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**Abstract** This article discusses the meaning of the term *record* and explains how it applies to the Book of Mormon.

## THE BOOK OF MORMON AS RECORD

Louis Midgley

We have included several reviews and articles on the Book of Mormon in this issue of the *Review*. In none of these essays is there an explicit effort made to demonstrate the historical authenticity of Mormon's book, since this is assumed or taken for granted. These authors have their own reasons for doing this. But setting out those reasons is not their intention, though these essays bear witness of their faith. In each instance there is a prior commitment to the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. In addition, none of these authors see themselves as proving the Book of Mormon, something both unnecessary and impossible. Instead, the authors seek to uncover and examine what they consider to be the unusually complex and subtle message embedded in the text or, in one instance, to ensure that what is believed about the Book of Mormon's recovery and publication is accurate.

Authors who do not assume that the Book of Mormon is or at least could be an authentic ancient text and hence a divine special revelation must necessarily strive to explain it away. Of course, when it is read as a kind of hodgepodge somehow cobbled together by Joseph Smith or fabricated by a sly, sinister group of conspirators determined to play a hoax on easily duped, incredulous rustics, the book is read differently than when it is read as an ancient text. When it is read as a strictly nineteenth-century composition—perhaps as Joseph's effort,

either pious or pernicious, to sort out his own internal and family conflicts or to settle for himself and others the troubling sectarian conflicts of his day—much of the book’s complexity and richness, as well as its strangeness, must be denied or explained away. Even the way in which it presents itself as a *record* must be ignored.

### Records . . .

The noun *record(s)* appears in the Book of Mormon some 210 times,<sup>1</sup> often in the senses of *bearing record* and preserving or keeping *records* of things of worth such as genealogies and accounts<sup>2</sup> of events, or what we call history. The Book of Mormon is itself such a record, or it presents itself as such and is taken as such by the faithful, who read it as the product of a recording or bearing record of genuine words and deeds, including past encounters with the divine. The noun *record* thus seems to identify something done and something to be cherished, as well as something that has been or must be written and can and must be preserved, enhanced, and then pondered and obeyed with one’s mind or heart.

The most primitive or basic way of recording or keeping in mind words and deeds was and still is to write them on the heart—that is, by memorizing them and thereby remembering them. Our English words *record* (verb) and *record* (noun) come from Old French *recorder*, which was borrowed from the Latin *recordari* (*re-* = again + *cor-*, *cord* = heart). Something thus written on the heart includes the notions of telling, reciting, and testifying/bearing witness. When we place something in the heart, or memorize it, we are reminded of our solemn duty in connection with it. In addition, we inscribe words and deeds so that others now and in the distant future can know and thus access

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1. The word counts for *record(s)* and *account(s)* are based on R. Gary Shapiro, comp., *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publishing, 1977). Incidentally, the verb *record* appears in the Book of Mormon only once, in an Isaiah quotation at 2 Nephi 18:2.

2. The word *account(s)* appears in the Book of Mormon some eighty times, most often as a synonym for the nouns *record* or *recording*. See, for example, Ether 1:1–6, where the giving of an account of events and written records are yoked.

and remember these same words and deeds.<sup>3</sup> The wonders of writing in creating written memos or memorials seem crucial in accomplishing this end.

All of this is embedded in our scriptures. For example, the apostle Peter once wrote a letter warning the Saints not to be “forgetful of the cleansing of past sins” as they sought to enter “into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” He also indicated that he intended “to keep on reminding” the Saints of the things they presumably already knew. He clearly believed it was requisite to refresh their memories. Hence the Saints “should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles” (2 Peter 1:9, 11, 12; 3:1-2 NRSV). In the case of the New Testament, these written admonitions, some of which were placed in letters, were eventually canonized as the New Testament (or covenant). It seems that such written texts were recorded in an effort to ensure that the Saints could remember the mighty divine deeds on their behalf and hence also what in their covenants they promised to do. Today we periodically renew our covenants so that we will remember and keep the commandments of God and thus be worthy of the name *Saint* and eventually be justified before God.

The Book of Mormon is an essentially historical text in which mighty acts of God are recorded. The words and deeds therein memorialized include sacred covenants that God made with Lehi and his faithful followers, as well as descriptions of the difficulties flowing from failures to fully keep the commandments that form the moral horizon of those covenants. Also included in the record are appeals to older covenants that God made with Abraham and Moses and their descendants; these seem to have been preserved as part of a sacred history contained in what Nephi called “the record of the Jews” (1 Nephi 3:3). Additionally, the pride and apostasy of a once-faithful people are recorded in detail, seemingly as a dire warning to all those who are tempted to forget and hence fail to keep God’s commandments.

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3. The phrase “to break a record,” because it suggests going beyond the routine or ordinary, refers to something genuinely worthy of being set down in a permanent record.

We learn early in the Book of Mormon narrative of the Lord's commission to Nephi and his brothers to secure for their father, and thus also for his extended family, "the record of the Jews" (1 Nephi 3:2-4). This record held, among other things, the genealogy of Lehi's own people as well a version of what Jews call "the Law and Prophets," though not all of what we now call the Old Testament. This record was kept in the treasury of one Laban (or, as we will see in one of the essays in this issue, someone that Nephi, writing years after the incident, labels as a "Laban"). In addition, Lehi and those who followed him had, we are told, entered into a covenant to keep their own sacred record (e.g., Mosiah 12:8), which was to contain, among other things, a full account of the struggles and woes of those associated with Lehi's colony and their descendants. This record was written from the perspective of those commissioned to provide this account. It is also assembled and written from the controlling perspective of Mormon, the final redactor.

These records were, we are informed, to be preserved "for a wise purpose" (1 Nephi 9:5), or, when some specific end was mentioned, "for other wise purposes" (19:3). Some of these purposes are eventually set forth or hinted at. The most detailed account of the necessity of preserving and enlarging the sacred record, even or especially with all the dreadful works of darkness that discomfit and distress the covenant people of God, is provided by Alma in his instructions to his son Helaman, to whom he entrusted the Nephite records (see Alma 37).

### **. . . Written on the Mind and Heart**

But we must ask: why all this fuss about written records? The most obvious explanation is that since our memories are frail, even among those people who rely upon oral traditions, some permanent written form is needed and must be preserved for a wise but not entirely known purpose. So we now strive to supplement or replace fragile oral traditions by having scribes transcribe, copy, and circulate them, as well as by having presses eventually publish what is recorded. In faithful communities such written records are intended to provoke memory and thereby inspire strict obedience to the commandments

of God. When one properly and fully remembers and keeps those laws, then one's name is inscribed in a heavenly book of remembrance (e.g., Malachi 3:16). But we must learn to focus on truly significant historical events and not on the flotsam on the debris-covered surface of events. We must develop an anticipation of divine faithfulness as well as a reverence for the past and the mighty acts of God that took place on behalf of his covenant people. Then we must merge that past with a relevant present, including the many dour and sour tales of apostasy, and also with a glorious and triumphal anticipated future for faithfulness on our part.

While there is a demand for communal obedience manifesting our clan's success in remembering and keeping God's laws, there is also a plea for personal remembrance (Jeremiah 15:15). The proper manifestation of faith is a memorial—the law written on the broken or crushed heart and shown in our obedient deeds. Remembrance is not mere curiosity, nor is it nostalgia for a lost innocence in which faith once had a place in one's heart or in the hearts of one's ancestors but is no longer really alive and well. These are merely somber manifestations of faithless forgetfulness and apostasy. We must come to understand our present circumstances, including our own trials and tribulations, as we endure our probation in the light of the record of past and promised future divine faithfulness by striving to keep the covenant our Lord and Savior once made with his people and has now made or offered to make with us.

### **Some Notes on the Book of Mormon in This Issue of the *Review***

In 1995 Oxford University Press began a series, now approaching two hundred titles, carrying the subtitle *A Very Short Introduction* (hereafter *VSI*). These pocket-sized volumes of just over a hundred pages are designed to make a variety of subjects more accessible to curious readers. On the topic of what can be called “religions,” the *VSI* series includes the following: Norman Solomon, *Judaism* (2000); Malise Ruthven, *Islam* (2000); Kim Knott, *Hinduism* (2000); Gerald O'Collins, *Catholicism* (2001); Julian Baggani, *Atheism* (2003); Linda Woodhead, *Christianity* (2004); and Mark Chapman, *Anglicanism*

(2006). In April 2008, Oxford also issued Richard Lyman Bushman's *Mormonism*. In addition, one can find *VSI* volumes on important religious figures such as Augustine, Spinoza, and Muhammad, as well as volumes on the sacred texts of several faith communities, including John Riches, *The Bible* (2000), Michael Cook, *The Koran* (2000), Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament* (2008), and Kyle Keefer, *The New Testament as Literature* (2008).

We are pleased to announce that later this year Oxford will publish Terryl Givens's *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. Instead of reviewing this book, we have included in this issue of the *Review* the entire second chapter, entitled "Themes." We believe that even Latter-day Saints who consider themselves close students of the Book of Mormon will learn much from what Givens has to say in his remarkable book. Much like *By the Hand of Mormon*, his earlier scholarly treatment of the text grounding the faith of the Saints,<sup>4</sup> this *VSI* treatment of the Book of Mormon makes an important contribution to the study of this crucial founding text. Yet there are some radical differences between *By the Hand of Mormon* and this *VSI* primer on the Book of Mormon. In the latter, Givens does not begin by describing the book's recovery or by setting out and assessing the controversy the book has generated. Instead, he examines its actual contents. Whether familiar with the Book of Mormon or not, the reader will be introduced directly to its subtle complexities.

In the chapter reproduced here, Givens also demonstrates that the Book of Mormon pictures sacred scripture as "fluid, diffuse, and infi-

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4. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2002), made available in paperback in 2003. In this book Givens deals with essentially the full range of issues surrounding the Book of Mormon—its recovery, the controversy it elicited, its place in the way the Saints have understood their relationship with divine things, and so forth. And with the publication of this book, Givens became the premier figure in Mormon studies. See also his *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford, 1997), which is a survey of literary anti-Mormonism and the closest thing to a history of that bizarre, unseemly endeavor. Latter-day Saint historians, for various reasons, seem to have avoided dealing fully and directly with this important topic. Givens has, in addition to numerous essays, published *The Latter-day Saint Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004) and *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford, 2007).



nitely generable” and that “prophetic utterances cannot be final or permanently fixed.” In addition, the understanding of divine special revelation set forth in the complicated narrative found in the Book of Mormon now shapes and informs the way the Saints encounter divine things.

Without wishing to slight in the least any of the other contributors to this issue of the *Review*, I also wish to call special attention to Brant Gardner’s close attention to what he sees as Mormon’s method and controlling message as set out in the text he wrote and redacted.<sup>5</sup> Gardner, I believe, demonstrates that what we have is truly Mormon’s book and hence the message he sought to convey to us, its future readers.

In addition, we have both a book review and an essay that examine the story with which the Book of Mormon begins—that is, the unpleasant, even terrible account of the efforts of Lehi’s sons to gain possession of the “record of the Jews.”<sup>6</sup> Both of these essays draw on recent literary theory in an effort to uncover the rich, deep structure and major motifs embedded in our English text. In these and other essays herein, we see what I consider to be the beginnings of a profitable line of inquiry into the Book of Mormon—one capable of opening up the meaning of language otherwise only partly comprehended by readers. Such studies set the table, offering what might be seen as the appetizer or perhaps the opening course for the full dinner that awaits us but is not yet entirely before us.

We can, of course, even now enjoy the fruits of a careful study of the Book of Mormon as we strive to offer our own memorial of remembrance to the God who gave us such a rich scriptural treasure. We must thereby learn to see our own present situation in light of God’s faithfulness in the past. We should keep in mind that God also remembers the covenants he has made with us, even when we go missing. In endeavoring to give our own acceptable offering to the Lord, we should, as the Psalmist advises, “bless the Lord . . . and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2).<sup>7</sup>

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5. See herein Brant Gardner, “Mormon’s Editorial Method and Meta-Message.”

6. See herein Alan Goff, “How Should We Then Read? Reading Mormon Scripture after the Fall”; and Steven Olsen, “The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation.”

7. I am especially gratified that the essays herein by Terryl Givens and Steven Olsen have drawn attention to the crucial role of remembrance in the Book of Mormon.

