The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon: Still Losing the Battle

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Abstract   Review of *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* (2005), by Joel P. Kramer and Scott R. Johnson.

The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon: Still Losing the Battle

David E. Bokovoy

In 1998, Paul Owen and Carl Mosser shocked the turbulent world of anti-Mormonism with their assessment of anti-Mormon polemics. According to these authors, Latter-day Saint scholarship analyzing Book of Mormon historicity had extended far beyond the intellectual scope of evangelical responses.[1] In recent years, several anti-Mormon organizations have taken up the task of raising the intellectual bar of Book of Mormon criticism.[2] In one such recent attempt, the anti-Mormon organization Living Hope Ministries, located in Brigham City, Utah, produced a sixty-six–minute film entitled *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon.* Throughout the production, Living Hope Ministries presents several interviews with evangelical biblical scholars, Near Eastern and

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1. Paul Owen and Carl Mosser, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal,* n.s., 19/2 (1998): 179–205.

2. Richard Bushman expresses a similar sentiment in his recent biography of Joseph Smith: "On the whole better trained, with more technical language skills than their opponents, they [Book of Mormon proponents] are located mainly at Brigham Young University and associated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). As a loosely coordinated group, they are as assiduous in demonstrating the historical authenticity of the book as the critics are in situating it in the nineteenth century." *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Random House, 2005), 93.

Review of Joel P. Kramer and Scott R. Johnson. *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon.* Brigham City, UT: Living Hope Ministries, 2005. $20.00.

Central American archaeologists, and a Jewish rabbi discussing issues pertaining to Book of Mormon historicity and the Bible. According to director Joel P. Kramer, *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* project presents the discoveries made by Living Hope Ministries throughout this interviewing process. However, notwithstanding the fact that the film represents an expensive, well-organized endeavor, its obvious rhetoric, coupled with a dearth of genuine scholarship, illustrates the continued failure of anti-Mormon critics to seriously engage the issue of Book of Mormon historicity.

This production by Living Hope Ministries is a scholarly nightmare. Kramer and his colleagues fail to define the parameters of the investigation. The film commences with a quotation—taken out of context—from the current introduction to the Book of Mormon: "The Book of Mormon is a volume of holy scripture comparable to the Bible." Living Hope Ministries then proceeds for some sixty minutes to investigate whether the Book of Mormon is comparable to the Bible archaeologically and historically. Viewers should be aware that, in reality, the passage extracted from the introduction to the Book of Mormon has nothing to do with these issues but claims, instead, that it "contains, as does the Bible, the fulness of the everlasting gospel." Therefore, from an academic perspective, this tactical blunder in investigating the Book of Mormon in accordance with a faulty presupposition negates the validity of the entire analysis.

By taking this quotation out of context, the film proceeds to compare the Bible and the Book of Mormon on issues other than "the fulness of the everlasting gospel." "The biblical appeal to remember," according to one Jewish scholar, "thus has little to do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested that it become a nation of historians."[3] Throughout the production, Living Hope Ministries has ignored the manner in which the Book of Mormon claims to be comparable to the Bible. However, even when the Book of Mormon's rela-

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3. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 10.

tionship to the Bible is considered in accordance with the producers' assumptions, the film proves incredibly problematic.

The production proceeds to give a basic overview of biblical history entitled "The Bible Story." This summary includes only the crucial historical facts pertaining to the land of Israel and the Jewish exile into Babylonian captivity. Obviously, with this cursory synopsis, the producers wished to leave their audience with little doubt concerning the absolute certainty of biblical history. Egypt existed. Babylon existed. *Israel* existed. Therefore, since modern readers can today look at a road sign identifying the city of Jerusalem, viewers should be fully convinced that the Bible remains completely accurate in its representation of the past.

One of the immediate problems with this logic is the surplus of ancient Near Eastern texts that discuss known archaeological sites, although with little or even no *real* historicity. The Babylonian tale Atrahasis, for example, describes the days prior to human existence when "the gods' load was too great" so "the great Anunnaki made the Igigi carry the workload sevenfold."[4] In its introduction, this ancient myth refers to the gods of Mesopotamia digging out the canals for the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.[5] According to the film's logic, Atrahasis is as historically sound as the Bible since modern-day readers can open up a current Middle Eastern map and actually pinpoint these precise bodies of water. Any contemporary visitor to Iraq who possesses a camera could no doubt return from his or her trip with pictures of actual signs identifying these two geographical bodies. Obviously, contrary to the film's polemic, the ability to identify specific locations described in an ancient text has little relevancy for determining either its religious or historical value. Certainly Living Hope Ministries does not assume that a religious text like Atrahasis provides a correct representation of the past, even if Atrahasis mentions presently known geographical sites.

4. Atrahasis tablet I as cited in Stephanie Dalley, trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9.

5. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia,* 9.

Living Hope Ministries attempts to contrast the Bible's historicity with the Book of Mormon's alleged lack thereof; the organization's agenda is easily witnessed through the film's immediate transition from the Babylonian captivity and King Herod's renovations to the producers' summary of the Book of Mormon story. Unlike their succinct summation of the Bible devoid of any and all references to the supernatural, the producers' recounting of Book of Mormon history moves into a description of extraordinary events involving angels, hidden plates, and Jaredite barges. The film's polemical agenda is obvious through this skillful, but wholly misleading, diversionary tactic. Through the introductory comparison between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, Living Hope Ministries effectively establishes the premise for its scheme by encouraging its audience to ponder how Mormons could ever sustain a belief in the miraculous events described in the Book of Mormon, especially when compared with something so totally rational as the biblical account of the Jewish exile.

But is this bare-bones historical outline summarized by Living Hope Ministries all there is to "The Bible Story"? In an effort to feign accuracy, Living Hope Ministries should have included at least references to the biblical description of Noah placing animals of every species upon the ark, Moses parting the formidable Red Sea, Balaam speaking with his obstinate donkey, Elijah miraculously ascending into heaven, Elisha's floating ax head, Jonah's survival in a fish, and Jesus rising from the dead. Surely, when prefaced with these sorts of biblical events, Book of Mormon references to angels, hidden plates, and Jaredite barges appear far less *extraordinary*.

The film's agenda can be surmised in one dramatic scene in which biblical archaeologist Gabriel Barkay states, "It [the Book of Mormon] doesn't make sense to me. . . . I don't think it has anything to do with the culture of 600 BC, and I'm an expert on that period." Based on this assessment, however, one has to question to what extent Barkay (a respected contributor to his field) has, if ever, seriously engaged the

Book of Mormon.[6] In reality, the Book of Mormon commences with a very plausible historical claim regarding an Israelite family that flees into the wilderness prior to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Nephi's reference to the fact that God commanded his father Lehi to "take his family and depart into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 2:2) immediately relates the Book of Mormon to biblical views regarding the flight-into-the-wilderness motif. As Susan Bratton has shown, "the Bible implies that wilderness fosters dependence on the divine, vastly improved spiritual vision, and the drive for new ministries."[7] This biblical theme recurs prominently throughout subsequent chapters in the Book of Mormon, marking a strong historical, literary, and even religious tie between the two works.[8] Since *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* commences with Kramer's disingenuous claim that Living Hope Ministries wanted to learn if the Book of Mormon is truly comparable to the Bible, surely these sorts of important connections should have been addressed in its inquiry.

Conceptually, the Book of Mormon's immediate reference to a biblical-like flight into the wilderness parallels the book's final episode describing Moroni's wilderness escape: "I make not myself known to the Lamanites lest they should destroy me. . . . And I, Moroni, will not deny the Christ; wherefore, I wander whithersoever I can for the safety of mine own life" (Moroni 1:1, 3). The prominent role of wilderness journeys throughout the Book of Mormon clearly links the Nephite record with the Bible in a manner intentionally ignored by Living Hope Ministries. "Israel's religious life as a partner of Yahweh begins in the wilderness," notes Ulrich Mauser. "The desert is the place of God's initial and fundamental revelation to his people . . . the wilderness is the womb of a fundamental datum of the religion of the Old

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6. See John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds. *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004); and the DVD entitled *Journey of Faith* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005).

7. Susan P. Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1993), 106.

8. In addition to the examples cited above, see 2 Nephi 5:5; Enos 1:3; Mosiah 18:4–5; etc.

Testament."⁹ Certainly, the same observation proves correct for the Book of Mormon.

Though Living Hope Ministries attempts to portray the Book of Mormon as an irrational piece of nineteenth-century fiction, from a biblical perspective there is obviously nothing extraordinary in the idea of a seer "prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Nephi 1:4). Ancient Israel witnessed its fair share of false prophets who feigned divine authority in their predictions. Hence Lehi's biblical contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, specifically identified a true messenger as one who had "perceived and heard [God's] word" (Jeremiah 23:18). In Jeremiah 23:18, "perceived" is the King James translation for the Hebrew verb *ra ah,* which means, in its most basic sense, "to see."¹⁰ Therefore, according to the stipulations provided by Jeremiah, a true prophet had both *seen* and *heard* God's word.

In his own account, Nephi demonstrates an evident awareness of this biblical standard. Immediately after describing his father Lehi's experience with a biblical-like pillar of fire, Nephi specifically notes that Lehi "*saw* and *heard* much; and because of the things which he *saw* and *heard* he did quake and tremble exceedingly" (1 Nephi 1:6). Nephi also informs his readers that Lehi "went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both *seen* and *heard,* . . . and he testified that the things which he *saw* and *heard* . . . manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah" (1 Nephi 1:18–19). In this opening chapter of the Book of Mormon, Nephi matches his apparent effort to portray Lehi as a true prophet, who had *seen* and *heard* God's word, with a continuous repetition of the biblical designation *my father.*

The Book of Mormon commences with Nephi's statement "I make a record in the language of *my father*" (1 Nephi 1:2). Indeed, Nephi's expression *my father* appears a total of twelve times in the initial

9. Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London: SCM, 1963), 27, 29.

10. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:1157.

twenty-two verses of the Book of Mormon. The repetition provides yet another significant link between the Bible and the Book of Mormon ignored by Living Hope Ministries in their quest to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is not comparable to the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament, "there are certain well-known passages in which the prophetic leader is called *abi*, 'my father,'" a title previously unknown in that sense to the prophet Joseph Smith, yet apparently recognized by the prophet Nephi.[11] "And Elisha saw it," reports the author of 2 Kings concerning the chief prophet Elijah's ascent into heaven, "and he cried, My father, my father . . ." (2 Kings 2:12). In reality, these types of subtle cultural and religious links between the Bible and the Book of Mormon appear continuously throughout the Nephite record.[12] Therefore, in a film allegedly devoted to a comparison between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, Living Hope Ministries should have acknowledged at least a few of these numerous connections. Yet, of course, its real agenda was based on neither objectivity nor genuine scholarship.

Contrary to the assertions of critics like Kramer and his associates, the teachings presented throughout the Book of Mormon are clearly contiguous with the Bible. Book of Mormon sermons rely extensively on the literary, cultural, and religious traditions of ancient Israel. One of the classic biblical themes presented throughout the Book of Mormon includes the notion of rising from the dust. This Book of Mormon admonition reflects the account of man's creation described in Genesis 2:7. The imagery of rising from the dust held considerable meaning for Lehi, who, following his initial admonition in 2 Nephi 1:21, continued the theme: "Shake off the chains with which ye are bound, and come forth out of obscurity, and arise from the dust" (2 Nephi 1:23).

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11. James G. Williams, "The Prophetic 'Father': A Brief Explanation of the Term 'Sons of the Prophets,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 345.

12. For a recent survey concerning several literary, cultural, and religious links between the Book of Mormon and the Bible, see David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage, 2003).

Lehi's repetitive invitation reflects the use of creation imagery in the Old Testament. In an important study devoted to an analysis of this motif, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has illustrated that the Bible features a connection between rising from the dust and enthronement.[13] "To be taken 'from the dust,'" he notes, "means to be elevated from *obscurity* to royal office and to return to dust means to be deprived of that office and returned to *obscurity*."[14] Lehi's use of this biblical image clearly reflects Brueggemann's observation: "Come forth out of *obscurity*, and arise from the dust" (2 Nephi 1:23). Unfortunately, by ignoring these sorts of crucial links between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, Living Hope Ministries stands guilty of a misrepresentation. In this film in which Kramer and his anti-Mormon colleagues attempt to answer the question "is the Book of Mormon comparable to the Bible?" viewers should expect to encounter at least a few references to these sorts of links. However, not only do the producers of the film reveal their ignorance of these issues, but, even more seriously, Living Hope Ministries manifests a tendency toward intentional distortion.

One of the clearest examples of falsification is the subject of coinage in the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, Living Hope Ministries is guilty of presenting the false impression that the Book of Mormon actually describes the use of coins in Alma 11. Hence, according to the film's logic, the Bible has more evidence for historicity than the Book of Mormon because archaeologists have uncovered coins in the Old World, but have yet to do so in the New. In reality, when it comes to biblical coinage, "very little metal money is found at Palestinian sites from ca. 1300 to 587 B.C.E."[15] And for good reason: The first coins were struck in western Asia Minor in the late seventh or early sixth century BC.[16] The original Book of Mormon family would have had very little, in any, exposure to this medium of exchange.

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13. Walter Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84 (1972): 1–18.

14. Brueggemann, "From Dust to Kingship," 2.

15. John W. Betlyon, "Coinage," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1078.

16. Betlyon, "Coinage," 1079.

Since money in the Old Testament does not refer to coins, Kramer and company err in their argument. "The references [to Old Testament money] designate measures of value in goods or in precious metals. The metals are not coined, however, in specific weights."[17] Alma 11 does not describe a coinage system but rather a weights-and-measures system in which the Nephites "altered their reckoning and their measure, according to the minds and the circumstances of the people" (v. 4). Surely Living Hope Ministries was aware of the fact that the chapter summary placed at the beginning of Alma 11, which includes the word *coinage,* is not part of the actual text. Why would they falsify? Perhaps because the use of measures instead of coinage in the Book of Mormon provides evidence for its historicity.

Another example of deception in the film includes the producers' scorn of the Book of Mormon phrase *reformed Egyptian*. In their efforts to dismantle the Book of Mormon, Living Hope Ministries presents the false impression that the term *reformed Egyptian* appears in the Book of Mormon as a proper name. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Instead, the word *reformed* functions as an adjective, meaning "altered, modified, or changed."[18] Mormon, for example, directly states that "the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, [were] handed down and altered by us" and that "none other people knoweth our language" (Mormon 9:32, 34). Thus, according to Mormon, the Nephites altered the form or shape of the Egyptian characters. The Book of Mormon expression *reformed Egyptian* describes the Egyptian system modified and adapted to suit Nephite needs. According to this definition, archaeologists have uncovered important examples of reformed Egyptian, including hieratic and Demotic.[19] There are also a number of historical examples of Semitic languages written in a "reformed" or modified Egyptian script.[20] In a staged scene, the film

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17. Betlyon, "Coinage," 1076.

18. See William J. Hamblin, "Reformed Egyptian," at farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=transcripts&id=36 (accessed 7 March 2006).

19. For a general introduction on hieroglyphs, see W. V. Davies, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs* (London: British Museum Publications, 1987).

20. See John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, "Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–63.

presents a segment with evangelical scholar Simon Gathercole denying the validity of the Book of Mormon reference to reformed Egyptian. However, Book of Mormon scholars have made information concerning the legitimacy of the expression completely accessible, leaving no excuse for Gathercole's dramatic question, "What's ancient reformed Egyptian?"

On a related subject, the same deception holds true for the film's segment regarding Nephite literacy. Living Hope Ministries attempts to land a crucial blow against the Book of Mormon's historicity on the grounds of the scarcity of Egyptian or Hebraic scripts discovered in areas associated with Book of Mormon geography. Contrary to the film's assertion, though, the Book of Mormon never claims that a large literate population inhabited ancient America. In presenting the information in Helaman 3:15, Living Hope Ministries neglects to include the subsequent verse, which specifically states that the written records "have been handed down from one generation to another" (v. 16). This reference does not suggest that the Nephites produced a large supply of written documents. To the contrary, the ability to hand down the written documents described in verse 15 places an obvious limitation upon these texts.

According to the Book of Mormon, the Nephites originated from the land of Jerusalem ca. 600 bc. Studies have indisputably shown that literacy rates in ancient Israel were quite low, especially when compared with contemporary Western standards.[21] In the words of biblical scholar James Crenshaw,

> An agricultural economy such as that prevailing in Judah and Israel provided few inducements to formal education, despite the rhetoric in Deut. 6:9 encouraging the people to write the commandments on doorposts and gates. In fact, the de-

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21. See Ian M. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence: Part I," *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998): 239–53; and Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence: Part II," *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998): 408–22; compare the conservative response by Richard S. Hess, "Literacy in Iron Age Israel," in *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of "Biblical Israel,"* ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 82–102.

mands of daily chores—tending sheep and goats, preparing land for cultivation, attending to olive groves and vineyards—discouraged formal schooling.[22]

As a result, "it was [evidently] normal practice in antiquity for people to read out loud, and hence interested but illiterate bystanders would be able to obtain the information presented in the text."[23] In harmony with this trend, Nephi demonstrates a need to explain the source of his unusual talent: "I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; . . . therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:1–2).

A cursory survey of Book of Mormon references to the issue of literacy supports a conclusion exactly opposite to the view proposed by Living Hope Ministries. Most Book of Mormon texts suggest that the vast majority of Book of Mormon people, much like their biblical counterparts, lacked the basic ability to read, let alone to write and leave epigraphic remains:

> Now it came to pass that I, Nephi, did teach my brethren these things; and it came to pass that *I did read many things to them*, which were engraven upon the plates of brass. . . . And *I did read many things unto them* which were written in the books of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer *I did read unto them* that which was written by the prophet Isaiah. (1 Nephi 19:22–23)

> And now *I read unto you* the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that they are not written in your hearts; I perceive that ye have studied and taught iniquity the most part of your lives. (Mosiah 13:11)

> And it came to pass that *Mosiah did read, and caused to be read*, the records of Zeniff to his people; yea, *he read* the

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22. James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 39.
23. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Part II," 422.

records of the people of Zeniff, from the time they left the
land of Zarahemla until they returned again. (Mosiah 25:5)

And it came to pass that when Aaron saw that the king
would believe his words, he began from the creation of Adam,
reading the scriptures unto the king. (Alma 22:12)

This general Book of Mormon trend certainly relates to the evidence
regarding literacy levels in the ancient Near East, a fact rendering Peter
Williams's observation in the film regarding literate societies, that they
leave written records, completely irrelevant. Besides, the Nephites *did*
leave behind a written record—that is, the Book of Mormon.

In another error, Kramer appears in the film's background elic-
iting an invalid comment made by Rabbi Chaim Richman regard-
ing Israelite temples and 2 Nephi 5:16, a Book of Mormon verse that
refers to the Nephites' building a temple like unto Solomon's. While
Rabbi Richman's statement regarding most contemporary Jews' reject-
ing the notion of a temple anywhere outside Jerusalem may be true,
ancient Israelites clearly did not share this belief. Rabbi Richman fails
to recognize that "although the Hebrew Bible emphatically declared
the Jerusalem Temple to be the sole legitimate site for Israelite wor-
ship during the monarchial era, other temples and shrines are known
through textual and architectural remains."[24] Archeological evidence
suggests that Jews actually continued to build temples outside the city of
Jerusalem during the Hellenistic and Persian periods.[25] Biblical scholar
Joong Ho Chong has gone so far as to suggest that religious Jews living
in Babylon during the exilic period probably built temples in the land
of Mesopotamia.[26]

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24. Beth A. Nakhai, "Temples: Syro-Palestinian Temples," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East,* ed. Eric M. Meyers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5:173.

25. Edward F. Campbell Jr., "Jewish Shrines of the Hellenistic and Persian Periods," in *Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900–1975),* ed. Frank Moore Cross (Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 159–67.

26. Joong Ho Chong, "Were There Yahwistic Sanctuaries in Babylonia?" *Asia Journal of Theology* 10/1 (1996): 198–217.

The general scholarly consensus seems to hold that the view espoused by Rabbi Richman concerning Jerusalem as the *only* place that God chose for a temple represents a much later theological development.[27] Ronald Clements suggests that this notion, witnessed for example in Deuteronomy 12, originally developed in the Babylonian exile out of a fear that the destruction of the Jerusalem temple would discredit the holy city in the minds of Jews.[28] Clearly, the mandate espoused by Rabbi Richman would have had no relevancy for the Nephites.

In their discussion of the alleged lack of evidence for pinpointing Book of Mormon geography, Kramer and Johnson deliberately neglect the Book of Mormon's internal evidence, which quite frequently indicates a strong case for toponymic links with Hebrew. For example, one of the important Book of Mormon sites ignored throughout the film is the city Jershon. In recent years, scholars have noted the connection between the Book of Mormon name *Jershon* and the triliteral Hebraic root *yrš*, meaning "to inherit."[29] Though the name *Jershon* does not appear in the Bible, it serves in the Book of Mormon as a designation for the land given to the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi as an inheritance. Filled with compassion for their converted brethren, the Nephites declared, "this land Jershon is the land which we will give our brethren for an *inheritance*" (Alma 27:22; see also 27:24, 26; 35:14).[30] In addition to this link, the Book of Mormon contains another startling piece of evidence connecting ancient Near Eastern traditions regarding acts of possession with the land of Jershon.

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27. For an introduction to the basic issues, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23–52.

28. Ronald E. Clements, "The Deuteronomic Law of Centralisation and the Catastrophe of 587 b.c.," in *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason,* ed. John Barton and David J. Reimer (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 5–25; for an alternative conservative view, see Pekka Pitkänen, *Central Sanctuary and Centralization of Worship in Ancient Israel from the Settlement to the Building of Solomon's Temple* (New Jersey: Gorgias, 2003), who suggests that the mandate to build a temple only in the place that God chose did not prohibit the construction of additional non-Jerusalem shrines.

29. Research by Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Origin of Three Book of Mormon Place-Names," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon,* ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 89.

30. Ricks and Tvedtnes, "Hebrew Origin," 89.

In a treatise concerning legal symbolism in Mesopotamia, Israeli scholar Meir Malul has noted the significance of the Akkadian expression "*i/ana (libbi) x ar dum*," meaning "'to descend to x.'"[31] This expression occurs in one sale document from Old Babylonian Susa, two Nuzi texts, a Middle Babylonian letter, and a neo-Babylonian sale document. Three other Old Babylonian texts from Susa contain the variation *ana m tim ar dum,* "'to descend to the land,'" which seems to convey a special nuance of the general meaning common to this and other expressions—claiming and taking possession of something.[32] The expression "to go down to x" as a symbol of possession also appears in the Old Testament:

> And it came to pass, when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, *to take possession* of it. And the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Arise, *go down* to meet Ahab king of Israel . . . he is in the vineyard of Naboth, whither he is *gone down to possess it.* (1 Kings 21:16–18, emphasis added)

In this passage detailing King Ahab's efforts to obtain the vineyard of Naboth, the Hebrew word translated as "to possess" is the verb *yrš,* the same root that provides the apparent base for the proper noun *Jershon* in the Book of Mormon.

A similar usage to that witnessed in Mesopotamian legal documents and the Old Testament also appears in the Book of Mormon's description of Jershon: "And they [the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi] *went down* into the land of Jershon, and *took possession* of the land of Jershon" (Alma 27:26).

The Book of Mormon contains further examples of the technical expression *to go down to x* in the context of possession/inheritance. The prophet Nephi, for example, twice incorporated this statement into his speech prior to the acquisition of the brass plates. Through

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31. See Meir Malul, *Studies in Mesopotamian Legal Symbolism* (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon & Bercker, 1988), 391–92; Malul, " q b 'Heel' and qab 'To Supplant' and the Concept of Succession in the Jacob-Esau Narratives," *Vetus Testamentum* 46/2 (1996): 198.

32. Malul, *Studies in Mesopotamian Legal Symbolism*, 391–92.

the power of repetition, Nephi contrasted the idea of descending to his father *possessionless* with descending to the land of Lehi's *possessions*:

> We will not *go down* unto our father in the wilderness until we have accomplished the thing which the Lord commanded us. . . . therefore *let us go down* to the land of our father's *inheritance*, for behold he left gold and silver, and all manner of riches. (1 Nephi 3:15–16)

These statements concerning descent and possession supply additional evidence for understanding Jershon as an authentic location specifically designated for the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi as a place of inheritance. This connection between Book of Mormon geography and ancient Semitic languages and culture reveals the types of important clues that the film *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* all too conveniently neglects.

In their efforts to contrast the supposedly rational, historical nature of the Bible with the purportedly irrational, fictitious framework of the Book of Mormon, Living Hope Ministries includes a variety of misleading statements from archaeologists and theologians familiar with the Bible and the ancient Near East. Because of this, the film leaves viewers with the erroneous perspective that scholars have verified the Bible's historicity. However, much of the archaeological and textual evidence accepted by contemporary biblical scholars proves detrimental to the views advocated by groups like Living Hope Ministries.

In his recent book describing the archaeological and textual evidence for religious developments in ancient Israel, prominent Near Eastern archaeologist William Dever notes:

> A generation ago, when I was a graduate student, biblical scholars were nearly unanimous in thinking that monotheism had been predominant in ancient Israelite religion from the beginning—not just as an "ideal," but as the reality. Today all that has changed. Virtually all mainstream scholars (and even a few conservatives) acknowledge that true monotheism emerged only in the period of the exile in Babylon in the 6th

century B.C., as the canon of the Hebrew Bible was taking shape. . . .

I have suggested, along with most scholars, that the emergence of monotheism—of exclusive Yahwism—was largely a response to the tragic experience of the exile.[33]

While problematic for many Christians, these views endorsed by "virtually all mainstream scholars" present few, if any, challenges for Latter-day Saints. The fact that biblical Israel was originally henotheistic, meaning that it worshipped one God while acknowledging the existence of other deities, stands in harmony with Latter-day Saint beliefs, marking a strong tie between modern revelation and the ancient world.

Sadly, Living Hope Ministries ignores the implications of contemporary archaeological and biblical discoveries. "Of course, no archaeologist can deny that the Bible contains legends, characters, and story fragments that reach far back in time," state Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman in their recent survey, *The Bible Unearthed.* "But archaeology can show that the Torah and the Deuteronomistic History bear unmistakable hallmarks of their initial compilation in the seventh century BCE."[34] If groups like Living Hope Ministries wish to support their beliefs with contemporary scholarly evidence, they carry an ethical responsibility to acknowledge the significant problems that this evidence presents for their own religious and historical views.[35] Most contemporary biblical scholars reject the historical and

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33. William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 294–95, 297.

34. Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 23.

35. Of course, acceptance of every critical theory held by contemporary biblical scholars would present unique challenges for Book of Mormon historicity. Presumably, Living Hope Ministries avoided addressing topics such as Deutero-Isaiah and source criticism since these issues stand in direct conflict with an evangelical approach to the Bible and would have also negated their erroneous claim that current scholarship supports a conservative assessment of biblical historicity. For an analysis of the relationship between higher criticism and the Book of Mormon, see Kevin L. Barney, "Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis," *Dialogue* 33/1 (2000): 57–99. For a scholarly assessment of the relationship

theological perspectives Living Hope Ministries associates with the Bible.

If anything, the film *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* provides evidence that anti-Mormons still have a long way to go before they can claim to have contributed to the discussion regarding Book of Mormon historicity. True, Egypt existed. True, Babylon existed. And yes, we know that Israel *also* existed. But does the mere attestation of these cultures sustain the validity of biblical history and theology, especially as interpreted by Living Hope Ministries? Contrary to the assertions featured in the film *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon,* acceptance of the Bible as a spiritual guide requires faith on the part of its reader, just as it does for a belief in the religious validity of the Book of Mormon. In my opinion, it is both deceptive and spiritually problematic for anyone to suggest otherwise.

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between history and the Hebrew Bible, see Marc Z. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995).