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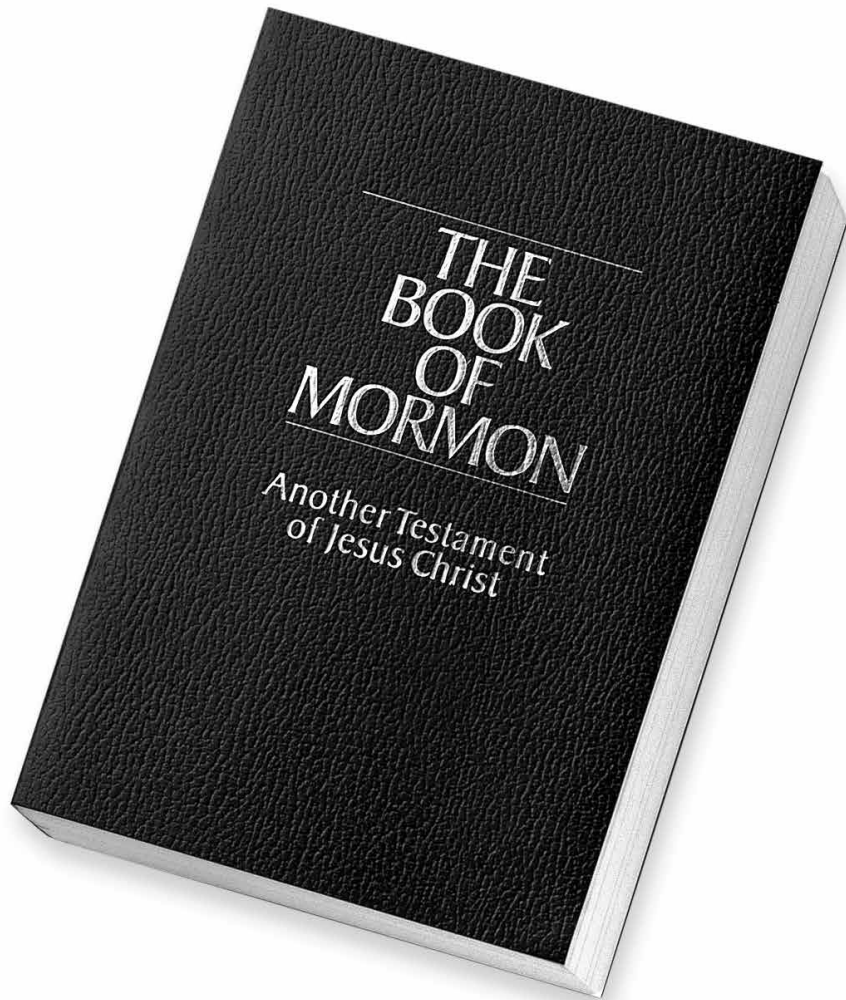
The Book, the Words of the Book: What the Book of Mormon Says about Its Own Coming Forth

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The Book of Mormon says many things about its coming forth.

Photograph by Emily Webb, Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

The Book, the Words of the Book: What the Book of Mormon Says about Its Own Coming Forth

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Joseph Smith famously claimed that the Book of Mormon is “the most correct of any book on earth.”¹ There are several ways that this statement can be understood. It is usually taken to mean that the principles and doctrines contained in the Book of Mormon are trustworthy, that the history recounted in the volume is real, or that the divinely orchestrated way the book was transmitted to the modern world ensured its freedom from corruption. Perhaps a fourth interpretation deserves consideration. Unlike biblical scripture, the Book of Mormon constantly explains to its readers its divine purposes, the sources from which it was produced, and the circumstances surrounding its coming forth. Perhaps part of what makes this book so correct is this element of self-awareness.² Certainly, readers of this incomparable volume of scripture would do well to pay close attention to everything the Book of Mormon has to say about itself. It not only *is* scripture, but it tells us a good deal about *what it means* for it to be scripture.

Importantly, among the topics the Book of Mormon addresses when it reflects on its own nature is the story and meaning of its latter-day coming forth. Historians have, of course, taught us and can teach us much about the

coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Yet, given all the Book of Mormon has to say about itself, *it too* ought to be granted a voice in conversations about this topic. And importantly, some of what the Book of Mormon says about the meaning of its own coming forth can be read as outlining a critique of the way modern historians usually go about their work. My aim in this article is to provide an exposition of this theme internal to the Book of Mormon. I will begin rather broadly, reviewing in a first section on the general relationship the Book of Mormon bears to itself in passages where it reflects on its own nature and meaning. But then, over the course of the next two sections, I will focus at length on 2 Nephi 27:15–20, the most suggestive of the Book of Mormon’s reflections on the meaning of its own modern-day coming forth. In a fourth and final section, I will draw general theological conclusions in light of the interpretation set forth in the course of the article. In the end, I hope to have shown that 2 Nephi 27:15–20 can be interpreted as providing a guide to what it means to receive and to read the Book of Mormon in the way it should be received and read. We can learn much from reading this passage carefully.

A Book about a Book

In a helpful contribution to the *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, Professor Clyde J. Williams has outlined several themes addressed in the Book of Mormon that concern the coming forth of the book.³ These deserve some attention here by way of introduction.

Perhaps chief among the themes the Book of Mormon addresses in connection with its own coming forth is the role it is to play in indicating the reanimation of God’s work in redeeming Israel. This is highlighted at what many readers of the Book of Mormon recognize as the volume’s climax: Jesus Christ’s visit to the New World shortly after his Resurrection. In the lengthiest recorded sermon given by Christ on that occasion, the latter-day appearance of the Book of Mormon is described as “a sign” marking the commencement of “the fulfilling of the covenant which [the Lord] hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel” (3 Nephi 21:7). Six hundred years earlier, Nephi (son of Lehi) sees in vision that “the work of the Father” in fulfilling the same covenant would commence only once the Book of Mormon had begun to circulate among the Gentiles and the remnant of Israel (1 Nephi 14:17). Throughout the volume, the event of the Book of Mormon’s appearance is marked as a turning point in history.

The Book of Mormon also has much to say about the events leading up to that turning point. The same vision of Nephi provides a broad outline of history from the time of Jesus’ mortal sojourn to the time of the Book of Mormon’s translation and publication (see 1 Nephi 11–13). Reflecting on that vision later, both Nephi himself and his distant descendant Moroni, the last of the volume’s contributors, decry the wickedness that would prevail at the time of the book’s coming forth.⁴ Both prophesy of a day when “it shall be said that miracles are done away” (Mormon 8:26; see also 2 Nephi 27:23) and when people will “deny the power of God” (2 Nephi 28:5; see also Mormon 8:28). Working against such skepticism, Book of Mormon prophets insist that the book would be translated “by the power of God” (Mormon 8:16).

Despite their confidence in the truth of the Book of Mormon, the prophets who write the most about its coming forth worry deeply about its reception. Nephi sees that many would reject the Book of Mormon as an unnecessary—if not blasphemous—supplement to the Christian Bible (see 2 Nephi 29:3). He condemns that attitude in the strongest possible terms, but he nonetheless worries about not being “mighty in writing,” concerned that readers would “esteem” his writings as “things of naught” (2 Nephi 33:1–2). Moroni too expresses his anxiety that readers would “condemn” the Book of Mormon “because of the imperfections which are in it” (Mormon 8:12). In a particularly poignant passage, Moroni describes a desperate prayer he once raised about what he had begun to regard as the inevitable rejection of the Book of Mormon. Citing, like Nephi, his “weakness in writing” (Ether 12:23), Moroni tells the Lord of his “fear” that the learned people of the last days would “mock” at the sacred history his father had recorded (Ether 12:25).

Two distressing events surrounding the translation of the Book of Mormon especially seem to worry its contributors. First, Christ during his visit to Lehi’s children seems to refer to Martin Harris’s losing the translated Book of Lehi, as well as to the lost manuscript’s subsequent replacement by the translation of the small plates of Nephi.⁵ Both Nephi and Mormon thus speak of the “wise purpose” of the Lord in having the small plates prepared (1 Nephi 9:5; Words of Mormon 1:7), but the fragility of the entire operation reveals itself in the fact that the Lord has recourse to a contingency plan. Second, Nephi prophesies of the critical response of the “learned” Charles Anthon to Martin Harris’s report concerning the gold plates (2 Nephi 27:15–20). Although, as Richard L. Bushman has put it, “Martin Harris came back



A replica of the gold plates.

Photograph by Philip S. Shurtleff. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

[from his visit with Anthon] more convinced than before,” the unrepentant rejection of the translation by the scholar seems to worry Nephi.⁶

The anxiety that both Nephi and Moroni express apparently merits a divine reply. In response to Moroni’s worried prayer, the Lord explains that the weakness with which the authors of the Book of Mormon write is a divine gift: “I give unto men weakness” (Ether 12:27). It would seem that, according to the Book of Mormon itself, the weakness that would cause so many to reject this “most correct of any book” is *intentional* and of *divine origin*. In other words, it would seem that the Book of Mormon is supposed to be received as something produced in weakness. At the same time, it is apparently supposed to be received with a genuine confession of one’s own divinely granted weakness as well. Only readers who fail to see *their own* weakness condemn the book because of the weakness *of its authors*.⁷

This last point, in my view, is the most important thing the Book of Mormon has to say about its own coming forth. In Nephi’s prophecy concerning Charles Anthon’s rejection of the miraculous nature of the Book of Mormon, a full—if nonetheless subtle—clarification of this point is to be found. In close analysis of that prophecy, it is possible to learn what the prophets of the Book of Mormon expect of those who would allow the book to come forth in the right way.

Nephi’s Prophecy

In 2 Nephi 27, in a remarkable adaptation of some of Isaiah’s writings, Nephi prophetically denounces the sins characteristic of the day of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth.⁸ At the heart of this prophetic denunciation is Nephi’s richly suggestive prophecy of the Anthon incident. In a way, Anthon’s prophesied response to the Book of Mormon is representative of an entire era’s response to the Book of Mormon. Key to both his prophetic presentation of the Anthon incident and his nuanced adaptation of Isaiah is a subtle distinction Nephi finds in Isaiah 29:11–12, a distinction he then amplifies in his own inventive “likening” of that text. The distinction in question is that between a certain *book* and its *words*. The original Isaiah text famously discusses a sealed book delivered in succession to someone who lacks the authority to break the seal on the book and someone who lacks the learning to read even an unsealed book. Isaiah makes reference to this book in order to draw a comparison between the inaccessibility of “the words” of such a sealed book and the disappointing reception of his own prophetic “vision” (Isaiah 29:11).

Such, at any rate, is the standard interpretation of the original text.⁹ Nephi, however, seems to have noted a crucial ambiguity in Isaiah's words. Here is the familiar King James Version of the text: "And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned" (Isaiah 29:11–12). Notice, early in this passage, that what "men deliver to one that is learned" can be interpreted as *either* the sealed book itself *or* the words of the sealed book.¹⁰ While the former represents the standard interpretation, the latter marks the interpretive path Nephi follows. Rather than assuming that one and the same object—"the book"—is given to both the learned and the unlearned, Nephi takes Isaiah to distinguish between what is given to each of these audiences. To the learned are delivered only *the words of* the book, but to the unlearned is delivered *the book itself*. Consequently, where the standard interpretation of the Isaiah passage understands the words of the book to be inaccessible and the book itself to be available for circulation (albeit in unreadable form), Nephi understands the words of the book to be available for circulation and the book itself to be inaccessible (due to its being sealed).

This interpretive approach to Isaiah is central to everything Nephi says about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in 2 Nephi 27—and especially to what he says about the right way the Book of Mormon is to be received by its readers. With unwavering consistency, he distinguishes between "the book" (see vv. 7–13, 15, 17, 18–19) and "the words of the book" (see vv. 6, 9, 14–15, 19, 20), likening the former to just the gold plates—the physical historical artifact as a discrete object—and the latter to the plates' actual transmissible intellectual content, what one now reads under the title of "The Book of Mormon."¹¹ From the outset of Nephi's account of the Book of Mormon's emergence, it is the words of the book, much more than the book itself, that are meant to accomplish God's purposes (see 2 Nephi 27:6). And, as Nephi continues his prophecy, he makes clear that God accomplishes his purposes with those words largely by keeping them at a certain distance from the book that is their source.

The latter-day situation in which the Book of Mormon originally appears, according to Nephi, is best characterized by Isaiah's famous words quoted in Joseph Smith's canonical account of the First Vision: "This people draw near unto me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed

their hearts far from me, and their fear towards me is taught by the precepts of men" (2 Nephi 27:25; see also Isaiah 29:13 and Joseph Smith—History 1:19). This situation, already detailed earlier in this paper, calls for divine intervention, "a marvelous work and a wonder," which is meant explicitly to make "perish" the "wisdom of their wise and learned" and the "understanding of their prudent" (2 Nephi 27:26). More specifically, this "marvelous work" is to reveal that God remains "a God of miracles," and especially that God works "among the children of men" always and only "according to their faith" (2 Nephi 27:23). The Book of Mormon, as Nephi understands it, is designed to call into question certain secular and academic prejudices about God and scripture. What those prejudices are becomes clear only as Nephi's account of God's intentions with both the book and the words of the book unfolds.

The Restoration begins, in Nephi's prophecy, with the appearance of the words of the book: "And it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered" (2 Nephi 27:6). As for the book itself (the gold plates), it "shall be sealed" (2 Nephi 27:7), such that it "shall be kept from" circulation (2 Nephi 27:8) with the exception of its being delivered to one man, whom readers readily identify as Joseph Smith. That one man "shall deliver the words of the book . . . unto another" (2 Nephi 27:9), but never "the book" itself, "sealed" as it is "by the power of God" (2 Nephi 27:10). Even as the words of the book are passed along, then, "the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it"—except for a few selected to "testify to the truth of the book," familiar to readers as the Three and the Eight Witnesses (2 Nephi 27:12). Again, it is only the words of the book that circulate in a more general way. Those words are first delivered, as noted above, "unto another," who turns out to have the task of "show[ing] them unto the learned" (2 Nephi 27:15). Even before the words of the book begin to circulate generally, the learned have an opportunity to consider them.

Readers of Nephi's prophecy are quick to associate this last detail with a very specific event: Martin Harris's 1828 journey to New York City to have a fraction of Joseph Smith's efforts at translation certified by Charles Anthon. Such an interpretation is, of course, entirely justified (I have already been drawing on this interpretation here), but it is not the only possible interpretation of the text. The way Nephi shapes his description of this event *both* "secure[s] a connection between the prophecy of Isaiah and the Anthon incident" *and* "allegorize[s] that latter-day incident," generalizing its implications

to teach a broader lesson.¹² Note that in 2 Nephi 27:16, the second verse reporting on the incident, “the learned” (words that at first seem to refer only to one person, Charles Anthon) has a plural referent: “because of the glory of the world and to get gain will *they* say this, and not for the glory of God” (emphasis added).¹³ What happens with Charles Anthon in Nephi’s anticipatory prophecy is thus a figure or a type of *every* learned encounter with the Book of Mormon. And because Nephi claims that the Book of Mormon is meant to confront the prejudices, precisely, *of the learned*, the figural reading of this incident is crucial to understanding what Nephi takes to be the meaning of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth. We would do well to read quite carefully Nephi’s account of the Anthon incident, symbolic as well as literal in nature.

The Learned and the Unlearned

The typical Anthon incident, as Nephi predicts it, begins with just the words of the book being delivered “to another, that he may show them unto the learned, saying: Read this, I pray thee” (2 Nephi 27:15). The book itself meanwhile remains in the possession of “him to whom [the Lord] shall deliver” it (2 Nephi 27:15). The prophesied response of the learned to the request to read the book’s words is crucial: “And the learned shall say: Bring hither the book, and I will read them” (2 Nephi 27:15). The details are important here. The response of the learned is to demand access to *the book* so as to read *the words* of the book (“them”), the words which have already been presented to the learned. In other words, the learned here already have access to the words of the book but apparently insist on reading those words *only* when it is possible to compare them with the book itself. In the end, though, this is unsurprising. To read in a learned way is, often enough, to set side by side presently available accounts with relevant material artifacts. The historian retrieves from the archives the material traces of historical events and then mobilizes those traces against standard accounts of the relevant history. The archaeologist retrieves from geological strata the material traces of past cultures and then mobilizes those traces against standard accounts of those cultures’ practices. The biologist retrieves from the sphere of living organisms material data and then mobilizes that data against standard accounts of how life operates. The learned too naturally respond to the words of the book—to the record known today as the Book of Mormon—by insisting that they are intelligible *only* when set side by side with relevant material artifacts and

data. If the gold plates are not themselves available, then one must read the words of the book only when they can be interpreted in light of concrete historical and archaeological facts: unearthed ancient altars and temples on the one hand, and known historical trends from the nineteenth century on the other. What Nephi seems to mean by the “learned” approach to the words of the book is the modern insistence that the *best* or the *truest* or the *realist* understanding of the Book of Mormon is always what we call today a historical-critical reading.¹⁴

Nephi anticipates all of this. Far beyond the immediate circumstances of the Anthon incident, Nephi prophetically predicts that many of the Book of Mormon’s readers will insist on approaching it *solely* according to the canons of secular historiography. Whether in an attempt to attack the book by drawing parallels between its words and “every error and almost every truth discussed in N. York” between 1820 and 1830,¹⁵ or whether in an attempt to defend the book by drawing parallels between its words and the “miraculous preservation of the remains, ruins, records and reminiscences” of ancient American civilizations,¹⁶ the chief response of modern readers of the Book of Mormon has been to ask for concrete historical artifacts in order to read and interpret the book *at all*.

According to Nephi, the motivations behind the learned’s resistance to wrestling directly with the words of the book are not innocent: “And now, because of the glory of the world and to get gain will they say this, and not for the glory of God” (2 Nephi 27:16). As much comfort as one might take in assuming that this verse refers solely to Charles Anthon and his supposedly corrupt motivations, it is in this verse that it first becomes clear that “the learned” has a plural referent: “they.” Here especially, then, those whom Nephi means to criticize seem to be *all* the learned readers of the Book of Mormon. It seems Nephi worries that it is too easy to demand a learned approach to the Book of Mormon for problematic reasons, largely to impress “the world” or to defend one’s own credibility rather than to promote “the glory of God.” This is a danger as much for defenders as for critics of the book. When confronted with the words of the book, even believers face the very real temptation to give all their attention to historical and archaeological questions, letting God’s glory play second fiddle to academic respectability. (Of course, one can assume that Nephi would have been rather pleased with scholarly interpretation of the Book of Mormon when it *does* aim at promoting God’s glory above all else, but his words here should make every scholarly

interpreter think more than twice about whether her or his motivations are as pure as she or he would like to believe—mine certainly included! In Nephi's view, too much is at stake just to assume that all is well in our interpretive work on the Book of Mormon.)

Whatever the motivations of the learned for wanting to see the book itself alongside its words, that desire must remain unfulfilled. Nephi reports, "And the man shall say: I cannot bring the book, for it is sealed" (2 Nephi 27:17). This may be the most mysterious moment in the text. The divine seal placed on the gold plates frustrates the desire of the learned. In fact, that seal effectively renders impossible their desired approach to the text. Thus learned interpretation, strictly speaking, cannot be pursued when it comes to the Book of Mormon—at least not in any straightforward way¹⁷—and Nephi suggests that this is by divine design! Should God have desired at any point in the past two centuries to indicate the whereabouts of Zarahemla or the land of Nephi, he certainly could have done so. Should God have desired to make known where archaeological work could produce irrefutable evidence of the Book of Mormon's ancient historicity, he could have done that as well. And of course, it remains entirely possible that future archaeological work will reveal long-sought evidence. In the meanwhile, however, it is as if a divine seal has been placed on the identifiable archaeological remains of every Book of Mormon settlement, in addition to being placed on the gold plates themselves. The relevant material artifacts *still* make themselves inaccessible to every learned reader of the book, as if God were *still* attempting to force readers to give their attention first and foremost to the words of the book—if not, in fact, to them alone.

How do the learned respond to this situation? According to Nephi, the response is negative: "Then shall the learned say: I cannot read it" (2 Nephi 27:18). Nephi identifies a problem here, the likelihood that the learned will insist always and only on a learned reading. If the material artifact cannot be placed alongside the received words of the book, the learned will say that the words simply cannot be read. (By implication, those who are happy to wrestle with the words of the book while pursuing critical interpretation are not among those Nephi means to criticize.) The problem, it seems, is that the learned too often know and embrace only *one* way of approaching scripture, only *one* way of making sense of how God intervenes in the world. And that one way always involves strictly scholarly, strictly historical-critical, work.

A further detail deserves notice here. Nephi does not conclude his prophecy after reporting the response of the learned to their restricted access; rather, he goes on to report the response of the unlearned to their parallel situation. Actually, strictly speaking there is only *one* unlearned person referred to in Nephi's prophecy. He refers only to "him that is not learned" and "the man that is not learned," never pluralizing the referent as he does with "the learned" (2 Nephi 27:19).¹⁸ Thus, whereas one should be hesitant to restrict Nephi's talk of the learned to the Anthon incident alone, it seems best to understand the referent of "him that is not learned" to be Joseph Smith alone. The reason for this is clear, actually. The one person referred to as unlearned has been, from the beginning, "him to whom [the Lord God] shall deliver the book"—that is, he who has been given divinely granted access to the gold plates (2 Nephi 27:15)—and that seems only to have been Joseph Smith. The situation of the unlearned is thus at once parallel to and yet quite distinct from that of the learned in Nephi's prophecy. Nephi reports, "Wherefore it shall come to pass, that the Lord God will deliver again the book and the words thereof to him that is not learned" (2 Nephi 27:19). The unlearned—Joseph Smith—is presented with both the words of the book, which are entirely available also to the learned, and also the book itself, which the learned demand to see but to which they are refused access.

The prophesied response to the situation of the unlearned is ironic: "the man that is not learned shall say: I am not learned" (2 Nephi 27:19). Presented with the scholar's dream of placing the text of the Book of Mormon side by side with concrete historical artifacts, Joseph Smith, on Nephi's prediction, at first assumes that he is supposed to serve as some kind of scholar, to begin producing something of an academic nature.¹⁹ Nephi records the Lord's predicted response to Joseph's confusion: "Then shall the Lord God say unto him: The learned shall not read them, for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee" (2 Nephi 27:20). Joseph Smith, the unlearned one, finds laid before him the resources wished for by the learned. And yet the Lord intends, according to Nephi, that the Prophet entirely ignore the historical artifact in order just to "read the words" given directly to him. According to the Book of Mormon itself, the gold plates were to play no actual role in the translation of the book. And, as eyewitness accounts reveal and historians remind us, the gold plates in fact did not play any direct role in the translation. "Joseph looked in the seerstone, and the plates lay covered on the table."²⁰ According

to Nephi, this set-up was meant to demonstrate that the Lord is “able to do [his] own work” (2 Nephi 27:20).

Receiving the Words of the Book

Throughout the course of Nephi’s prophecy, the Lord *intentionally* keeps the words of the book (that is, the Book of Mormon as translated) at a distance from the book itself (the historical artifact of the gold plates). Extrapolating from this prophecy, one can *perhaps* say—as I have ventured to suggest above—that the Lord just as intentionally keeps the Book of Mormon today at a distance from relevant historical traces. The Lord, Nephi might be read as saying, insists that the Book of Mormon be received in the last days first and foremost as a collection of words, words that must be read on their own terms rather than always and only according to the canons of modern historiography. Indeed, it might be possible to say that the Book of Mormon is deliberately intended to contest the canons of modern historiography—to cause “the wisdom of their wise and learned” to “perish” (2 Nephi 27:26). It seems Nephi wishes his readers to believe that the lack of definitive “scientific” evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon is by divine design. That is, it seems that we modern readers are supposed to relate to the words of this remarkable book primarily in some other, essentially nonscientific, way. If we insist on approaching those words only or even primarily in strictly secular and academic terms, it appears that we will be among “the learned” who “shall not read them” (2 Nephi 27:20).

From the problematic perspective of modern secular society—which was already fully formed by the time of Joseph Smith—one would likely say that what has been described in the preceding pages amounts to a fundamental weakness. That the Book of Mormon cannot be directly corroborated by definitive archaeological or historiographical evidence means that Latter-day Saints cannot definitively demonstrate the truth of their treasured scripture to the skeptical. This is what worries Moroni. He frets openly over the many reasons the book’s modern readers would have to “mock at [his and his father’s] words” (Ether 12:25). But in response to Moroni’s worries, as described at the outset of this article, the Lord explains that weakness is a direct and intentional gift: “I give unto men weakness” (Ether 12:27). On one interpretation of these texts, what appears from a secular point of view to be a weakness is actually an intentional feature of the Book of Mormon—in fact a divine gift! Moreover, as the Lord explains to Moroni, such weakness,

if embraced appropriately, *is strength*: “if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). While there is a tendency to read this passage as suggesting that weaknesses can be replaced by strengths, it is probably more correct—and certainly more theologically satisfying—to read it as claiming that weakness, rightly embraced, is itself strength.²¹ In other words, potential “weakness” (as perceived by those Nephi calls “the learned”) in the Book of Mormon and its authors can actually become strength to those who approach the book in humility. Those who approach the book arrogantly demanding proofs of its historicity (and perhaps even believers who come to pin their faith or others’ faith on the possibility of establishing its historicity) cannot discover the book’s essential strength.

In the Lord’s words to Moroni, human beings are commended to see their weakness so that God’s strength might be revealed in them. Whether or not they comply, it might be said that the Book of Mormon’s authors *see their own weakness*, and for that very reason, *God’s strength is revealed* in the words of that book. This, again, may be what especially makes the Book of Mormon the most correct of any book. At any rate, Nephi makes this point in his prophecy. The more strictly historical the Book of Mormon becomes, the more it inevitably slips into the ancient world. And the more the Book of Mormon disappears into the ancient world, the less it can have to say to the modern world.²² But God’s intentions with the words of this book are unmistakably that they remain central and relevant to the life of faith. At any rate, it seems that Nephi quotes the Lord as saying that his reason for cutting the Book of Mormon off from relevant historical traces—even the gold plates themselves!—is to demonstrate something about the life of faith: “For behold, I am God; and I am a God of miracles; and I will show unto the world that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever; and I work not among the children of men save it be according to their faith” (2 Nephi 27:23). On the reading of Nephi I have presented here, the Lord, in bringing forth the Book of Mormon, deliberately frustrates the possibility of relating to the book in any way other than that of faith. Only if the words of the book are read in faith—without access to the gold plates, without the opportunity to wander through the ruins of Zarahemla, without the resources required for strict historical investigation—will the book testify to its readers of a God of miracles.

In this sense, then, the weakness that readers of the Book of Mormon too often attribute to its authors—if not to the book itself—is precisely

its strength. It has become increasingly clear to biblical interpreters how much is lost when one demands that all textual interpretation be scientific in nature. Consequently, recent decades have seen a profound shift from strictly historical-critical work on biblical texts to theological investigation of the canonical presentation of biblical texts.²³ In my view, Latter-day Saint scholars and lay readers should recognize something similar with respect to the Book of Mormon, a book that seems to demand that a similar shift take place. Its prophets seem to have foreseen a day in which the scientific study of religions would usurp the place of deeply devoted but still rigorous interpretation of scripture. The Book of Mormon's prophets foresaw such a day and decried it, pleading with their eventual readers to give their attention to the Book of Mormon in a rather different spirit—and in turn also give their attention to the Bible in a rather different spirit. Nephi's hope, at least, was that the peculiar circumstances surrounding the emergence of the Book of Mormon, a set of words to be taken on faith, might help to turn some among modern society to the task of reading scripture in the right way.

What I have just said should not be construed as implying that the only proper reading of scripture is careless reading, or reading aimed solely at feeling the Spirit through an encounter with the text. To see what Nephi is apparently saying about reading scripture, it is necessary to read his words carefully, thoughtfully, even theologically. What Nephi recommends is, on my interpretation, not *careless* reading, but a rather *different sort of care* in careful reading. After the dawn of the secular age, we have come to believe that all care worthy of the name is scientific or academic. But there is another sort of care. It might be called literary care, a certain care for structures and themes, for repeated words and canonical intentions. Or it might be called theological care, a certain care for relevance and implication, for deep reflection and readerly response. Whatever such care should be called, it is unmistakably called for by the Book of Mormon itself.

The Book of Mormon, I believe, speaks to modern readers with remarkable strength. The Lord seems to speak in it as he did to Isaiah: “with a strong hand” and with instruction that we “should not walk in the way of this people” (Isaiah 8:11). In this way, the Book of Mormon gives a robust theological account of the era of its own emergence. It richly describes its own coming forth. Unfortunately, for most of the two centuries since the words of the book first began to circulate, the Book of Mormon has been far more conscious of itself than have the Latter-day Saints—far more conscious of its themes, of

its purposes, of its authors' weaknesses, and even of the circumstances of its coming forth.²⁴ The Book of Mormon, in other words, has perhaps been far more correct about itself than we have collectively been about it. The fact is that the Book of Mormon is still only just beginning to come forth, since we are still in the early stages of reading it seriously. Perhaps it can begin to come forth more fully in our own generation, and perhaps we will therefore begin to hear more clearly what it has to say to us. **RE**

Notes

1. Introduction to the Book of Mormon.
2. I am indebted to George Handley for this insight.
3. Clyde James Williams, “Book of Mormon, What It Says about Itself,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 163–65.
4. Grant Hardy has noted the peculiar attention Moroni seems to have paid to Nephi's writings of a thousand years earlier. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 248–67.
5. This seems, at any rate, the best interpretation of Jesus' reference to a servant who is “marred” because of “those who will not believe,” only to have the Lord “heal” him to show that his (the Lord's) “wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil” (3 Nephi 21:9–10). For a detailed defense of this reading, see Gaye Strathearn and Jacob Moody, “Christ's Interpretation of Isaiah 52's ‘My Servant’ in 3 Nephi,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 1 (2009): 4–15.
6. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 65.
7. See Adam S. Miller, “A Hermeneutics of Weakness,” in *Rube Goldberg Machines* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 99–105.
8. For a helpful analysis of Nephi's adaptation of Isaiah in 2 Nephi 26–27, see Heather and Grant Hardy, “How Nephi Shapes His Readers' Perceptions of Isaiah,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: Reading 2 Nephi 26–27*, ed. Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2014), 37–62.
9. See, for instance, standard commentaries from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum: Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 403–6; and John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 532.
10. This ambiguity is present also in the original Hebrew due to the use of the Hebrew word *asher* (translated “which”), which does not distinguish between singular and plural subjects. It should be noted, though, that verse 12 explicitly states that “the book” (rather than “the words of the book”) is delivered to “him that is *not* learned.”
11. For purposes of presentation, I here ignore another important element of Nephi's prophetic adaptation of Isaiah. In addition to the words of the book and the book itself, Nephi refers to “a revelation” contained in the book, the very “words” of which “are sealed” (2 Nephi 27:7–11). For a nice delineation of these several elements, see Julie A. P. Frederick,

“Seals, Symbols, and Sacred Texts: Sealing and the Book of Mormon,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 79–91.

12. George Handley, “On the Moral Risks of Reading Scripture,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 106. Handley captures this point in a nice formula: Nephi passes “through specification to a kind of generalization.” “Moral Risks of Reading Scripture,” 105.

13. The referent of “the learned” is also plural in verse 20: “the learned shall not read them, for *they* have rejected them” (emphasis added). It is presumably in order to pluralize the referent of “the learned” that Nephi alters the wording of the Isaiah text slightly in his borrowing. Isaiah 29:11 (both in Hebrew and in English) refers to “one that is learned” to whom the words of the book are delivered. 2 Nephi 27:15, however, refers not to “one that is learned,” but simply to “the learned,” making possible a plural referent. One might object, however, that whenever Nephi quotes the learned themselves, he has them speak in the singular first person: “I will read them” (2 Nephi 27:15) and “I cannot read it” (2 Nephi 27:18). It nonetheless seems to me better to read these quotations not as suggesting that Nephi has reference to just one learned person in his discussion, but rather as indicating that learned persons speak for themselves individually.

14. Of course, Nephi in no way suggests that there is no place for such “learned” readings of the Book of Mormon, only that something is amiss where they are privileged above all others.

15. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon; with an Examination of Its Internal and External Evidences, and a Refutation of Its Pretences to Divine Authority* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832), 13.

16. “Zarahemla,” *Times and Seasons*, October 1, 1842, 927.

17. Hugh Nibley famously skirted the straightforward approach to the learned interpretation of the Book of Mormon. Rather than insisting on setting the received text side by side with directly relevant archaeological or historical evidence—evidence that, for the most part, remains unavailable—Nibley placed the Book of Mormon into a larger fabric of indirectly relevant archaeological and historical considerations: patterns and trends discernible in the literatures of the ancient world rather generally. Nibley and many who have followed in his footsteps have thus attempted a rather different sort of learned interpretation of the Book of Mormon than even Nephi seems to anticipate. Even this approach, however, is subject to the same dangers and temptations Nephi identifies in connection with more straightforward learned interpretations. For Nibley’s direct defense of his approach to the Book of Mormon, see Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988).

18. The unlearned is again referred to in verse 20 simply as “him,” and then eventually in verse 24 as “him that shall read the words that shall be delivered him.” Throughout, there is only one unlearned person in question in Nephi’s prophecy.

19. Interestingly, recent work on the history surrounding the translation of the Book of Mormon suggests that Joseph Smith and Martin Harris in fact *did* assume that their work with the gold plates was to be at least semi-academic in nature—an assumption that partly motivated Harris’s trip to meet with Anthon. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 39–59.

20. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 71. For much more detail and information, see MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*.

21. Such an interpretation is strengthened when one considers similar passages in the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. There the Lord’s words to Paul were as follows: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). From this Paul concludes, “When I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10).

22. The same should be said, incidentally, for any account that insists that the Book of Mormon is the product of the nineteenth century. As Joseph Smith’s era recedes more and more into the past, the Book of Mormon would inevitably become less and less relevant to our times. *Every* insistence on reducing the Book of Mormon to its historical bearings—whether ancient or modern—threatens to trap it in the past.

23. For the relevant history, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 1–114.

24. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62–88.