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### Themes

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**Abstract** Givens first recounts the six visions that Nephi records in the Book of Mormon. He then suggests five themes from these visions: personal revelation, focus on Jesus Christ, wilderness and varieties of Zion, new configurations of scripture, and the centrality of family. Finally, he expands on each of these themes individually, explaining how they are illustrated throughout the Book of Mormon.

## THEMES

Terryl L. Givens

What is Nephi's place and moment in time, which he asserts so emphatically? The city of Jerusalem, he tells us, at the very beginning of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah (roughly 600 BC). This information anchors the narrative in secular history, even as it establishes the first of many interconnections with biblical history and texts. (This date becomes one of three temporal reference points that orient and ground all subsequent history in the Book of Mormon. The other two will be the inauguration of a government based on reigning judges, at around 91 BC, and the third the birth of Jesus Christ.) It is a moment of acute national crisis for Judah. A few years earlier, the reforming king Josiah had died in battle against Egypt, which then made Judah its vassal. After Egypt's subsequent defeat at Carchemish by Babylon in 605 BC, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, took thousands captive, and made the small kingdom its vassal, installing Josiah's son Jehoiakim as puppet king. In spite of the outspoken warnings of the prophet Jeremiah, Jehoiakim attempted to defect to Egypt, incurring reprisals from Babylon. When Jehoiakim died in 597 BC, his son Jehoiachin served only three months before Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of Babylon, installed another of Josiah's sons, Mattaniah, renaming him Zedekiah.

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This essay will appear as chapter 2 of Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2010). It is printed here courtesy of the author and by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

The authors of the biblical books of Kings and Chronicles describe the undeviating descent of Judah from the pinnacle of righteousness under good king Josiah into increasing spiritual wickedness under subsequent rulers, culminating in open hostility between the prophet Jeremiah and the royal house. As Zedekiah assumes the throne, his choice of loyalty or rebellion, political as well as spiritual, will decide Judah's fate. This is the scene when Nephi opens the curtain on his narrative, writing that "in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Nephi 1:4).

This pluralism of prophets and prophecy becomes one of the most significant features of the world that Nephi sets about chronicling. This is evident in the very next sentence, when Nephi's own father, Lehi, who emerges as one of these "many prophets," experiences the first of six visions and revelations that Nephi records. Because these visions introduce several principal themes that will occupy the Book of Mormon from its first page to its last, we will consider how they are introduced and then examine each individually.

### Six Visions

We know virtually nothing for certain of Lehi or his background except that he is a person of wealth and, as his wife laments and Lehi agrees, is a "visionary man" (1 Nephi 5:2, 4). His first recorded vision occurs as he is praying "with all his heart" on behalf of his people (1:5). Strangely, this is the only one of Lehi's visions about whose content we are told nothing at all. Nephi simply reveals that as Lehi prayed, "there came a pillar of fire . . . and he saw and heard much" (v. 6). No details of the message, no particulars of any message, are available to distract from the fact of the visitation itself, given to a man who shares neither the public prestige nor, so far as we can tell, the national stewardship of his contemporary Jeremiah. What we do have is the sheer fact of a personal revelation, apparently containing images and words ("he saw and heard much"), that comes as a result of petitionary prayer and profoundly affects the recipient. This definition of revelation as propositional, or content-bearing, will become one of the dominant

themes of the Book of Mormon, even as it is manifested in the lives of a broadening range of recipients.

Immediately following his first vision, Lehi returns to his home and experiences a second vision. This one takes the form initially of a theophany, or vision of God, and calls to mind the divine assembly described in Old Testament passages like Psalm 82 or 2 Chronicles 18. Lehi sees “God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.” Then follows a sight that is decidedly without Old Testament precedent: “And it came to pass that he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Nephi 1:8–10). Christians have not shrunk from reading messianic prophecies into the psalms or passages from Isaiah and Zechariah. But nothing biblical approaches the degree of specificity with which Book of Mormon prophets and writers detail their anticipation of a Christ, six centuries before his birth. Christocentrism pervades the text from its first pages to its last.

Following this vision, which includes foreshadowings of the destruction of Jerusalem, Lehi preaches repentance to an unreceptive populace. Like Jeremiah’s exhortations, which led to his persecution and imprisonment, Lehi’s public warnings prompt threats against his life. Consequently, Lehi receives a third vision, wherein God commands him to take his family and flee into the wilderness. Lehi promptly complies, setting in motion the principal action of the early Book of Mormon, the family’s journey to and settlement of a new world. This exodus also establishes a structural motif, as the first of many *hegiras* the Book of Mormon records. Flight from the old Jerusalem and building new ones, scattering and gathering, covenantal integrity in the midst of apostasy and dispersion and a “land of promise”—all these constitute variants of the Book of Mormon’s recurring theme of building Zion in the wilderness.

After a journey of three days, Lehi and his family make camp. There, in the wilderness south of Jerusalem, Lehi has a fourth dream-vision,

in which he is commanded to send his four sons back to Jerusalem to secure a record of the Jews together with a family genealogy, inscribed on plates of brass (1 Nephi 3:2–4). This is a formidable challenge because the plates are in the possession of one Laban, apparently a Jewish official of some standing. Twice the brothers fail, almost losing their lives in the process. Nephi himself returns a third time and succeeds unaided, but only through the extreme measure of killing a drunken and helpless Laban at the persistent urging of “the Spirit.” The cost in expense, effort, and human life demonstrates and justifies a profound valuation of scripture—a concept that comes to be developed in the Book of Mormon in ways very unlike Catholic and Protestant notions.

Once in possession of the brass plates, Lehi relates yet another divine mandate he has received, this time sending his sons on a quest presumably more to their liking: obtaining wives. If they had harbored doubts about the duration or remoteness of their exile, the command to acquire companions before continuing must have told them that their flight was a definitive exile. Lehi’s sons and daughters need companions if the band of refugees is to have a sustainable future—or, as expressed in the scripture, “his sons should take daughters to wife, that they might raise up seed unto the Lord” (1 Nephi 7:1). This concern with family and posterity, and the fervent hope that descendants will prosper in the face of contention, schism, and eventual civil war, reinforce this narrative’s essential identity as a clan history. Like the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, the Book of Mormon, especially in its initial self-conceiving, is an epic family drama.

Nephi describes one more vision Lehi experienced shortly after the return of the sons bringing the family of Ishmael with their prospective brides (and presumably grooms). By far the most extensive of his chronicled visions, and the most memorable in the Book of Mormon, this one culminates and subsumes the long chain of heavenly revelations already recorded. The central image in his vision is a tree with resplendent white fruit, “desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). Other features of the allegorical dream include a large and spacious building, a rod of iron, a spacious field and a fountain of waters, and Lehi’s family and multitudes of people. But now, in the pages following Lehi’s descrip-

tion of his dream, the narrative takes a peculiar and momentous shift, for Nephi records for the first time that in the aftermath of his father's vision, he goes to the Lord in prayer, desiring that he may also "behold the things which [his] father saw" (11:3).

The Spirit of the Lord appears to him and at first leaves him in doubt as to the propriety of his request. Does he not believe his father's account? Why then ask for his own version? Assured by Nephi that he does indeed trust the words of his father, the prophet and patriarch Lehi, the Spirit breaks into a hosanna shout and blesses Nephi for seeking his personal revelatory experience. Nephi then records his version of the vision, which exceeds his father's in points of detail. It is thus by virtue of the repetition of Lehi's final vision through his son Nephi that the principal themes already outlined are reiterated and reconfirmed. First, the very circumstance of the vision's duplication for Nephi's benefit emphatically attests to the desirability and worthiness of the quest for personal revelation. The apparent redundancy of the vision, and its bestowal on an individual outside the channels of prophetic leadership or patriarchal direction, point to a more egalitarian, decentralized, less priestly version of revelation than is typical of Old Testament texts. Nephi summarizes this lesson, the backbone of his people's entire scriptural and religious history, when he writes that his desire "to see, and hear, and know" the things of God "by the power of the Holy Ghost" will be granted by God "unto all those who diligently seek him. . . . For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come" (1 Nephi 10:17, 19).

The Christocentrism of Nephi's vision is powerfully manifest in the answer to his question concerning the meaning of the central, commanding image of the vision, a magnificent tree with white fruit. Instead of receiving an answer in words, Nephi is shown the Virgin Mary, bearing the young Christ in her arms. He then apprehends that the fruit of the tree signifies the love of God, concretized in the gift of his son. He sees as well the Savior's ministry and crucifixion, and in a dramatic coda to the gospel version of the passion and resurrection,

Nephi also witnesses the risen Christ appearing to his own future descendants in “the land of promise.” Christ, then, is the governing image in this vision, the consummation of all righteous desire, and the historical culmination of the process of exile and new-world building that Lehi initiates.

With that land of promise, we come again to the theme of the third vision—Zion and wilderness. The prior mention of that motif makes sense of Lehi’s unusual emphasis on the temporal and geographical details of his present vision. His very first words of description referred to “a dark and dreary wilderness” (1 Nephi 8:4). A man appears proposing to guide him, but it still takes “the space of many hours in darkness” to reach a spacious field on the other side of “a dark and dreary waste” (vv. 7–8). That may at first sound like a metaphorical refuge at the end of a spiritual wilderness, but Nephi’s account emphasizes the literal, historical dimensions of successive promised lands and blessed eras. He details the dispensation of Christ’s life and ministry, and the passing of that age into darkness; he witnesses the flourishing of his posterity, in a “land of promise” far from Jerusalem, and the eventual apostasy of that civilization, as “darkness [covers] the face of the land of promise”; he sees Christ’s post-resurrection visit to the survivors, and the reestablishment of yet another golden age of righteousness that lasts three generations before descending back into a night of sin; and he watches as yet another work of righteousness is established, this time referred to as Zion, and prophesied to be established among the Gentiles in the latter days (1 Nephi 11–15).

The final two themes are reintroduced in connection with the dominating image of the tree of life itself. In the vicinity of the tree are throngs of people—lost, wandering, or striving to reach its fruit. Shrouds of mist obscure the path, but a conspicuous rod of iron leads along the bank of a river, through the darkness, straight to the tree. Only those who cling to it are successful in their quest. The troublesome brothers ask Nephi the meaning of this iron rod and are told, “It [is] the word of God” (1 Nephi 15:24). The importance of scripture is depicted metaphorically here; as recounted in the Book of Mormon



itself, national as well as individual spiritual survival is tied to its availability.

Finally, Lehi's vision of the tree of life is framed at both ends and marked internally by his parental preoccupation. "I have seen a vision," he says by way of introduction, "and behold, because of the thing which I have seen, I have reason to rejoice because of Nephi and also of Sam. . . . But behold, Laman and Lemuel, I fear exceedingly because of you" (1 Nephi 8:2–4).

The reason for his fear is the scene that unfolds in the vicinity of the tree of life, the fruit of which Lehi samples, finding it "most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted" (v. 11). Finding that it "filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy" (v. 12), he immediately desires that his family should likewise partake. Looking around for his wife and children, he beckons to several of them, who come and share in the delicious fruit. Laman and Lemuel alone refuse to come and partake. In recounting the long and complex epiphany he has experienced, with its elements of peril and salvation, Christology, national destiny, and apocalypse, Lehi begins and ends with a reference to his parental concern for his children.

These five themes—personal revelation, Christ, varieties of Zion, new configurations of scripture, and the centrality of family—constitute the backbone of five distinct narratives that constitute the sacred record.

### Personal Revelation

One influential theologian has written, "God's revelation of Himself always occurs in such a way as to manifest more deeply his inaccessibility to our thought and imagination. All that we can know is the world. God is not the world. . . . He is Mystery."<sup>1</sup> Another contemporary religious scholar, Elizabeth A. Johnson, agrees, and sees this as a dominant motif in Christian thought:

The history of theology is replete with this truth: recall Augustine's insight that if we have understood, then what we have understood is not God; Anselm's argument that God is that

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1. Emil Brunner, *Our Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 11–12.

than which nothing greater can be conceived; Hildegard's vision of God's glory as Living Light that blinded her sight; Aquinas's working rule that we can know that God is and what God is not, but not what God is; Luther's stress on the hiddenness of God's glory in the shame of the cross; Simone Weil's conviction that there is nothing that resembles what she can conceive of when she says the word God; Sallie McFague's insistence on imaginative leaps into metaphor since no language about God is adequate and all of it is improper.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the God of the Book of Mormon.

It is hard to talk about revelation *in* the Book of Mormon without talking about the revelation *of* the Book of Mormon. We shall turn to the modern translation and publication of the Book of Mormon later. Suffice it for now to say that the process by which the Book of Mormon itself came into existence enacts and epitomizes the principle of revelation the record is at such pains to foster and promote. As we saw, the book opens upon a scene of prophets and prophecy set in a time of extreme national peril. Within pages, however, the focus shifts from the city of Jerusalem and her inhabitants to the destiny of a man named Lehi and his family who flee into the wilderness. As the focus narrows, the manifestations of divine communication, the interactions with God and his interventions in human life, do not decrease but are multiplied. (This shift of direction, from a public prophet advocating national repentance for the sake of collective survival in the face of geopolitical crisis to a father contending for the preservation of his sons and daughters in the wilderness, is a perfect example of the

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2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 7. Her citations are Augustine, *Sermo* 52, ch. 6, n. 16 (*Patrologia Latina* 38.360); Anselm, *Proslogium*, chaps. 2–3, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974); Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist, 1990), bk. 1, vision 1, *Studia Theologica* I, q. 3, preface; Martin Luther, theses 19 and 20, "The Heidelberg Disputation," in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, trans. and ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 32; and Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 35 and *passim*.

Book of Mormon's tendency to abruptly shift the ground under our feet. Time and again, we see familiar themes and motifs invoked—revelation, Christ, Zion, scripture—only to have the narrative swerve in a direction that reconfigures or reorients the thematic treatment.) “Prophecy was preeminently the privilege of the prophets,” writes one scholar of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup> Prophecy is “exegesis of existence from a divine perspective,” writes Abraham Heschel.<sup>4</sup> In the Book of Mormon, this is emphatically not the case. Prophecy and revelation contract into the sphere of the quotidian, the personal, and the immediate, where they proliferate and flourish.

There are indications that the writers of the Book of Mormon intended the prevailing message of the book to be, in fact, openness to radically individualistic and literalistic conceptions of divine communication to mortals, that is, dialogic revelation. The kind of revelation we are referring to is seen in the Old Testament most memorably in Moses's encounter with God on Mount Sinai, when it is recorded that “the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exodus 33:11), or in Abraham's prolonged exchange with God over the fate of Sodom, when they haggle over numbers like a housewife and a shopkeeper (Genesis 18). The anthropomorphism of these stories, figurative or mythical as it may be to today's readers, is certainly understood literally by the writer. “And the Lord went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham: and Abraham returned unto his place” (v. 33), he writes, as if human language and human paradigms of interaction were perfectly adequate to describe prophetic negotiations with the divine.

The major thrust of the Book of Mormon is the elaboration of this model of revelation and its extension to lesser mortals. Nephi is no figure of prominence, but the son of a minor prophet and clan leader. Yet he matter-of-factly records, in language reminiscent of the Abraham account, how he “returned from speaking with the Lord, to the tent of [his] father” (1 Nephi 3:1). His nephew Enos makes clear that these

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3. “Prophecy,” in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1336.

4. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), xviii.

encounters are not monologues in the wilderness but genuine dialogues when he tells of his wrestle with the Lord, which is followed by a voice assuring him of God's blessing. There follows further petitioning of the Lord, whereupon God "covenanted with" Enos according to his desires (Enos 1:16). Such examples in the Book of Mormon could be multiplied almost endlessly. But what elevates this preoccupation from a sporadic motif to a governing theme is the way the status of revelation is tied to the destiny of the principal peoples in the narrative. As we saw, Lehi's revelations, unheeded, anticipate but cannot prevent the destruction of Jerusalem. But directed to his own family, the revealed word of the Lord leads to escape and safety.

While in the wilderness, after Lehi's vision of the tree of life, his son Nephi receives his own personal version of the vision as well. Subsequently, he finds his brothers disputing over the interpretation of the vision. Nephi asks, "Have ye inquired of the Lord?" They respond, "We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us," whereupon Nephi rebukes them and likens their rejection of personal revelation to willful self-destruction (1 Nephi 15:8–11).

Shortly after the tree of life vision, the pattern of revelation continues as Lehi hears, once again, "the voice of the Lord" in the nighttime, urging him to continue his journey southward in the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:9). The following morning, he finds a curious artifact, later designated the Liahona, outside his tent. It functions as a kind of compass that works according to the "faith and diligence and heed" (v. 28) of its users. The instrument is thus a strange blend of symbolism and functionality since it actually indicates a direction to be followed but also demonstrates the principle that revelation depends upon righteous conduct and that "by small means the Lord can bring about great things" (v. 29). Personal revelation oriented around the daily demands of a family's wilderness trek now has both divine affirmation and concrete embodiment. The analogy with Moses's exodus, which was accompanied by fiery and cloudy pillars, is obvious, and Nephi often invokes this Old Testament parallel. But the analogy only underscores the discrepancy between the signs and thunderings from Sinai that inspire and guide vast multitudes of a covenant people and

the “small” but effective “means” that lead a father and his family to a new home. The dramatic recontextualizing of revelation seems very much the point: the Book of Mormon is systemically reconstructing it into a principle with an egalitarian application.

In southern Arabia, the clan turns eastward following the continuing admonitions of “the voice of the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:39). After eight long years (compared to the forty of Israel), they arrive in a coastal area they call Bountiful, and Nephi, not the patriarch Lehi, is summoned by the voice of the Lord to build a ship after a particular pattern shown to him. Surmounting the skepticism of his siblings, Nephi builds the ship and after a harrowing sea journey the family reaches “the promised land.” Arrived safely, they pitch tents, till the earth, and commence a new branch of civilization that will last a thousand years.

Flight from imminent destruction and captivity in Jerusalem, survival in the wilderness, guidance through a perilous ocean crossing, prosperity in the New World, even victory over dissenting Lamanites, are all effected through a continual stream of revelation given to family patriarchs and righteous sons, chief judges and Nephite kings. They even choose as “chief captains . . . some one that [has] the spirit of revelation” (3 Nephi 3:19). When the people come dangerously close to destruction in the decades before Christ, it is because “they [have begun] to disbelieve in the spirit of prophecy and in the spirit of revelation” (Helaman 4:23). As the civilization at last spirals into its final self-destruction, from the midst of the carnage Mormon identifies a major culprit for future generations: “wo unto him that shall deny the revelations of the Lord, and that shall say the Lord no longer worketh by revelation, or by prophecy” (3 Nephi 29:6). When his son Moroni remains the sole survivor of the apocalypse, he echoes the warning, part of his last testament from the dust, reproving those “who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies” (Mormon 9:7). Then he turns to the same theme by way of final apostrophe to future generations, enjoining them to seek confirmation of the authenticity of the things they are reading, promising personal revelation to all who ask “with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ” (Moroni 10:4).

### Focus on Jesus Christ

Nowhere is the juxtaposition of the familiar and the unexpected more striking than in the place of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon. Many claims surrounding the Book of Mormon—its inscription on plates of gold, its delivery to Joseph Smith by an angel, its miraculous translation involving seer stones and Urim and Thummim—are remarkable, to say the least. The most striking claim *within* the Book of Mormon is undoubtedly its insistence that the Jesus Christ born in Bethlehem in the reign of Caesar Augustus was worshipped in the Western Hemisphere, by way of anticipation, as long ago as six centuries BC. The subtitle printed on the Book of Mormon cover since 1982 (“Another Testament of Jesus Christ”) is a recent development that reflects both the centrality of Jesus Christ in Latter-day Saint belief and the church’s concern to emphasize that belief in the face of public skepticism and uncertainty about its self-designation as Christian. But the gesture is no act of modern revisionism. On the title page itself, Moroni, upon concluding his ancient record, explains the second major purpose of the Book of Mormon to be “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the eternal GOD.”

This assertion immediately invites the question, how did a group of ancient Israelites acquire exact foreknowledge of Jesus when their Jewish contemporaries had, at best, vaguely defined beliefs in some kind of future Messiah? The Book of Mormon seems in this regard a pseudepigraphal response to the tantalizing possibilities intimated by Peter when he wrote that “the prophets . . . made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated, when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory” (1 Peter 1:10–11 NRSV). The church father Eusebius argued that “Moses . . . was enabled by the Holy Spirit to foresee quite plainly the title Jesus” (evident, he believes, in his naming his successor *Joshua*—which transliterates as *Jesus*).<sup>5</sup> Most Christians, however, see such biblical typology as inspired fore-

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5. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Middlesex, Eng.: Dorset, 1983), 3.3 (p. 41).

shadowings apparent only through hindsight. In the case of the Book of Mormon, by contrast, the references are clear and unobscured by allegory, symbolism, or cryptic allusion.

The first reference to Christ in the Book of Mormon is in Lehi's vision of One descending from heaven followed by twelve others. Later, the tree of life vision flowers into a lengthy exposition replete with detail. Nephi is told he will see "the Son of God" (1 Nephi 11:18). He then sees a virgin, in the city of Nazareth, who is carried away in the Spirit, thereafter giving birth to "the Lamb of God, . . . the Redeemer of the world" (vv. 21, 27). All the essential details of Christ's life as given in the New Testament are seen by Nephi in this vision dated by himself to the sixth century BC. Jesus is baptized by a prophet, gathers twelve followers, heals and ministers to the sick, and is finally "lifted up and slain for the sins of the world" (v. 11:33).

As if they are aware of the improbable nature of their knowledge, Book of Mormon authors generally attribute it to special revelations. Lehi has a vision of the Christ before his family even leaves Jerusalem. In the vision, he is given a book, which "manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah" (1 Nephi 1:19). Later, he preaches the time of the Messiah's coming apparently based on an elaborate dream (10:2–4). Nephi refers to the coming Messiah as Jesus Christ "according to . . . the word of the angel of God" (2 Nephi 25:21). His mother's name, Mary, is likewise made known to King Benjamin "by an angel from God" (Mosiah 3:2–8). The high priest Alma the Younger knows the Savior shall be born of Mary in Jerusalem because "the Spirit hath said this much unto me" (Alma 7:9), and so on. Jacob, Nephi's brother, insists that the very purpose of the record keeping is "that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us" (Jacob 4:4).

Christology in the Book of Mormon is not an occasional intrusion but the narrative backbone of the story and the dramatic point of orientation. All of Book of Mormon history, in other words, pivots on the moment of Christ's coming. Its narrative centrality is emphasized

by the steadfastness and travails of those who anticipate the messianic moment, the subsequent utopian era of those who keep Christ's coming and its significance in memory, and the rapid decline and degradation of those who do not. Book of Mormon prophets even establish their own chronology around his coming. Logic dictates that dating "Before Christ" can only occur from the perspective of a people living in the "Annis Domini." But Nephi states and twice reaffirms that his people's departure from the Old World to the New occurs "six hundred years" before Christ's birth. To Enos it is reaffirmed that he is living "many years . . . before he [Christ] shall manifest himself in the flesh" (Enos 1:8). And to the prophetic Alma the Younger, even the demise of his civilization is dated in reference to that coming event: "Behold, I perceive that this very people, the Nephites, according to the spirit of revelation which is in me, in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief" (Alma 45:10).

As the time of Christ's birth nears, the chronicle records the cost as well as the reward that such anticipation brings. "Now it came to pass that there was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death except the sign should come to pass, which had been given by Samuel the prophet" (3 Nephi 1:9). In a striking twist on soteriology, or salvation theology, the Book of Mormon records that anticipation of Christ's coming, if it extends to actual faith, is efficacious for salvation even before the event. Jarom teaches early on in the Book of Mormon that his people are "to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was" (Jarom 1:11.) But King Benjamin goes further, preaching that "the Lord God hath sent his holy prophets among all the children of men, to declare these things to every kindred, nation, and tongue, that thereby whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins, and rejoice with exceedingly great joy, *even as though he had already come among them*" (Mosiah 3:13, emphasis added).

Christ's first coming, in the Old World, was in humility and anonymity. His visitation to the Nephite people, after his resurrec-



tion in Jerusalem, anticipates his second coming of Christian hope in its drama, his glorious appearance, and the inauguration of a mini-millennial utopia. The New Testament records that at the crucifixion of Christ, the earth quaked and the veil in the temple was rent. In the New World, according to the Book of Mormon, there were tempests and earthquakes that swallowed highways and obliterated cities. In the aftermath a righteous remnant, gathering around the temple at Bountiful, hear a piercing, heavenly voice announce the risen Christ.

And behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them; and . . . he stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying: Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. . . . Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. (3 Nephi 11:8–10, 14)

Over a period of days, Jesus ministers to the people, delivers a discourse similar to the Sermon on the Mount, gives special power and authority to a chosen twelve, blesses their children, and gives other instructions. Occupying several chapters, the account also includes Christ's promise of his second coming, institution of the Lord's supper, some corrections to their record keeping, and tender accounts of his praying with and for his disciples, healing their sick, and a children's Pentecost replete with ministering angels.

One challenge confronted by the early Christian church was how to situate the gospel of Jesus Christ in relation to the teachings of a host of ancient philosophers, sages, and non-Jewish prophets. One solution was to accord to some of these predecessors a degree of inspiration that anticipated but did not equal the fulness of the gospel revealed in the apostolic age. In other words, the gospel was held to be in some fashion as ancient as Adam. St. Augustine, for example, held that "that which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients,

and never did not exist, from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh, at which time the true religion which already existed began to be called Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> According to this doctrine of *prisca theologia*, versions of the gospel were transmitted imperfectly to other peoples and cultures, affording even pagans a partial glimpse of gospel truth. The Book of Mormon suggests a more radical concept: Christ presents his own ministry to the Nephites as but one in a series of proliferating manifestations of his gospel and even his personal presence. Quoting but expanding upon words recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells them,

Ye are they of whom I said: Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. . . . And verily, verily, I say unto you that I have other sheep, which are not of this land, neither of the land of Jerusalem, neither in any parts of that land round about whither I have been to minister. . . . But I have received a commandment of the Father that I shall go unto them, and that they shall hear my voice. (3 Nephi 15:21; 16:1, 3)

Instead of a single unparalleled irruption of the divine into the human, we have in the Book of Mormon a proliferation of historical iterations that collectively become the ongoing substance rather than the shadow of God’s past dealings in the universe.

### Wilderness and Varieties of Zion

The central fact in the history of Israel is the exodus from Egypt and the settling of the promised land. Millennia later, the Puritans who settled America would see themselves as exiles from the Old World, figurative Israelites who were guided to this promised land to establish a spiritual Zion. The early Christian saga involves movement from the covenant of blood extended to a chosen tribe to the

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6. Augustine, *Retractions* I.12.3, trans. Mary Inez Brogan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 54.

covenant of adoption that creates a community of believers; it changes from a gathering in real space, centered in a literal Zion, to a spiritual gathering that constitutes a figurative body in Christ. The Book of Mormon reenacts the former, Jewish model, even as it presages the latter, Christian version. For the Book of Mormon is the record of a people's repeated quests for a land of promise and their anxiety about their covenantal status before God, even as it insistently repeats the theme that "as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord" (2 Nephi 30:2).

Gods who hold dominion and sway by the power of love evoke a particular kind of anxiety in their people. We are never so vulnerable as when we love,<sup>7</sup> writes Freud, and that holds true in relations with the divine as much as in relations with humans. The fear of alienation, anxiety about rejection, and the terror of being forgotten—these sentiments seem to be fully acknowledged and mercifully addressed in God's institution of the covenant as a compensating mechanism. There is no more pervasive and unifying theme to the Jewish scriptures than the covenant made with Abraham. It is the basis of both collective and individual identity. It is the foundation not just of a particular status vis-à-vis other peoples, but it is principally and primarily the guarantee of God's constant love. A woman may forget her nursing child, the Lord assures them through Isaiah, "yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:15–16).

Only in this context does the dominant emotional tone of the Book of Mormon have a recognizable resonance. The Book of Mormon begins with an event that must have been traumatic to the principal actors in the drama: exodus. Not an exodus from bondage and wilderness exile to the land of promise, but exodus away from the land of promise, away from Jerusalem, from the people of the covenant, from the temple, and into the wilderness. This is why the form of so much of Nephi's preaching, in the early days of exile, is reassurance and consolation. He invokes Isaiah repeatedly, precisely in order to convince his people that they are "a remnant of the house of Israel" and that,

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7. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 31.

though broken off, they “may have hope as well as [their] brethren” (1 Nephi 19:24). A thousand years later, at the conclusion of the record, Moroni reaffirms this message by giving it pride of place on his title page. The sacred record, he writes, is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.”

This lesson—the portability of Zion—is reenacted so many times in the Book of Mormon story that it becomes a leitmotif. Lehi erects an altar in the wilderness and makes of his exile a sacred refuge. After a terrifying sea voyage, the clan becomes established in the promised land. But there dissension immediately breaks out, and Nephi is directed to again flee into the wilderness and reestablish a remnant of the original remnant (2 Nephi 5). A few hundred years later, the Lord directs a subsequent king, Mosiah, to depart from there “into the wilderness” with “as many as would hearken” (Omni 1:13). Arrived in Zarahemla, Mosiah and his people encounter another remnant from Jerusalem who “journeyed in the wilderness” (v. 16) to this New World Zion. Other iterations of this theme will include the newly converted Alma the Elder’s flight from the court of King Noah and his founding of a church in the wilderness, and yet another people descended from Old World exiles, who cross the sea in barges after being commanded to “go forth into the wilderness” at the time of the Tower of Babel (Ether 2:5). Most poignantly of all, the record will close with the spectacle of a lonely Moroni, sole survivor of his race. Finding in his wilderness exile that he has neither family, friends, nor “whither to go” (Mormon 8:5), the successive chain of Zion building finds its definitive end and the record closes thereafter.

The Book of Mormon may be seen in this light as the story of the unending transmission of the gospel into new contexts, a chronicle of the volatility and fragility of lands of refuge, a testament of the portability and ceaseless transmutations of Zion, with the only constant being the eternally present promise of a special relationship to God and direct access to his power and truth. The original dislocation signified by Lehi’s exodus becomes not a prelude to a new geographi-

cal gathering but a shadow of the permanent reconstitution of Zion into spiritual refuge. The resonance of this theme for early American descendants of those who had embarked on their own errand into the wilderness would have been unmistakable. And the theme would undoubtedly have held special poignancy for the first readers of the Book of Mormon, nineteenth-century religious refugees who persisted doggedly and tragically in attempts to realize their own earthly Zions in a trail from Ohio through Missouri to Illinois and the Great Basin of Utah.

### **New Configurations of Scripture**

In the 1830s, the Book of Mormon erupted out of an intensely Christian environment. Its most popular appellations, the “Golden Bible” or the “Mormon Bible,” affirmed the fact that the Bible was its first and enduring standard of comparison and the point of departure for understanding it. Mormons called it scripture, the Word of God, a revelation. It was about Jews and the house of Israel, and its opening scenes are in Jerusalem, with language that is immediately recognizable as King James English. Early editions were even deliberately bound to emulate the most popular edition of the Bible in circulation in nineteenth-century America. Joseph Smith planned to publish an edition in which the two sacred volumes, the Bible and the Book of Mormon, would be bound together (a desire not realized until the twentieth century).

A striking difference between the Book of Mormon and the Bible is that the latter achieved its present form(s) through a long process that involved both identified and anonymous authors, almost entirely anonymous scribes and editors, Jewish and early Christian councils, a good dose of faction and conflict, and centuries of transmission history marked by darkness and obscurity. The Book of Mormon, by contrast, is generally transparent about its own origins and construction from beginning to end. Clarity surrounding its provenance seems to be not just a by-product of such transparency, but central to its claim to authority and to what it has to say about the very nature of scripture and scriptural formation. Most writers are identified, and the entirety

is organized and subsumed within the editorial control and prophetic vision of its final authors, Mormon and Moroni.

Its complex, multilayered, at times Chinese-box structure evinces important principles of how scripture is constituted. And the Book of Mormon itself is transparent about the process of its own metamorphosis from a panoply of sources and influences to the final product translated by Joseph Smith and delivered to the world as scripture. It will be useful therefore to trace the organization and constitution of the text of the Book of Mormon from its beginnings. After their eight-year sojourn in the Arabian wilderness and an oceanic crossing, Lehi's clan arrives in the promised land. Upon arrival, Nephi writes that the Lord commanded him to compile "the record of [his] people" (1 Nephi 19:1). He does not call it scripture or doctrine or prophecy—but a simple clan history. This account includes "the record of [his] father, and the genealogy of his fathers, and the more part of all [their] proceedings in the wilderness" (v. 2). And Nephi indicates that in the future those plates are to contain "an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions of [his] people" (9:4). They are, in other words, designed to be the record of what we today would call the political and secular history of his family and their descendants. Nephi obeys the command, fashioning "plates of ore" (they are never referred to in the Book of Mormon as gold plates) and commencing the record. He faithfully keeps that record for more than twenty years, at the end of which time he is directed by the Lord to fashion a second set of plates (subsequently called the "small plates" by Nephi's brother Jacob).

On these small plates, Nephi records "the ministry of [his] people" (1 Nephi 9:3). Elsewhere the subject of the small plates is described as "the things of God" (6:3) or "things . . . most precious" (Jacob 1:2). The pages constituting the first quarter of the modern Book of Mormon are entirely derived from these small plates. The command to produce two parallel records must have struck Nephi as peculiar, but he knows only that it is for "a wise purpose" of the Lord (1 Nephi 9:5). For reasons that go a long way toward explaining the need for two histories, Smith's translation of Nephi's first version—written on the "other,"

or presumably large, plates and later abridged by Mormon—never made it into print. What this means for the reader is that, for the first two hundred years and more of the history chronicled by the Book of Mormon, we have a focus on “ministry” rather than on history, written by Nephi and others and never subjected to later abridgment.

After explaining the origins of this record that will eventually become the Book of Mormon, and establishing his intent to write nothing “save it be . . . sacred” (1 Nephi 19:6), Nephi goes about constituting his record in a way that is markedly different from simple prophetic utterance or inspired dictate. He constitutes his record as a kind of bricolage, or assemblage of already-existing pieces into a new mosaic. In doing so, he reinforces a conception of scripture as fluid, diffuse, and infinitely generable—the very opposite of scripture as unilinear, concretized, fixed in a canon.

The first eight chapters of his record Nephi characterizes as a summation of a record his father kept. His own record commences with the details leading up to his vision of the tree of life. He then assimilates into his account a number of other prophetic voices unknown to modern readers: “[Christ shall yield himself to] be lifted up, according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified, according to the words of Neum, and to be buried in a sepulchre, according to the words of Zenos” (1 Nephi 19:10). (Nephi’s brother Jacob will likewise borrow, but more extensively, from Zenos.) Nephi then progresses to the prophecies of Isaiah, whose stature in Nephi’s eyes is indicated by the fact that he refers to him simply as “the prophet” (v. 11). Not content to merely cite him, Nephi incorporates into his narrative entire swaths of Isaiah, largely unchanged from the form known to Jewish and Christian readers of the Bible. These writings of Isaiah, Nephi tells us, were contained in the brass plates that he took from Laban in Jerusalem. Those passages most favored by Nephi for inclusion are ones dealing with covenant and the scattering and gathering of Israel. As Nephi explains, “I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scripture unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (v. 23). This aside reveals that Nephi is

engaged in a kind of midrash on the Isaiah passages. *Midrash* is based on the word *derash*. As Norman Cohen explains,

the derash teaches meaning for every age. The term derash is based on the root d-r-sh, which means “to seek” or “to search out” in reference to the Bible, i.e., to search out and to discern meaning in the biblical text. . . . Derash, the method of midrash (from the same root), is, as we have seen already, the dominant mode for the creation of rabbinic literature. . . . [T]he words of the text can illumine the reader’s life experience, while the reader, in bringing his or her life to bear on a text, can penetrate the human issues implicit in it. Derash essentially involves the “reading in” of a meaning different from the text’s peshat [literal meaning].<sup>8</sup>

Time and again, Nephi cites passages from Isaiah. When his brothers ask, “What meaneth these things which ye have read?” his explications situate his family and posterity firmly within the scope of Isaiah’s vision of the future: “it meaneth us in the days to come, and also all our brethren who are of the house of Israel,” he says in one typical interpretation (1 Nephi 22:1, 6).

The dynamic, vibrant life of scripture, as something that is generated, assimilated, transformed, and transmitted in endless ways and in ever-new contexts, is clearly apparent in these scenes where Nephi centers in on his commission to produce a sacred record. This pattern achieves its most dramatic instance well into the subsequent narrative with a repentant sinner, Alma the Elder. Coming from an unbelieving people far removed from the righteous Nephites, Alma begins, surprisingly, to preach Christ to his peers: “And now, it came to pass that Alma, who had fled from the servants of king Noah, repented of his sins and iniquities, and . . . began to teach . . . concerning that which was to come, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ” (Mosiah 18:1–2).

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8. Norman J. Cohen, *The Way into Torah* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 84–85.



How did Alma obtain knowledge of Christ? He heard the preaching of Abinadi, an itinerant prophet martyred by the wicked Noah. And Alma “did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4). Where did Abinadi, who appears suddenly in the narrative with no background or introduction, get his knowledge? In chapters 13–14 of Mosiah, we find him reading the words of Moses and of Isaiah to Noah’s court, and finding in them clear foreshadowing of a “God [who should] himself . . . come down among the children of men, and . . . redeem his people” (13:33, 34). Where did Abinadi obtain those scriptures? He was a member of Zeniff’s colony, which was an offshoot of the major Nephite settlement, and the narrative would apparently have us believe they took copies of the Nephite records with them when they departed Zarahemla and resettled Lehi-Nephi. And those Nephite records? As we already learned early in the Book of Mormon, Nephi and his brothers absconded with Laban’s brass plates that contained the writings of Moses, Isaiah, and several other Hebrew prophets. So we have a clear line of transmission from prophetic utterance to brass plates to Nephi’s small plates to Zeniff’s copy to Abinadi’s gloss to Alma’s transcription. And that is only half the story. From Alma we learn that those teachings become a part of his written record. When he and his band of exiles arrive back in the major colony of Zarahemla, King Mosiah reads to the assembled people “the account of Alma and his brethren” (Mosiah 25:6). King Mosiah, as guardian of the large plates, presumably incorporates the record into his own record. Those plates are subsequently abridged by Mormon, the late-fourth-century Nephite editor.

It is in this conception of scripture that the boundary between Nephites and nineteenth-century Mormons, between Moroni and Joseph Smith, again fades. Not in the sense of the Book of Mormon as pseudepigrapha, but in the sense of its nineteenth-century incarnation as one more stage, one more version, of prophetic utterance that can never be permanently fixed or final. As the Lord indicates in a kind of celebration of this scriptural proliferation,

I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them. . . . For

behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. (2 Nephi 29:11–12)

After the mutiny on the HMS *Bounty* in 1789, the mutineers founded on Pitcairn Island a colony that rapidly descended into “a living hell of sexual abuse, drunkenness, and murder. Their society was on the brink of collapse.”<sup>9</sup> With the help of a Bible found among their effects, survivors founded a church and a school on the island. When the colony was discovered years later, the inhabitants were so orderly and educated that the criminals were not returned for trial.

The story may be somewhat romanticized, but its moral of the indispensability of scripture to cultural and spiritual preservation is echoed in the Book of Mormon. The civilization of the Nephites could be said to have been founded on a blood sacrifice that attests the incalculable value of scripture. Nephi slew the corrupt Jewish leader Laban in order to secure the scriptural record engraved on the plates of brass. The manslaughter is expressly condoned, even mandated by the voice of the Spirit, which testifies to the reluctant Nephi that “it is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13). The specter of a nation spiritually dying for lack of scripture subsequently becomes reality when Nephi’s descendants encounter another immigrant population in the New World who departed Jerusalem at the time of Zedekiah’s captivity, around 586 BC. Of these “Mulekites,” the chronicler Amaleki writes that “they had become exceedingly numerous. Nevertheless, they had had many wars and serious contentions . . . ; and their language had become corrupted; and they had brought no records with them; and they denied the being of their Creator; and Mosiah, nor the people of Mosiah, could understand them” (Omni 1:17).

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9. Ginny Hastings recounts the *Bounty* story in “Ship of Fools: Mutiny on the Bounty,” *Issues & Answers* 5/8 (November 1982): 1.

Religious memory is clearly the only safeguard against spiritual apostasy and cultural decline. The injunction to remember becomes a mantra woven through the entire length of the Book of Mormon. Nephi and other prophets exhort their audience to “remember the words which I speak unto you” (1 Nephi 7:15), “remember to keep his commandments” (15:25), “remember the Lord” (17:45; 19:18), “remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:16), “remember the greatness of the Holy One of Israel” (9:40)—these and innumerable kindred commands are encapsulated in the oft-repeated injunction to remember the covenants of the Father. The memory of the past is an essential guarantee that they will remember their obligation to the future and thus maintain intact their covenant relationship with God. Memory preserves the links of this human chain against the ravages of sin and forgetting. So the injunction to remember “the captivity of [their] fathers” (Mosiah 27:16; Alma 5:6; 36:2), the “deliverance of [their] fathers” (Mosiah 9:17), “the travails, and the labors, and the pains of the Jews” (2 Nephi 29:4), and, in sum, “how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things” (Moroni 10:3) is mirrored in the stimulus and prod to remember obligations extending into the future: “remember your children” (Jacob 3:10) and “remember your seed” (2 Nephi 29:2). In this light, the indispensability of the scriptures is made resoundingly clear by Alma the Younger. In his simple explanation, “they have enlarged the memory of this people” (Alma 37:8).

### Centrality of Family

The first sentence of the Book of Mormon proper is the headnote, written by Nephi, in which he characterizes what is to follow as “an account of Lehi and his wife Sariah, and his four sons.” The Book of Mormon, in other words, in fact and in the eyes of its first author, is the story of a family. In the text’s introductory sentence, Nephi’s first thought is to cast himself as a son of “goodly parents,” “taught somewhat in all the learning of my father,” tempered nonetheless by “many afflictions” (1 Nephi 1:1). The stage is immediately set for the

kind of familiar domestic drama with which the patriarchal narratives of the Hebrew Bible abound. Like the righteous Abel, the favored Isaac, the usurper Jacob, and the indulged Joseph, Nephi is situated within a web of family relationships including righteous parents, scheming or displaced siblings, and a posterity's destiny hanging in the balance.

Of the many parallels with the Mosaic narratives invoked by Nephi, this comparison sets up the most emphatic reversal of all, for although the first brothers in Genesis are embroiled in fratricide, and bitter brotherly conflict including Ishmael, Esau, and Joseph's brothers persists through the generations, the epic history of the patriarchs finds happy resolution in the end. In the emotional ordeal Joseph imposes on his eleven guilty brothers in the realm of Pharaoh, followed by his frank forgiveness of them for selling him into bondage, we find atonement and family reconciliation. The emotionally cleansing scene of recognition and weeping, followed by reunion with Israel and establishment of the entire clan in Goshen, is capstoned by Jacob's patriarchal benediction upon the heads of his dozen children. Prophetic promises explicate and confirm the providentially guided destiny of the house of Israel. We end Genesis with closure, family unity, and intimations of great destinies.

Against this foil, the Book of Mormon's family saga acquires a somber cast. Sibling jealousies do not find resolution but violent expansion, culminating in a tragic and genocidal finale painfully deferred until the record's final pages. The founding family of the Book of Mormon fractures even before they leave Jerusalem. The eldest sons Laman and Lemuel murmur against their father's indictment of Jerusalem, their flight from the city, and his whole vision-led life that drags them into its disruptive wake. Murmuring escalates to contention, violence against the ever-obedient Nephi, and an eventual attempt on his life. After the harrowing ocean crossing and the death of clan leader Lehi, the group fractures permanently. On the pretext that Nephi has usurped their right to rule, a claim that will persist through centuries, Laman and Lemuel again plot violence against Nephi, who departs further into the interior with his followers. His

brother describes the principal dynamic that animates subsequent Book of Mormon history: the dissenters, left to possess the site of original settlement, conceive “an eternal hatred against us, their brethren. And they sought by the power of their arms to destroy us continually” (Jacob 7:24).

Because the record’s first writer, Nephi, sees in vision the extinction of his people at the hands of their brethren, and the book’s final writer and editor, Moroni, personally experiences the apocalypse, the narrative from beginning to end both anticipates and looks back upon a tragic history. To compound an already-wretched tale, Moroni appends near the end an account of another civilization, the Jaredites, who centuries earlier met an equally calamitous end.

Narratively, then, reunion and resolution are tentatively and fleetingly attained at best, and hope hovers perpetually over the horizon. The grounds for whatever solace there may be, the sole mode of consolation and vehicle of hope, is the sacred record itself. It will be the means, in a day far future, of recuperating a message of eternal worth that outlives the peoples who authored it. As the Lord reveals to a grieving Nephi, who has just witnessed in vision the cataclysms to fall upon his descendants:

I will be merciful unto the Gentiles in that day, insomuch that I will bring forth unto them, in mine own power, much of my gospel, which shall be plain and precious, saith the Lamb. For, behold, saith the Lamb: I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious; and after thy seed shall be destroyed, and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles. (1 Nephi 13:34–35)

But the tragedy is not as complete as those words suggest, for Nephi also receives the assurance that at least a remnant of his posterity will survive both the ravages of the civil wars and the later depredations of the “Gentile” colonizers (1 Nephi 13:30).

The qualification is crucial because it grounds the fragile hope that motivates and animates the maintenance of the sacred records for a thousand years and more. This is no chronicle kept by court historians or apocalyptic warning legalistically recorded by a dour Jeremiah or a Jonah waiting with *Schadenfreude* for the violent denouement. It is first and foremost a father's testament and family history, impelled by parental anxiety. It is written to inspire, to edify, to morally instruct, and to warn an extended family already riven by dissension and faithlessness.

When Lehi is first introduced to us, he has the unenviable task of trying to forfend the destruction of Jerusalem and its people. Though he wrestles with national destinies, the fate of his own family is his overriding concern, and the local domestic tragedy he fails to avert becomes in this regard a microcosm, or a type, of the larger tragedy it portends. Lehi's vision of the tree of life, as we learn from two retellings of it, expands to involve contemporary events in Jerusalem, the destiny of scattered Israel, and the coming of the Messiah. But Lehi, in his first retelling of the story, seems unable to move beyond the personal source of grief the vision elicited. The same seems true of Nephi, who records, "These are the words of my father: . . . And Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit, said my father" (1 Nephi 8:34–35). And even though Lehi at this time discusses other matters pertaining to his vision ("all the words of his dream . . . were many," v. 36), Nephi only notes that "because of these things which he saw in vision, he exceedingly feared for Laman and Lemuel; yea, he feared lest they should be cast off from the presence of the Lord. And he did exhort them then with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words" (vv. 36–37).

Like the Old Testament, then, family stories dominate the subject matter of the early sections of the Book of Mormon. But they also pervade and eventually conclude the narrative as well. The poignant concern of Lehi for his sons is mirrored later in the paternal worry of King Mosiah for his missionary sons about to proselytize a violent and hostile people in Lamanite territory. His fears are allayed when he obtains a revelation expressly telling him, "Let them go up, for many

shall believe on their words, and they shall have eternal life; and I will deliver thy sons out of the hands of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 28:7). The righteous Alma the Elder has a particularly recalcitrant son who goes about seeking to destroy the church his father founded. When an angel appears to Alma the Younger in an episode reminiscent of Paul on the road to Damascus, the miraculous conversion that ensues is traceable to a father’s love. “The Lord hath heard the prayers of his people,” the angel tells the stunned youth, “and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father; for he has prayed with much faith concerning thee that thou mightest be brought to the knowledge of the truth; therefore, for this purpose have I come to convince thee of the power and authority of God, that the prayers of his servants might be answered according to their faith” (Mosiah 27:14).

Even without angelic intervention, the power of loving parents proves potent. Nephi implicitly attributes all that is good in his life to “his goodly parents” and having been taught “in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1). The first conversion recorded in the Book of Mormon occurs when Enos goes to the forest to hunt and, as he writes, “the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my heart” (Enos 1:4). The miraculous preservation of the warrior youths of Helaman is expressly attributed by them to their having “been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (Alma 56:47). And the last two characters given voice in the Book of Mormon, silhouetted against a battlefield of appalling carnage, are the warrior prophets Mormon and his son Moroni, who vainly battled to save their people, by preaching and by force of arms, from a spiral into irredeemable depravity and death. When the final scene wraps up, as when the thousand-year drama began, fragile hope resides in the son who occupies a darkening stage. The family tragedy that escalated into a civilization’s utter destruction, is reduced in the end, once again, to loss that is profoundly personal and relational. The abstractions of historic catastrophe collapse into a family circle. The seeds of destruction, the hope of spiritual survival, and the consequences of evil never really move outside the local and the personal.

With his last words, Mormon laments the scene before him:

My soul was rent with anguish, because of the slain of my people, and I cried: O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you! Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss. O ye fair sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye fair ones, how is it that ye could have fallen! (Mormon 6:16–19)

When Moroni appends an epilogue to Mormon's final narrative, pain receives its full complement in his isolation from all human relationships.

And my father also was killed by them, and I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. . . . My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live I know not. (Mormon 8:3, 5)