to be 2 Nephi 31 and 2 Nephi 9:23–24, since they recommend baptism to the hearer or reader. However, 2 Nephi 31 seems to find Nephi talking to “[his] brethren.”

Looking at the broader context, one sees that 2 Nephi 31 continues a discourse beginning in 2 Nephi 25. As 2 Nephi 25:3 makes clear, that longer prophetic discourse is one that Nephi addresses “unto my people, unto all those that shall receive hereafter these things.” The “hereafter” seems to indicate clearly that he is not speaking to his people but to the later readers of the Book of Mormon. This may leave only 2 Nephi 9:23–24 as problematic, where Jacob (within Nephi’s record) clearly

7. There would also be 1 Nephi 20:1 that mentions baptism. However, Royal Skousen in *Analysis of Textual Variants* has shown that the phrase “or out of the waters of baptism” is actually a later gloss inserted by Joseph Smith. We therefore will not consider it here. See Royal Skousen, Vol. IV: *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, in six parts (Provo, UT: FARMS, Brigham Young University, 2004–2009).
speaks to his contemporaries in recommending baptism ("Jerusalem, from whence we came" in 2 Nephi 9:5).

There is thus only this one reference, 2 Nephi 9:23–24, that concerns an explicit teaching about baptism to the Nephites before Alma's time. This is quite meager for almost five hundred years of history until the time of Mosiah's address. Based on this scripture alone, one might conclude that baptism was known and even practiced by the Nephites from the time of Nephi, even though the evidence is scant. But one might also assume without too much risk that this knowledge and practice have been long forgotten by Benjamin's time. After all, the dynasty of King Benjamin originated with Mosiah, who was “warned by the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi” (Omni 1:12), presumably due to a kind of general Nephite apostasy. At this time, or at any time before, knowledge about baptism might have been lost.

We might even go further. If one accepts the hypothesis that there was a Nephite apostasy somewhere between the time of Jacob and the time of Benjamin, then one might well conclude also that the knowledge of Christ was lost at the same moment. This could explain the fact that the angel announces to Benjamin “glad tidings of great joy” (Mosiah 3:3) concerning the “com[ing] down from heaven” of the “Lord Omnipotent.” The word “tidings” is defined as “a piece of news.” If the knowledge of the Messiah was available from the time of Nephi, why would there be a need to announce this knowledge again? Benjamin could have preached about the coming of Christ and its consequences and blessings, but there would have been no need for an angel to announce the coming itself. Moreover, if knowledge about the mission of Jesus Christ was indeed lost, this loss would explain why King Noah's priests were so shocked by Abinadi's affirmation that “God himself should come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 17:8) to the point of sentencing him to death. It would also explain why the same priests would teach that “salvation come[s] by the law of Moses”

Table 1. Summary of the commonalities of the addresses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King Benjamin’s address</th>
<th>King Mosiah’s first address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gathered “every man according to his family” (Mosiah 2:5)</td>
<td>Gathered “in large bodies” (Mosiah 25:15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“mighty change [of heart]” (Mosiah 5:2)</td>
<td>“struck with wonder and amazement” (Mosiah 25:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give thanks to the Lord their God “who . . . had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies” (Mosiah 2:4)</td>
<td>“when they thought of the . . . power [of God] in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage, they did . . . give thanks to God” (Mosiah 25:10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant to obey the commandments (Mosiah 5:5)</td>
<td>Baptism of Limhi and his people (Mosiah 25:17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Christ is given (Mosiah 5:7)</td>
<td>Some were “desirous to take upon them the name of Christ” (Mosiah 25:23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new king is announced (Mosiah 6:3)</td>
<td>The church system is introduced (Mosiah 25:19–22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mosiah 12:32). We should remember that Zeniff, inaugurating the colony in which Noah and his priests dwell, left the land of Zarahemla with his party before Benjamin’s address. Thus, if knowledge about Christ was restored only at this latter point, the people of Noah would not know about it; this knowledge would only be restored with Abinadi.

This interpretation might seem far-fetched. It could be simply that the aim of the angel in Mosiah 3:3 is to announce that the coming of Christ is soon approaching. Nevertheless, the literary construction of the sentence does not seem to put an emphasis on the time of the coming so much as the events themselves that are to transpire.9

There is thus reason to believe that the address of King Mosiah in Mosiah 25 provides a pivotal moment in Nephite history. It marks the moment of official ecclesiastic organization through the establishment of the Church; it also marks the moment when Nephite religious life collectively passes from a state-organized religion with ordinances centered on the community to a church organization with individual or personal ordinances. It might also serve as a site of restoration in

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9. Critics of the Book of Mormon could also argue that the explanation is linked to the order of dictation: Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mosiah long before the book of Nephi.
which the previously lost Nephite knowledge of Christ and sacred ordinances such as baptism are restored (although the evidence in support of this hypothesis is ultimately too scant to be definitively conclusive). If King Mosiah's address, however, does mark a moment of such restoration, then the Book of Mormon takes on additional meaning as the scripture of the Restoration. It perhaps models events of restoration within its pages as it speaks to a people organized around a latter-day restoration. Perhaps, in fact, it models at least two restorations: the one wrought through Nephi and Lehi, and another later through Benjamin and Mosiah.

Michaël Ulrich received his PhD in Mathematics from the Université de Franche-Comté (France) and from Universität Greifswald (Germany). He currently works as a teacher in the French system of Classes Préparatoires at Lycée Fabert (Metz, France). Interested in scripture, he devotes his free time to the study of the Book of Mormon. He participated in the 2014 Mormon Theology Seminar and the 2015 Summer Seminar in Mormon Culture.
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