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Abstract Review of *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (2004), by Dan Vogel.

HOW SHOULD WE THEN READ? READING MORMON SCRIPTURE AFTER THE FALL

Alan Goff

Review of Dan Vogel. *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004. xxii + 715 pp., with illustrations, maps, index. \$39.95.

How should we then live? (Ezekiel 33:10)

Before the shock of the sexual revolution from the 1960s had finished reverberating through our culture, a similar textual revolution was taking place. Before the impact of structuralism and post-structuralism was felt, reading seemed to be a fairly straightforward act. After that transformation—inasmuch as anthropology, literary studies, biblical criticism, historiography, and other disciplines were overtaken by the tsunami called theory—reading became a much more problematic endeavor. Before that transformation, researchers commonly used terms such as *objectivity*, *neutrality*, *freedom from presuppositions*, and *lack of bias*. But Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), and similar thinkers have insisted that we view all such claims with suspicion. Instead, we now talk about the ineluctability of ideology. Before the fall into ideology, we talked and wrote as though objectivity were not only a possibility but also a desirable aspiration. But now we can no longer live in the innocence we used to enjoy in our prelapsarian state. A reader always has an ideology—inescapably, unavoidably, inevitably. This does not mean that a reading's ideological content is all or everything, for it varies

tremendously among interpreters. But it does mean that ideological content is often hidden from both the writer and the audience and that when one writer or generation sees little ideological content in a text, the next reader or generation may find the text saturated with it.

We live in a time of various hermeneutics of suspicion; all of these assert that the claims made on the surface of a text cannot be true or sufficient. A deeper explanation must be sought. The greatest nineteenth-century proponents of a hermeneutics of suspicion were Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Karl Marx (1818–1883). Both argued that the surface meaning of, say, a Shakespeare play is inadequate; the text must be opened up using Freudian psychology or Marxist economic analysis. Of course, a danger lurks in reducing a text using such overarching theories. Why? A “hermeneutics of suspicion always runs the risk of arbitrariness and therefore should intervene only in the last instance, when no other interpretation appears possible any longer.”¹ A primary step in understanding a text is to read it immanently—that is, to read it from within the world it creates for itself with some genuinely sympathetic attempt to see it through its own presuppositions. Once that immanent critique has been attempted, the way the text differs from the reader’s expectations or ideological framework will likely stand out. The differences and similarities can then be engaged critically.

When I read the Book of Mormon, I bring with me several presuppositions: the book is a complicated work of literature and history that not only deserves but also demands the best readings and readers, the book is an ancient text written by prophets belonging to a branch broken from the trunk of the house of Israel (and is therefore written according to biblical compositional principles), the book is a saturated phenomenon (like the Bible) that its readers—even the best readers—can never fully grasp or contain, and the book acquires most of its density through intertextuality (i.e., by referring to parts or a version of the Old Testament, brought to the New World with the founding

1. Jean-Luc Marion, “How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology,’” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 25.

generation of Nephites, and also through allusion by later Nephites prophets to earlier parts of the record, often called intratextuality). I believe that if we apply to the Book of Mormon a biblical hermeneutic that demands sensitivity to the use of repetition, we will uncover at least part of the complexity and layering available in that text.

Repeatedly, the Book of Mormon instructs its readers about how it should be read. To cite an example specifically in the context of interpreting Isaiah (that is, an example of intertextual reading in which Nephi tells us how to read Isaiah because he reads Isaiah in this way), Nephi tells his audience that he did and they should “liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). Not only is this the author’s cue about how to read Hebraic scripture, but he also claims that the scriptures are specifically written to be read that way, for the Nephites are a branch of the house of Israel whose scriptures are written so they can “liken them unto [them]selves, . . . for after this manner has the prophet written” (v. 24). The ancient rabbis had a similar rule—namely, that what happened to the fathers was a sign to their descendants.² Jon D. Levenson, a professor of Jewish studies at Harvard Divinity School, translates this rabbinic maxim this way: “The Patriarchs are the type; their descendants, the antitype.”³ Like the Bible, the Book of Mormon depends on repetition; what happens to an eponymous ancestor (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Nephi, Laman) also happens to or can be likened unto his progeny. This recently rediscovered literary view of the function of repetition⁴ should deepen our appreciation of the complexity of the Bible and Book of Mormon; it also imposes strict requirements on its readers to read better. In other words, the repetition of foundational events in the lives of descendants should increase our appreciation of

2. See Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 373.

3. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 114. Although he is Jewish, Levenson is willing to use traditionally Christian terminology when appropriate.

4. Robert Alter, in his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), was perhaps the first to articulate the importance of repetition in biblical texts.

the complexity of Hebraic texts, not make us view the recurrence as a defect. Speaking of this principle, a literarily trained reader of the Bible notes of the frequent reiterations in Genesis that if the reader does not account for the repeated elements, a large part of the meaning is neglected: “Miss the repetition, miss the story.”⁵ If we do not appreciate the importance of repetition to the ancient (especially Hebraic) mind, we end up imposing modern and alien textual principles on the scripture: “Overlooking such patterns of repetition that run through Genesis contributes to its being a story we haven’t heard, a story whose God gets shaped by our own projections and biases rather than by the text.”⁶ We cannot help but apply our modern biases to the texts we read because we are creatures of history as much as were the writers who produced the scriptures, but we ought to critically inform ourselves about other approaches and readings that put our own into question.

Reading for Superficiality

The Book of Mormon has long been read as a simple narrative, even by believers committed to its antiquity. Recently, though, there is a new and strange thing in the land: some readers are claiming that the Book of Mormon is a complex text, deserving of respectful and sophisticated readings. This new thing among us represents the emergence of competent literary critics who claim that the Book of Mormon has been read too simplistically.⁷ I add my voice to that consensus. After attending a conference concerned with the complexity of the Book of Mormon, a non-Latter-day Saint historian of religion commented: “I was of course familiar with the *Book of Mormon* to some extent, and had read a good deal of it. However, I confess that it had not occurred

5. Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 18.

6. Borgman, *Genesis*, 13.

7. See, for instance, Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997); and Robert A. Rees, “Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance,” *Dialogue* 35/3 (Fall 2002): 83–112.

to me that the text would bear the kind of close analysis to which our group of philosophers, political scientists, literary and historical specialists subjected it. My teaching and writing in the future will benefit from the enriched appreciation the seminar gave me for this complex and inspiring work.”⁸ Another prominent non-Latter-day Saint historian, Robert Remini, acknowledges the sophistication of the Book of Mormon text while marveling at the speed at which it was produced: “What is truly remarkable—really miraculous—is the fact that this massive translation was completed in sixty working days by an uneducated but highly imaginative zealot steeped in the religious fervor of his age. As a writer, I find that feat absolutely incredible. Sixty days! Two months to produce a work running over six hundred pages and *of such complexity and density*. Unbelievable.”⁹ It is counterproductive for critics to read the book simplistically when perceptive unbelievers can acknowledge the book’s intricacy. Fawn Brodie, Wayne Ham, Harold Bloom, Brent Metcalfe, Dan Vogel, and others have advanced the notion that the Book of Mormon is simple. Dan Vogel, for example, claims that the more one reads the Book of Mormon, the more simple it seems. He has explicitly committed himself to the idea that the Book of Mormon is simplistic.¹⁰ Additionally, Vogel cannot countenance a sophisticated Book of Mormon because “Smith’s method of dictation did not allow for rewriting. It was a more-or-less stream-of-consciousness composition” (p. xix).¹¹

8. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 39.

9. Robert V. Remini, “Biographical Reflections on the American Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 44/4 (2005): 27, emphasis added.

10. Doug Fabrizio, interview with Brent Lee Metcalfe, Dan Vogel, Thomas Murphy, and Trent Stephens, Radio West on KUER, 26 August 2002. The comment comes twenty-seven minutes into the sound file. Vogel (although it is hard to tell if the voice is Vogel’s or Metcalfe’s, the two commentators agree) notes that those writers published in the *FARMS Review* have asserted the complexity of the scripture. He flatly denies this, claiming instead that the more one reads the Book of Mormon, the simpler it is.

11. Parenthetical page references herein are to Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*. Additional aspects of Vogel’s book are examined in my review “Dan Vogel’s Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory,” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 321–400.

Vogel conceives of complexity as rather one-dimensional. He reads the Book of Mormon as an autobiographical novel written by Joseph Smith, whose spontaneous and unrehearsed stream-of-consciousness method of composition did not permit him to cross-reference the story to other parts of the text (pp. 120–21, 291). Smith usually did not even know which direction the story was going next (p. 384). Vogel asserts that Book of Mormon plots are simple, with the text only occasionally lapsing into lyricism (p. 119). So, almost without reservation, he finds no sophistication in the length and breadth of the Book of Mormon narrative. He is one of the Book of Mormon critics who “have grossly underestimated the quality of the literature in support of the Book of Mormon and . . . [thus] will have to rise to new levels of scholarly competence before they will be able to deal effectively with the current generation of LDS scholars and the large body of credible scientific work now supporting the plausibility of the Book of Mormon as history.”¹² I have dubbed Vogel’s approach “Book of Mormon superficialism.” For Vogel and others, the Book of Mormon is easier to explain if it is simple rather than complex. In other words, by assuming a simplistic text, these critics are apologists for an impoverished reading.

The sophistication of the Book of Mormon is achieved in a number of ways, but the most obvious is through its allusion both to earlier parts of its own text and to the Hebrew Bible. In Hebraic literature, allusion is a variety of repetition that needs to be accounted for. Vogel completely disregards this intertextual intricacy because he has no ideological interest in seeing it or pointing it out to his readers. I could select dozens of Book of Mormon narratives to demonstrate this textual complication, but I limit myself to one: the conflict between Laban and Nephi.

Vogel believes that a central key to understanding the Book of Mormon is Freudian psychoanalysis of family relationships and recent developments from Freudian theory. This approach already omits any gesture toward an immanent critique. It dismisses the explanations that the book itself gives and that Joseph Smith gave, going straight to a hermeneutics of suspicion. For Vogel, Joseph was attempting to keep

12. Reynolds, “Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” 39.

his family together, and he wrote the book to that end. For example, when Lehi receives a revelation instructing him to send his sons to Jerusalem in order to acquire the plates of brass, this is, Vogel affirms, Joseph's validation of his own father's visions. And Laman and Lemuel reject their visionary father just as (Vogel guesses, without evidence) Joseph's older brothers, Alvin and Hyrum, rejected their father's religious dreams. "To save his family, and to possibly reunite them," Vogel asserts, "Joseph Jr. knew he had to work through his father's dreams. . . . To defend his father, Joseph, like Nephi, endorsed him as the inspired patriarch of the family" (p. 132). According to Vogel's Freudian theory, Joseph Jr. has some rivalry going with his own father, but at the same time he also defends the patriarch. By taking up his father's cause, Nephi—like Joseph Smith Jr.—starts his trajectory to becoming a prophet himself. "Nephi's attempt to become the family's spiritual leader evoked jealousy and a serious rivalry from his older brothers who beat him with a rod" (p. 132). Vogel fabricates conflict between Joseph and his older brothers (Alvin and Hyrum) simply because it is required by his Freudian analysis. "As an idealized character, Nephi may reveal something of Joseph Jr.'s own perceptions and attitudes about his family and about this own mission. It is instructive to consider the plot and nuances of the Book of Mormon story for this reason and to notice the familiar ring to them" (p. 132). Vogel then summarizes the story of Lehi's sons and their confrontation with Laban in Jerusalem in this light as a family allegory.

If one treats the Book of Mormon storyline at such a high level of abstraction and saturates it with conjecture, one can find parallels between it and almost anyone's biography. The question is, Can textual analysis of the book proceed by paying attention to the book in its specificity and complexity? In Vogel's reading, Nephi is a stand-in for Joseph Smith himself; just as Joseph had to lie about prophetic visitations to advance his family's unity, Nephi must lie to acquire the plates of brass from Laban. "Nephi's struggle fits well with the overall autobiographical tone of Joseph's quest, involving certain moral sacrifices in order to get the gold plates. Nephi, as alter-ego, tells us something of Joseph's attitudes about his own mission and his decision to cross

moral lines to accomplish God's errand" (p. 134). For Vogel, not only does Nephi lie to Zoram about his identity because Joseph Smith must lie about having gold plates, but the story of Nephi and Laban reflects the Smith family dynamics:

On a deeper level, the story of Laban perhaps reflected an aspect of Joseph's relationship with his father. Whereas Lehi represented the idealized Joseph Sr., the drunken Laban personified the side of Joseph Sr. that the son most hated—the backsliding Universalist and sword-bearing treasure seeker that Joseph Jr. wanted extinguished. With God's permission, the son symbolically slays the evil father with his own weapon, that is, through belief in magic, hidden treasures, and inspired dreams, thus allowing the good father to emerge. Nephi's beheading of Laban might also symbolize an attack on Joseph Sr.'s tendency to intellectualize and allegorize the scriptures, a trait undoubtedly inherited from his own father, Asael. (p. 135)

Textual readings using such Freudian concepts are highly susceptible to arbitrary interpretation. Vogel's explanation of the Laban/Nephi story not only requires the reader to accept this Freudian idea of conflict between brothers (a quarrel that Vogel speculates into existence using psychohistorical guesswork), but it also reads Joseph Smith Jr.'s mind to discern relationships with his father for which there is no historical evidence. This reading imposes external Freudian analysis and family systems theory encrustations on the text, and only at a high level of generality. But other, less arbitrary and speculative approaches can read the story in its complexity rather than in its poverty. I will provide one example. The key allusive clue to the Laban/Nephi conflict story's meaning is Laban's name, a detail Vogel does not address.

Laban as Nexus of Interpretation in the Book of Mormon

Our debt to tradition through reading and conversation is so massive, our protest or private addition so rare and insignificant,—and this commonly on the ground of other reading or

hearing,—that, in a large sense, one would say there is no pure originality. All minds quote. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity and by delight, we all quote. . . .

Religious literature, the psalms and liturgies of churches, are of course of this slow growth,—a fagot of selections gathered through ages, leaving the worse and saving the better, until it is at last the work of the whole communion of worshippers. The Bible itself is like an old Cremona; it has been played upon by the devotion of thousands of years until every word and particle is public and tunable.¹³

When historical criticism became the dominant mode of biblical analysis in both secular and sectarian universities toward the end of the nineteenth century, appreciation of the fundamentally literary nature of biblical narrative was eclipsed by desiccated readings of the Bible that reduced the narrative to its informational-historical content. The past thirty years, however, have seen a resurgence of literary interest in the Bible, an approach that is perhaps no less secular than the historical-critical approach. While the latter seeks to get behind a given text in order to identify the urtext, literary criticism takes up biblical literature as a unified whole. The move away from the historical-critical method was pioneered by literary critics who did not specialize in biblical criticism but who occasionally performed readings of the Bible: Roland Barthes, Robert Alter, Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode, and René Girard. A generation of skilled biblical critics has taken up the text as a literary masterpiece, but the impetus came from outside the guild because of the stifling orthodoxy that source and redaction criticism represented within the discipline.

In examining ancient Hebrew narrative, I take my bearings from Robert Alter, who noted that biblical narrative works through subtle and overt allusion to comment on the actions, words, or thoughts of

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," in *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1929), 781, 782.

its characters. A simple notion like allusion challenges the historical-critical approach to the Bible because it represents a different way to account for repetitions and similar features in the text. Alter refers to the “paramount importance of intrabiblical allusion for the ancient Hebrew writers” of the Bible. Allusion is, for Alter, “an essential aspect of the distinctive language of literature and hence a vital consideration in defining the literary character of the Bible.”¹⁴ The same is true for the Book of Mormon. An essential part of the background for the Book of Mormon is the Bible. Leo Strauss (1899–1973) argues that when reading a complex text, one must learn to read it the way the writer reads others (Strauss states the principle as an aphorism: “One writes as one reads”).¹⁵ Nephi notes that his people find the plates of brass writings difficult to understand; such writings cannot be understood unless readers “are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5). In other words, “reading Scripture is not a naïve or objectivist exercise; instead it is concerned with discerning Scripture’s own custom.”¹⁶ Nephi and the Nephite writers who follow him repeatedly use Hebraic hermeneutical principles as they compose their record. They do so because they are writing “after the manner of the things of the Jews.” We must apply the principles of biblical composition when reading the Book of Mormon because they are also the principles of the text’s composition. The rule is to think allusively.

Intertextuality in the Bible

Alter hates the term *intertextuality*, preferring instead the more old-fashioned concept of allusion.¹⁷ He notes that all literary texts use allusion: “Allusion is not merely a device, like irony, understatement, ellipsis, or repetition, but an essential modality of the language

14. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), x–xi.

15. Leo Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (1959; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 230.

16. James Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture: History, Theology and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 175.

17. But much of the literature uses the fancy new term inspired by French philosophy and literary theory. I am indifferent to the debate over the term. I use the terms *intertextuality* and *allusion* interchangeably.

of literature.”¹⁸ This claim is fairly universal in literary criticism: “Intertextuality in virtually all discussions is not a characteristic of some texts as opposed to others but part of the structure of the literary text as such.”¹⁹ Any adequate understanding of the Book of Mormon as a literary text must account for this feature. From a certain ideological perspective, parallels between the Book of Mormon and the Bible can be interpreted as plagiarism or theft, but we have a responsibility to uncover the ideological claims of such a position; claims that the Book of Mormon steals from the Bible represent weak readings, just as traditional source criticism of the Bible functions to denigrate the scripture. “Indeed, all those fissures in the Torah which diachronic scholarship figures as evidence for a plurality of sources, our present reading practice will re-figure as indications of intertextuality. These intimations of intertextuality are part of what gives the Bible its continuing power to fascinate.”²⁰ Likewise, seeing allusion as a shortcoming in the Book of Mormon results from a lack of imagination on the reader’s part.

Narrative analogy—a type of allusion—is a device the Bible uses with great subtlety.²¹ The Bible points its readers to narratives with similar wording or story lines, assuming that they will grasp the allusions. “Narrative analogy is a device whereby the narrator can provide an internal commentary on the action which he is describing, usually by means of cross-reference to an earlier action or speech. Thus narratives are made to interact in ways which may not be immediately apparent; ironic parallelism abounds wherever this technique is applied.”²²

Of course, narrative analogy works only if the text provides enough clues to the story being alluded to. A second element needed

18. Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 111.

19. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14.

20. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 94.

21. Comparable but slightly different terms used in biblical criticism are *typology* and *type-scene*.

22. Robert P. Gordon, “David’s Rise and Saul’s Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24–26,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980): 42–43.

for intertextuality to work is a reader who makes the connection between the two stories. Allusion is a risky business, for the reader may not be up to the task. “Unless [the] audience recognises his ornament for what it is, it will fail to adorn. Those whom he addresses must at least perceive that the quotation *is* a quotation, or his pride will suffer a sad fall: and often he finds that he does not receive his full meed of praise unless the quotation is not only known to be one, but is actually a known and familiar one.”²³ A failure of allusion is primarily a readerly failure and only secondarily a writerly failure.²⁴ If readers see connections between the Book of Mormon and the Bible and yet produce superficial explanations of that intertextuality, the problem lies with the reader, not with the text. Similarly, if readers like Vogel fail to see obvious allusions from the Book of Mormon to the Bible, that too is a failure in the reading, not necessarily in the writing. “While one might not assume that the author is always right, one should at least entertain the possibility that what at first might seem an ‘inconsistency’ or a ‘mistake’ is purposeful and designed to take the reader beyond the surface.”²⁵ It appears that such authorial design is behind the Book of Mormon account of Nephi’s confrontation with and defeat of Laban.

If we are going to see in the Nephi/Laban story an allusion, we must grant that the record is textually sophisticated and view the connection as intentional rather than incidental. Allusion presupposes intention, and “an inadvertent allusion is a kind of solecism.”²⁶ I assert that the connections between the Laban story in the Book of Mormon and the Laban/Nabal stories in the Bible are intentional and that the ideal reader of the book will recognize the allusions.

23. E. E. Kellett, *Literary Quotation and Allusion* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1933), 8–9.

24. “When allusion is unnoticed or misunderstood, the blame should often fall on readers rather than on the writers and their occasional use of covert allusion.” Allan H. Pasco, *Allusion: A Literary Graft* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 10.

25. Pasco, *Allusion*, 105.

26. John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 64. An “echo” is a different matter for Hollander because it does not depend on intention.

Speaking of the predominance of typology in the Bible, Tibor Fabiny states that exegesis ought to proceed by applying the interpretive principles emerging from the text:

Instead of imposing our own historical preconceptions *on* the Bible we have to subordinate ourselves to the discourse *of* the Bible. As Paul Ricoeur says in his new, “intratextual,” theory of the text: “interpretation is not an act *on* the text, but an act *of* the text.” It is remarkable that the postmodern idea of “intertextuality” bears a conspicuous resemblance to the Reformation principle of *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* (the Holy Scripture interprets itself).²⁷

The same principle applies to the Book of Mormon: any interpretation should make some effort to use interpretive principles that arise from the text itself rather than uncritically imposing alien concepts of how texts ought to work.

Nephi and Laban

Laban appears in the Book of Mormon shortly after Lehi charges his sons with returning to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass from their possessor, Laban. The plates include the genealogy of Lehi’s family and something equivalent to the Hebrew Bible up to the time of Jeremiah. Laban is an archetypal villain character: a mean-spirited thief, a drunk, a greedy bully, a murderer, a churlish fool. Laman, the eldest of Lehi’s sons, must first demonstrate the failure of his own leadership before Nephi steps in to complete the mission and validate his own claim to family leadership. Laman fails to persuade Laban to give up the plates, and with accusations and death threats Laban sends Laman away, whereupon the two oldest brothers propose giving up the effort to obtain the record. Persistent in his assignment, Nephi insists on completing the mission. His first plan—to go back to Lehi’s family estate and to trade the goods the family left behind for the

27. Tibor Fabiny, *The Lion and the Lamb: Figuralism and Fulfilment in the Bible, Art, and Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 8.

plates—also fails. Laman and Lemuel then rebuke Nephi and insist that Laban is too mighty a man²⁸ for this task to succeed (1 Nephi 3:31). Nephi returns to Jerusalem by himself, where he finds Laban drunk and unconscious in the street. Nephi is commanded by God to cut off Laban’s head with Laban’s own sword. Completing the deed, Nephi then dons Laban’s clothes as a disguise, obtains the plates, and returns to his family in the wilderness.

Personal Names as Allusive Signposts

Tamar and Tamar

When the Bible has two characters with the same name, the similarity frequently functions as an allusive signpost. This linkage is seen in the two Tamar narratives. The first Tamar narrative (Genesis 38) interrupts the Joseph story at the point where Joseph is sold into slavery and his father pronounces him dead. The odd story about Judah and Tamar intrudes before the narrative returns to Joseph’s sojourn in Egypt. Robert Alter has detailed some of the leitmotifs and leading words that tie the Judah/Tamar story to the Joseph narrative.²⁹ Judah has three sons, the first of whom he marries to Tamar. When Er dies, Judah gives Tamar to his second son, Onan, to raise up descendants for Er. But Onan, apparently understanding that producing a son in his brother’s name will send his father’s inheritance through his brother’s line rather than his own, refuses to impregnate Tamar; he too is killed by God. Thinking Tamar to be bad luck, Judah refuses to give his third son to her and thus fulfill what in later biblical development would become the “Levirate obligation.” The third son soon dies, leaving Judah himself without an heir. After Judah’s wife also

28. The Hebrew words *gibborim* and *g^eburah* refer exclusively to royal power or might in 1 and 2 Kings. See Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 35. If it can be assumed that either Hebrew word underlies the description of the Book of Mormon Laban as a “mighty man,” even one who can “command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty” (1 Nephi 3:31), then he is being depicted as something of a kingly figure.

29. Robert Alter analyzes the Judah/Tamar story in *Art of Biblical Narrative* (pp. 5–12) and notes the analogies to the Joseph story (p. 73). He also compares the two stories in *World of Biblical Literature*, 114–17.

dies, Judah takes care of his pastoral obligations. Informed of his route and intention, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and Judah avails himself of her services. He leaves with her his signet, bracelet, and staff as pledges for his financial obligation. Judah later sends as payment a young goat, but his deputy cannot find Tamar. When Judah later hears that his daughter-in-law is pregnant, he commands that she be killed for her infidelity. She responds by producing the pledges to prove that Judah himself is the father, and Judah acknowledges that she is more righteous than he and that he should have given her to his third son. Tamar later gives birth to twins who are the only sons that survive Judah.

A second Tamar emerges in the David cycle. David's son and heir apparent, Amnon, desires his half sister Tamar. He plays sick to entice her, with at least David's unwitting participation. She goes to Amnon's residence to feed and nurture him. He first attempts to seduce her, and failing, he rapes her. Finished with her, his desire turns to repugnance and he throws her out while she, wanting to make the best of a bad situation, proposes that they now must marry.

The stories of the two Tamars depend not just on the identical names to make them allusive. A host of other indications point to the hermeneutical relationship between the two stories. One connection is the coat given by Jacob to Joseph. The only other place in the Bible that refers to a similar coat is the second Tamar story. After being expelled by Amnon, Tamar dons a "garment with divers colours" in mourning and "remain[s] desolate in her brother Absalom's house," never to know the coveted blessings of husband and children (2 Samuel 13:18, 20). Also, Amnon says, "Come lie with me, my sister" (v. 11), essentially repeating the words of Potiphar's wife when she attempted to seduce Joseph: "Lie with me" (Genesis 39:12). Like David, Jacob too has sons feuding with each other. The sons of Jacob gang up on Joseph, whereas Absalom eventually kills his half brother Amnon in revenge for the rape of Tamar. When the crimes of his sons become known, David is too weak of a father to straighten out his house by punishing his sons, and eventually Absalom attempts a coup d'état against his own father. Just as Jacob tears his clothing in grief when he sees

Joseph's bloodstained coat, Tamar tears her clothing in mourning after the rape. The Hebrew keyword translated into English as *recognition* (Joseph recognizing his brothers and their eventual recognition of him, Judah recognizing his own signet but not recognizing Tamar) connects the Judah/Tamar story to the surrounding Joseph story.

The narrative connection between the two stories would easily be overlooked if not for the identical names of the two women.

Laban and Laban

Another example of narrative analogy is seen in the accounts of the biblical Laban and the Book of Mormon Laban. The biblical story of Jacob and Laban concerns fraternal conflict. Jacob, urged by his mother, disguises himself as his brother and fools Isaac into giving him the birthright and blessing intended for Esau. Similarly, in the Book of Mormon, Nephi dons Laban's clothes in order to trick Zoram into entrusting the brass plates to his care. This theme of a younger brother overcoming the advantages of an elder brother's right of primogeniture and succeeding when the older brother fails is seen in numerous biblical stories.³⁰ Fleeing from his brother, Jacob goes to Haran. He meets Rachel at the well (just as his grandfather's envoy finds a wife for Isaac at a well in Haran) and is taken in by Laban, his uncle. Laban was seen by the ancient rabbis as a Pharaoh-figure who attempted to exterminate and enslave Jacob just as the Egyptian Pharaoh attempted to do to the Israelites.³¹ The rabbinic principle is, as stated earlier, "What happens to the fathers, happens to the sons." In the Jacob/Laban story, the theme of the younger brother's ascendancy turns slightly to one of conflict between daughters. Leah is the older sister and Rachel the younger; just as Isaac favored his elder son, Laban insists that his younger daughter cannot be married before the

30. Stories of younger sons succeeding over older ones include Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and Aaron, and David and his brothers. Important studies on this theme include Frederick E. Grenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1993).

31. See Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 181 n. 44.

older daughter. The two sisters attempt to outdo each other in marriage and childbearing. Jacob serves Laban (the Hebrew word *ebed* in the Bible can mean “service” and “enslavement”) seven years for Rachel (Genesis 29:20) but is tricked by Laban into marrying Leah first. Jacob serves another seven years for Rachel (v. 27). The text portrays Laban as an enslaving taskmaster; the allusion is to Exodus 21:2, where the maximum service of a Hebrew slave to a Hebrew master is six years, the slave being manumitted in the seventh year; Nephi also draws upon Exodus and slavery typology when he notes in the account of his mission to obtain the brass plates that, just as the Lord delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, so too the Lord would deliver Lehi’s sons from Laban (1 Nephi 4:3). After having been tricked into serving Laban for two wives, and having had his wages changed ten times (Genesis 31:7), Jacob turns the tables on his father-in-law by eventually acquiring through stratagem all the spotted cattle and sheep. He surreptitiously sets off with his herds, wives, and children. Laban pursues, and when he catches up with the group, he accuses Jacob of theft. Rachel is the immediate object of the charge, for she has stolen Jacob’s *teraphim*, the household idols that apparently have some value indicating priority in inheritance.

The biblical Laban first appears in the biblical narrative in the earlier story of Rebekah’s betrothal at the well (Genesis 24). In this story Laban sees the jewels and riches that Abraham’s servant gave to Rebekah (Laban’s sister) and gladly welcomes the traveler into his house because of the potential financial gain to the family. Similarly portrayed as greedy and dangerous, the Book of Mormon Laban covets Lehi’s precious goods and drives off Nephi and his brothers so he can keep the goods without parting with the plates (1 Nephi 3:24–25). Theft emerges in all of these stories: Jacob accuses Laban of theft in stealing years of his life and the herds that were rightfully Jacob’s because the Lord multiplied Laban’s herds during the time Jacob managed them. Laban accuses Jacob of theft. Rachel steals the household idols. Similarly, the Book of Mormon Laban accuses Laman and his brothers of being thieves, and Nephi portrays Laban as a robber. In all

the stories, the parties who flee into the wilderness despoil their hosts before they depart.

If what happens to the fathers also happens to the sons, the biblical Laban is a precursor to the Book of Mormon Laban, and both are figured to be stand-ins for Pharaoh. That allusive connection seems very sophisticated.

Laban and Nabal

Biblical critics often point to the similarities between the patriarchal stories in Genesis and the stories about David's life. The conclusion is usually a historical-critical one: Genesis was likely written in the period of David or shortly thereafter as a political justification of Davidic rule.³² Turning to the Book of Mormon, we note that the allusions to the biblical Laban story appear to continue. Not only does the Book of Mormon Laban exhibit character deficits on par with his biblical counterpart, but the name *Laban* itself suggests an interesting tie to the biblical Nabal, another person of low character and whose name is a palindrome or anagram of *Laban*. These deepening interconnections seen in personal names and character attributes, as well as in narrative content, are suggestive of a textual sophistication in the Bible that is mirrored in the Book of Mormon.

We recall that David has been on the run from Saul, who wants to kill him. In the wilderness, David has protected the flocks of the prosperous Nabal. When David asks for remuneration for this service, Nabal rejects the claim, implying that David is an escaped slave. Enraged, David straps on his sword and leads his men to kill Nabal. Abigail, Nabal's wife, recognizes the danger of the situation and departs with food and wine to appease David, and she succeeds. When she tells her drunken husband the next day, he dies from the shock, saving David from having blood on his hands. David later marries Abigail.

32. The technical term often used when the lives of the patriarchs serve to bolster the Davidic line of kings is *political allegory*.

Moshe Garsiel demonstrates allusive connections between the biblical personalities Nabal and Laban based on the spellings of their names and similarities of narrative function:

A further analogy is created in the comparison of Saul's and Nabal's conduct towards David with the Genesis story of Laban and Jacob. The author of Samuel seems to take advantage here of a further potential implication of Nabal's name, which, reversed, reads "Laban" (compare: *nbl: lbn*). The Sages noted the analogy between the two: "Rabbi Simon said, 'Nabal is Laban—just as Laban was a swindler, so was Nabal a swindler'" (*Yalqut Sim'oni* on I Sam. 25, #134). We shall look at the system of relationships and linkages which help to establish the schematic equation of Saul + Nabal = Laban.³³

Laban's deceit in cheating Jacob out of a second seven years' labor by switching his two daughters on the wedding night is representative of his swindling. The comparison is to Saul's promising his eldest daughter Merab to the champion who beat Goliath but then reneging and giving Michal to David instead (1 Samuel 17:25; 18:17–21).

The elements of two daughters, of whom the younger is preferred, a bride price, the father in law's failure to honor his commitments and the son in law's double service—all these are similar in principle in the two stories. In both a split subsequently develops between father in law and son in law, until the latter is compelled to flee, the daughter aiding him against her father. Teraphim are mentioned in connection with this flight in each case, albeit in different ways (Genesis 31:34–35; 1 Samuel 19:13–17). The stories also share the motifs of pursuit; of an exchange of words between pursuer and pursued;

33. Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies, and Parallels* (Ramant-Gan, Isarel: Revivum, 1985), 130–31. The affinities between Nabal and Laban are also noted in David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 212.

reconciliation and the making of a covenant; and the acceptance of the Lord as “judge.”³⁴

In addition, both the Jacob story and the David story include the rape of a daughter—Dinah and Tamar (Genesis 34:1–2; 2 Samuel 13:1).

The greedy fool archetype. The character Nabal, from 1 Samuel 25, has always seemed more symbol than substance. What parent would, after all, name a child “fool”?³⁵ Mark Biddle calls him a “composite” character because he is a stand-in for so many others (Laban, Saul, Esau).³⁶ For historical-critical readers, the Nabal story represented a resting place between the doublets of Saul’s pursuit of David and David’s refusal to kill Saul but to instead take part of his robe and, on a second occasion, his spear and water bottle, then calling out to Saul to recognize the justice of David’s actions (1 Samuel 24; 26). Garsiel notes that “it is possible that this name [*Nabal*] is original, but it may be given to him here for its typical qualities. In either case, the author exploits its ironic potentialities to the full.”³⁷

Nabal comes forcefully into the mix not just because he is a stand-in for Saul, but also because there are strong similarities between David’s confrontation with Nabal and Jacob’s with Laban. “David helps him by guarding his sheep, so that his property shall not be injured. This recalls Jacob’s work as a shepherd for Laban. Both see themselves as faithful servants who are cheated by the property owner to whom they have rendered service.”³⁸ Sheepshearing figures in both accounts: Jacob is helped by Laban’s two daughters, and David by Nabal’s wife.³⁹ Further, Laban is “another rich shepherd and exactly as

34. Garsiel, *First Book of Samuel*, 131.

35. The root *nebalah* means “fool” but has strong connotations of a particular type of fool, *namel*, a sexual fool or a churlish one: “The noun *nebalah* is, of course, related to the verb *nabal*, usually rendered ‘to be foolish, senseless,’ the opposite of *hakam* ‘to be wise.’” Anthony Phillips, “Nebalah—A Term for Seriously Disorderly and Unruly Conduct,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975): 237.

36. Mark E. Biddle, “Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/4 (2002): 623.

37. Garsiel, *First Book of Samuel*, 127.

38. Garsiel, *First Book of Samuel*, 131.

39. Garsiel, *First Book of Samuel*, 131.

much of a miser as Nabal,” for we know “that Scripture uses distorted personal names in order to mock their bearers.”⁴⁰

The Nabal of 1 Samuel 25 is the archetypal fool, but not the happy-go-lucky fool we often associate the word with. “The Hebrew *nabal*, often translated as ‘fool,’ designates not a harmless simpleton but rather a vicious, materialistic, and egocentric misfit,”⁴¹ a pretty good description of the Laban that Nephi meets in Jerusalem. The biblical Nabal is similarly greedy. Noting that Nabal’s property is introduced before Nabal himself is, one scholar observes: “Thematically, this touch is quite revealing, for 1 Samuel 25 is the story of how this fool and his property came to be parted. It is precisely Nabal’s attitude toward his holdings which destroys the potential for the *shalom* that David seeks. It is Nabal’s refusal to give that causes his loss, even his death.”⁴²

Similarities in two Saul stories. David’s encounter with Nabal is also about leadership, namely David’s rivalry with the house of Saul over who will succeed Saul as king. The Nabal story is sandwiched between two similar stories of conflict between David and Saul. Robert Culley’s comparison of the Saul stories from 1 Samuel 23:14–24:23 and 26:1–25 in parallel columns demonstrates the similarity of wording. In both accounts (1) David is hiding from Saul, (2) who enlists the help of three thousand soldiers to hunt David down. In one story Saul relieves himself in the cave where David and his men are hiding, and in the other David sneaks into Saul’s camp while the king is asleep. In both stories (3) David’s men urge him to kill Saul, saying the Lord has delivered the king into David’s hands (24:4; 26:8), just as Nephi is told, “The Lord hath delivered [Laban] into thy hands” (1 Nephi 4:11). In both Bible stories (4) David rejects the idea of smiting the

40. Yehuda T. Radday, “Humour in Names,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1990), 62–63.

41. Jon D. Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 2:221.

42. Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 15.

“Lord’s anointed.” At a safe distance (5) David calls out to Saul or his guards, holding up proof (part of Saul’s garment and, later, the spear and water bottle) that he could have harmed Saul and asking why Saul has pursued a flea such as him. (6) Saul twice says, “Is that your voice, David, my son?” and then admits he is wrong to attempt to kill him, blesses David, and departs.⁴³ For Culley, the two Saul stories have a slightly different order, and the main incident is also different, but in each the framework is the same. The stories are also closely connected because much of the wording is the same. “One thinks immediately of borrowing or copying. But how does one account for the fact that the central incidents are not at all alike?”⁴⁴

The Nabal-Saul link. The Nabal story is closely tied to the stories of Saul’s pursuit of David that surround 1 Samuel 25. Not only do the doublets of David’s refusal to kill Saul show this relationship, but the David-Saul and David-Nabal stories are about

the problem of military self-help. Both make use of the *Leitwörter* “good” (*tôv*) and “evil” (*raʿ*). Both show David stopping just short of acting on his own behalf, an option that would have harmed his welfare and name, and awaiting vindication from without, by the hand of YHWH. Yet in another respect the two bodies of material seem diametrically opposed: the doublets show David *teaching* the restraint of the saintly: the Nabal/Abigail episode shows David being *taught* such restraint by the intervention of a sagacious woman. I Samuel 24–26 thus form a kind of traditionary garland, most analogous perhaps to that of Gen. 15–17.⁴⁵

Many Bible commentators have observed that Nabal symbolically represents Saul. “Nabal is a debased and parodic version of Saul,” notes David Damrosch, “a rich miser who refuses to aid David with supplies, instead using his food and drink to feast ‘like a king’ [1 Samuel

43. Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 49–51.

44. Culley, *Structure of Hebrew Narrative*, 54–55.

45. Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 152.

25:36].⁴⁶ Further, Saul and Nabal are collapsed into each other as opponents of the upcoming king. According to Garsiel, “David’s enemies, Saul and Nabal, function as ungrateful villains, and the implied author therefore links them by analogy to Laban.”⁴⁷ Diana Edelman sees many points of contact between the Nabal and Saul stories. For example, David’s request of Nabal that the latter give “what his hand finds” (1 Samuel 25:8) echoes Samuel’s command to Saul at the time of his anointing that he “do what [his] hand finds to do” (10:7),⁴⁸ with all its militant overtones. It also echoes David’s request at the sanctuary at Nob, where David asks for food but is really after Goliath’s sword. David, in other words, may be threatening Nabal with a military response if his request is refused.⁴⁹ “Nabal’s ingratitude places him on a footing with Saul. It would seem that the author deliberately establishes an analogy between the two.”⁵⁰ Nabal is also linked to Saul because Nabal feasts at a banquet like the king’s.

According to Robert Gordon, “narrative analogy . . . provides an important clue to the relationship between 1 Samuel 25, which tells the story of Nabal, and the contiguous chapters, which treat of David’s sparing of Saul. The point can be expressed in the simple equation: Nabal = Saul. Saul does not vanish from view in 1 Samuel 25; he is Nabal’s *alter ego*.”⁵¹ Further links in these three stories are David’s resistance to his powerful personal interest in killing Saul and Nabal,⁵²

46. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 212.

47. Garsiel, *First Book of Samuel*, 131.

48. The two quotations from 1 Samuel are apparently Edelman’s own translation.

49. Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1991), 208.

50. Garsiel, *First Book of Samuel*, 129.

51. Gordon, “David’s Rise,” 43. Levenson also uses the term *narrative analogy* to describe 1 Samuel 25. This term refers to Robert Alter’s idea that the Hebrew Bible uses subtle and overt allusion to convey its meaning. The allusion connects stories or passages with each other in order to provide indirect judgments about characters. Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History,” 2:236.

52. “It is not hard to see why 1 Samuel 25 is spliced between two variants of the tradition of David’s sparing Saul’s life. In each case, David perceives a powerful advantage in killing, but is restrained by a theological consideration. In chapters 24 and 26, that consideration is the foulness of slaying “God’s anointed”; in chapter 25, it is, in Abigail’s words, that “when God has appointed you ruler over Israel, it should not be a cause for

locales in the Nabal story that are equally associated with Saul, Nabal's social position as a wealthy chieftain resembling that of a king,⁵³ and word pairs that tie the stories closely together.⁵⁴

Nabal is also Saul's alter ego later in the story. David, incensed at Nabal's refusal to pay for the protection David afforded Nabal's shepherds, threatens to kill everyone who "pisseth against the wall" (1 Samuel 25:22). "The biblical author is making it clear that the main 'pisser' is Nabal himself. The wall he pisses on, at least metaphorically, is David and his men. Nabal is elsewhere identified as a member of the Calebite (*kalibbi*) clan—a pun on the Hebrew *calev*, or 'dog.'"⁵⁵ After detailing the many parallels between Saul and Nabal, Peter Leithart goes even further by connecting Nabal's relieving himself to Saul's similar action in the cave where David had the opportunity to kill him. In both cases David declines to kill his opponent and lets the matter rest with the Lord.

The Nabal-Goliath link. Not only does Nabal represent Saul, he also stands in for Goliath. Abigail explicitly compares her churlish husband to Goliath (1 Samuel 25:26, 29) when she refers to David's enemies and those who pursue him. "The lives of David's enemies shall be 'slung out' by Yahweh: the metaphor is complex but the final image of the sling brings clearly to mind the fate of David's first enemy, Goliath. Lest there should be any doubt about the referent of the curse here the language dispels it: for it is quintessentially Saul who has 'pursued' (*rdp*) David and 'sought his life' (*bqs nps*)."⁵⁶ Nabal is a mixture of both Goliath and Saul, both enemies of David at different stages in his career. Abigail acts the role of David against Goliath when she confronts her husband and his heart becomes like a stone to be slung out.⁵⁷ The moral in both the Goliath and Nabal stories has to

you to stumble or to lose your courage that you shed blood without cause." Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History," 2:236.

53. Gordon, "David's Rise," 43–44.

54. Gordon, "David's Rise," 48–49.

55. Peter J. Leithart, "David's Threat to Nabal: How a Little Vulgarity Got the Point Across," *Bible Review* 18/5 (October 2002): 22.

56. David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1980), 100.

57. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 213.

do with David's innocence from bloodguilt; and, more importantly, in both stories David wins not by his own hand but by depending on the Lord (v. 33).

Thus Abigail has brought out the moral meaning of the initial encounter of David and Goliath, which was told in the spare form of an adventure story. There is no theological commentary (in the first version of the story), and David's use of the slingshot could simply testify to his own cleverness in catching Goliath off guard with an unexpected weapon. Now, in the discourse of the wise Abigail, David is brought to a moral understanding of his own past and is guided to a more openly faithful future behavior.⁵⁸

David immediately applies that understanding in the next chapter when he spares Saul's life a second time. When David twice refuses vengeance on Saul, he teaches a lesson about refusing violence at least for prudential reasons if not for moral imperatives. "David, who fled into exile armed with Goliath's sword, now rejects vengeance altogether. The image of Goliath is transformed from that of invading monster to that of a trusting but mistrusted son. Though David continues to be forced into the outward role of Goliath, it is Saul, like Nabal, who is the true Goliath who will find his punishment at God's hands."⁵⁹

The Laban-Goliath link. When the Book of Mormon narrative pauses to describe Laban's sword, the reader should take note because, as is true for the Bible, the record rarely dwells on physical description. We are given to understand that Laban's steel sword, like Goliath's iron blade, is a rarity. Just as Goliath's sword is preserved by the priests of Nob (1 Samuel 21:1-9), Laban's sword later becomes a model for other swords and a symbol of Nephite kingship (2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob 1:10; Words of Mormon 1:13). The sword of Laban is symbolically connected to the sword of Goliath in six major ways: (1) mighty men (Goliath and Laban) wield them; (2) both men have their heads cut

58. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 213.

59. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 215.

off with their own swords by underdog striplings; (3) in a medium as laconic as Hebraic narrative, the physical description of objects is rare and thus notable, as with these two weapons; (4) the swords become venerated objects, symbols of past deliverances; (5) as symbols the swords are used to lead people; and (6) the weapons symbolize the kingship of their possessors.⁶⁰

Daniel Rolph makes the connection between the Book of Mormon Laban and the biblical one through Balaam:

Balaam, a renegade prophet who sold out to the Moabites, is specifically addressed by Phineas as an archetype for that “Aramaean Laban who tried to destroy our father Jacob,” and, like the Laban of Nephi’s time, this Laban/Balaam’s head was struck off by Phineas with a special sword.

Another sword figures prominently in later Israelite history, when David, like Nephi, slew and decapitated his adversary Goliath with the enemy’s own sword (1 Samuel 17:51), and then deposited the weapon at Jerusalem or in the sanctuary of the priest at Nob in the lands of Benjamin.⁶¹

Further links. If the names or the parallels alone provided the allusive connection between Laban and Nabal, the analogy would be tenuous and easier to dismiss. But the combination of both in all their corresponding details makes a strong case that the three characters (Laban, Nephi’s foe; Laban, Jacob’s foe; Nabal, David’s foe) are meant by the Nephite historian to be interpreted allusively.

Like Nephi, David is a younger brother. The prophet Samuel even makes the mistake of selecting the oldest son of Jesse to be anointed as king, and God has to intervene to send him to the youngest son, David (1 Samuel 16:11–13). The confrontation between Goliath and David is also partly about slavery; Goliath proposes that the losing side in the

60. Brett L. Holbrook, “The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1993): 48–53.

61. Daniel N. Rolph, “Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1993): 77. The reference to Phineas is found in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913–25), 3:409–11.

battle of champions must be slaves to the winning side (17:9). Nabal also calls David and his cohort a band of escaped slaves (25:10).

Like the Labans in the two other stories, Nabal is miserly (1 Samuel 25:11). Not only does David end up with the food he asked for from Nabal, he also ends up with Nabal's wife and presumably all his property—a fitting despoiling of this petty tyrant. When the connection between Nabal and Goliath is made, we see more connections to Nephi. For example, although David was diverted from harming Saul and Nabal, letting the Lord carry out the punishment instead, David did behead Goliath. Similarly, Nephi asks not to have to behead Laban, but the Lord insists on it. So, like Goliath, Laban is decapitated with his own sword. Nabal's drunkenness is paralleled by Laban's drunkenness; and just as Nabal's drunken feasting places his own life in danger, Laban's drunken unconsciousness leads to his death.

Clothes and the Man

An important element connecting the Nephi/Laban story to the Jacob/Laban and David/Nabal stories is clothing symbolism. The theme appears in Jacob's narrative when Jacob dons his older brother's clothing in order to trick Isaac into giving him the blessing (Genesis 27:15). Nephi, too, dresses himself in Laban's clothes in a ruse to acquire the plates of brass. "In the ancient world, clothing held symbolic value."⁶² Clothes could represent status or class membership, duties or obligations, favor or rejection, exaltation or debasement. Clothes receive frequent mention in the David/Saul story. If Nabal represents Saul, then clothes illuminate both David's and Saul's roles in the story.

Throughout David's life, his fortunes are paralleled by the clothing he gathers. Indeed, "clothing appears at a series of turning points in the story, and serves to crystallize basic issues of cultural definition."⁶³ The clothing theme appears early in the story of David's rise to power.

62. Ora Horn Prouser, "Clothes Maketh the Man: Keys to Meaning in the Stories of Saul and David," *Bible Review* 14/1 (1998): 22.

63. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, 206–7.

David has barely been anointed by Samuel when armor and clothing enter the picture:

A person may be symbolized by the clothing that he or she wears. It is thus significant that in the David and Goliath story, Saul offers David his armor. David tries it on, but in a comic touch, the narrator notes that small David was too weak to walk in the heavy armor of King Saul (1 Sam. 17:38–9). This symbolizes David’s refusal to usurp Saul’s royal place. In contrast, however, in the next chapter, Jonathan, the crown-prince, gives his clothing to David. . . . David, then, very early in this narrative, becomes the true crown-prince.⁶⁴

The range of David stories with clothing transfers is broad and deep. David refuses Saul’s armor and therefore steps outside the symbolic field of Saul’s protection, relying on the Lord instead. But this also means that Saul cannot claim credit for Goliath’s defeat; the credit goes to the Lord: “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied” (1 Samuel 17:45). David also takes the symbols of royalty from Jonathan. Later, having acquired Saul’s daughter Michal as his wife, David brings the ark to Jerusalem and dances naked before it. Michal derides David for this display (which was not unlike her father’s nakedness before the prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 19:24), and David replies, “What Michal does not see is that David forgoes his royal robe because he is dancing before the true King of Israel: ‘It was before the Lord’” (2 Samuel 6:21).⁶⁵

In the context of Jonathan’s gift of his arms to David, David’s rejection of Saul’s armor, and his retention of Goliath’s arms, one scholar notes that “the passing of arms from the lesser to the greater,

64. Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 106–7. For additional discussion of how Jonathan’s gift of clothing symbolically transfers his kingship claim to David, see Ora Horn Prouser, “Suited to the Throne: The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the David and Saul Narratives,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 71 (1996): 31–32.

65. As quoted in Damrosch, *Narrative*, 226.

so carefully described by the narrator, seems to have had political implications in the ancient Near East.⁶⁶ David's refusal to use Saul's armor symbolizes that Saul's approach to challenging Goliath won't be David's and that David can achieve the objective without Saul's assistance. Accepting God's protection and commission rather than Saul's, David depends on deity rather than king while rejecting Saul's clothing; the mantle of leadership and protection is not Saul's to grant the man who is to be his successor.⁶⁷

What [David] will ultimately receive from Jonathan is the kingdom ([1 Samuel] 23:17)! The symbolism of the clothes nicely encapsulates and foreshadows this transference. In 15:27f. the tearing (*qr*□) of Saul's robe (*m^e□il*) is directly associated with the tearing (*qr*□) of the kingdom from him. The robe thus becomes a symbol of (royal) status so that when now we find Jonathan stripping off *his* robe (*m^e□il*) and giving it to David it is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are already witnessing, in anticipation as it were, the transference to David of Jonathan's status as heir apparent.⁶⁸

In 1 Samuel 18:4 Jonathan gives David his own robe as a symbol of kingship that will pass from Saul's to David's line. But previously, in 1 Samuel 15:27, Saul's own robe was torn by Samuel as a symbol of the kingship passing from Saul.⁶⁹ In fact, Jonathan gives David a whole range of kingly symbols: robe, sword, bow, and girdle (18:3–4).

The deep and beautiful symbolism of this seems to have been overlooked so far. It seems to me that the motif here has royal overtones. The rending of a robe, probably that of Saul in [1 Samuel 15:27], signified the rejection of Saul and the transference of his kingdom to David. Seen in the light of the fact that

66. J. A. Thompson, "The Significance of the Verb *Love* in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel," *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974): 335.

67. Prouser, "Suited to the Throne," 31.

68. Gunn, *Fate of King Saul*, 80.

69. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *King and Messiah: The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings* (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1976), 34.

the word *m^e□il* can denote a royal robe, Jonathan's robe is part of his princely apparel. When he hands it over to David he at the same time gives up and transfers his particular position as heir apparent. There is thus a legal symbolism in the act.⁷⁰

It is interesting to note how the references to clothing parallel the rise of David and the fall of Saul. Indeed, throughout the Saul and David narratives, David "accumulates clothing while Saul abuses, destroys or loses clothing."⁷¹ To begin with, David rejects the use of Saul's armor in his battle with Goliath, thus symbolically rejecting Saul's influence also. Jonathan gives his princely clothing to David, symbolizing the transfer of royal power from Saul's house to David's. Saul's nakedness before Samuel and his loss of clothing or arms on two occasions when pursuing David represent his loss of status and power to David. When Saul enters the cave to relieve himself, we already know that his "seed" will be cut off and that David will take his place. In the cave, David cuts off part of the "skirt" (*kanap*) of Saul's robe.

But the *kanap* (penis) is properly, of course, the *k^enap-m^e□il*, the skirt of the robe, and the robe, we have seen, is a potent symbol of status in the story. The robe-tearing in chapter 15—Samuel's symbolic demonstration of Saul's loss of status—is significantly recapitulated now. The robe of kingship is at last in David's hands, torn from Saul first by Yahweh's prophet and now, to complete the process, by the one anointed by the prophet. It is interesting to note, moreover, that in contrast to David's earlier refusal to borrow Saul's clothes (armor) in chapter 17 he now *seizes* the piece of robe.⁷²

After Saul's death, his clothes and arms are taken to David. And later, without shoes and head protection, David flees from Absalom.⁷³ To the very end of his life, David's fate is connected with his clothes.

70. Mettinger, *King and Messiah*, 39.

71. Prouser, "Suited to the Throne," 34.

72. Gunn, *Fate of King Saul*, 95.

73. Prouser, "Clothes Maketh the Man," 22–27.

When David is old and shivering, clothes can do nothing to warm him (1 Kings 1:1).

Signs of Sophistication

Merely because narratives use literary devices such as allusion does not mean they must surrender their claims to historical reliability. “The relation between ‘textuality’ and ‘history’ has often been presented as if they were mutually exclusive ways of understanding the literary text.”⁷⁴ In emphasizing the fictional impulse in the Bible, Robert Alter does “not mean to discount the historical impulse that informs the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel, as so often has been observed, is above all a God of history: the working out of His purposes in history is a process that compels the attention of the Hebrew imagination, which is thus led to the most vital interest in the concrete and differential character of historical events. The point is that fiction was the principal means the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history.”⁷⁵

Narrative analogy is one of biblical textuality’s principal means of showing relationships that aid interpretation by “invit[ing] the reader to read one story in terms of another.”⁷⁶

Biblical narrative certainly abounds in patterns of similarity, all based on the principle of analogy. Analogy is an essentially spatial pattern, composed of at least two elements (two characters, events, strands of action, etc.) between which there is at least one point of similarity and one of dissimilarity: the similarity affords the basis for the spatial linkage and confrontations of the analogical elements, whereas the dissimilarity

74. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 117.

75. Robert Alter, “Sacred History and Prose Fiction,” in *The Creation of Sacred Literature: Composition and Redaction of the Biblical Text*, ed. Richard Elliott Friedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 13–14.

76. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1983), 136.

makes for their mutual illumination, qualification, or simply concretization.⁷⁷

A related method that the Bible uses to establish important textual relationships is repetition, which “should not be mistaken for ancient redundancy, or even as simply an esthetic device. It is a key to perception, to interpretation; it calls attention to the similarity of two things or utterances, and may also be calling attention to their differences.”⁷⁸

Before discussing the “three wife-sister variations in Genesis,” Meir Sternberg notes that traditional biblical criticism has only clumsily handled such repetitions. “Traditional speculations about documents and sources and twice-told tales,” he argues, “have now piled up so high on the altar of genesis as to obscure the one remarkable fact in sight, which bears on poetics. Granting the profusion of variants that went into the making of the Bible, the fact remains that the finished discourse never introduces them *as* variants but rather strings them together into continuous action.”⁷⁹ Typologically figured narratives make a point about history and human nature. This approach is sophisticated, and it gives to the Bible—and to the Book of Mormon, which also exhibits a high degree of intertextuality—a level of complexity that many modern readers, especially Book of Mormon critics like Dan Vogel, have been unwilling to seriously engage or even acknowledge.

With the return of biblical literature to the foreground of literary criticism, the reemphasis on repetitions, typological associations, and redundancies is no longer viewed as evidence of textual failings or deficiencies but rather as signs of sophistication. Certainly the same can be said of the Book of Mormon.

Eugene England claimed that the Book of Mormon was the “most typologically structured book—the only one that uses biblical patterns with even greater intensity and consistency and ultimate signifi-

77. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 365.

78. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 136.

79. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 127.

cance than the Bible.”⁸⁰ Thus Latter-day Saint scholars have a certain obligation to continue to examine the Book of Mormon in light of the more fruitful lines of inquiry seen in biblical studies. Some of the tools and methods developed in biblical hermeneutics have proved useful in Book of Mormon studies, and future developments may similarly assist in the ongoing effort to more fully assess and appreciate the literary sophistication and richness of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suppose that what is true of intertextual connections in the New Testament is also true of the Book of Mormon: “Here—as in other passages where New Testament writers cite the Old Testament—the allusive ripples spread out widely from brief explicit citation to evoke larger narrative patterns.”⁸¹ The Book of Mormon invites us to read allusively, “for after this manner has the prophet written” (1 Nephi 19:24).

Reader Response and Nonreader Response

The Ineluctability of Ideology

Literary critics have come to realize that readers always apply one interpretive theory or another as they read. The critical reader will be aware of the theory choice and how it affects interpretation. Theory choices close off certain interpretive avenues and open up others. One powerful influence affecting interpretation is the reader’s ideology. Even a reader who asserts freedom from an ideology is applying one uncritically. When a reader’s theory or ideology goes unspoken and unanalyzed—as when it is a consensus taken for granted by a group of readers—“theory tends to be effaced, latent, presupposed.”⁸² Simply put, “practice is always a form of theory, is always informed by a set

80. Eugene England, “Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue* 22/3 (Fall 1989): 34.

81. Richard B. Hays, “Reading Scripture in Light of the Resurrection,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 228–29.

82. J. Hillis Miller, *Hawthorne and History: Defacing It* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 47.

of assumptions that function as theory.”⁸³ This understanding of the reading process accounts for the radical differences in the way Dan Vogel reads the Laban narrative and the Book of Mormon and the way I read them.

Since the 1970s literary theory has made us more aware of the reader’s contribution to the interpretive process. This approach to evaluating texts is known as reader-response or reception criticism. “Until recently, reading was thought to be a rather straightforward procedure,”⁸⁴ but the idea of an objective reader merely following the stimulus of a text to a single, simple, correct meaning has been abandoned because “readers were continually producing counterexamples in the form of irreducibly different and often contradictory readings of the same text.”⁸⁵ Factors such as one’s gender, religion, culture, class, and professional training affect meaning. “While evidence is far from conclusive, important experiments indicate that comprehension is mediated by generalized knowledge structures, or schemata, that exist in the mind of the reader. . . . In the final analysis, what one reads out of the text depends on what one reads into it.”⁸⁶ Superficiality in a reading might well be the product of an inept reader, but it also might result from a text less rich than others. In any case, ideology is ineluctable: “as reader-response criticism shows, any reader’s ideological allegiances as a member of a particular community play a crucial role in determining the way that reader produces meaning from a work of literature.”⁸⁷ In a very real sense, one cannot choose to do without ideology; one can only choose between applying an ideology uncritically or critically.

83. James L. Machor, “Introduction: Readers/Texts/Contexts,” in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), xxiv.

84. Patricinio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn, “Introduction,” in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patricinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), ix.

85. Schweickart and Flynn, “Introduction,” ix.

86. Schweickart and Flynn, “Introduction,” xii.

87. Stephen Railton, “The Address of *The Scarlet Letter*,” in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 138.

As critics, as readers, as discourse users, we always already historicize because we cannot escape our own historical conditions. The question, then, is not whether we should historicize, since we can never do anything else. The question is whether we will do so consciously, rigorously, and self-consciously—whether we will approach the historicity of reading in a way that recognizes and seeks to address the manner in which that history includes our own discourse practices as historical readers.⁸⁸

Historians do not just assemble facts that are given by the world free of interpretation and bias; rather, as they write their narratives, they filter some material out of the explanation at least partly because of ideological criteria. The sources we use are textual, and the histories produced are also textual. Not only are archival and other sources produced within a web of ideology but so are readers and writers. Addressing what is called in literary studies “the New Historicism,” Louis Montrose notes that “integral to such a collective project of historical criticism must be a realization and acknowledgement that our analyses and our understandings necessarily proceed from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points; that the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, ourselves, historical subjects.”⁸⁹ The reader of historical texts must come to recognize that strong efforts must be made to understand the contemporary reader’s own ideology: “It also necessitates efforts to historicize the present as well as the past, and to historicize the dialectic between them—those reciprocal historical pressures by which the past has shaped the present and the present reshapes the past.”⁹⁰

Master Codes and Interpretive Communities

Students of literature are taught to read texts in particular institutional contexts so they can connect what they read to the values and

88. Machor, “Introduction,” xxv–xxvi.

89. Louis A. Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 23.

90. Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance,” 24.

ideologies that operate in those larger cultural contexts. “Interpretation . . . is not so much a matter of generating meanings out of a text as it is a matter of making connections between a particular verbal text and a larger cultural context, which is the matrix or master code that the literary text both depends upon and modifies.”⁹¹

Because literary texts are made meaningful within a field consisting not just of interpretive strategies but also of intersecting ideologies, epistemic frames, and material conditions, the historical study of response must guard against the assumption that interpretive strategies, on their own, determine the dynamics of reading. Nonetheless, because the foremost concern of historical hermeneutics is the specific features of that dynamic, its primary focus must be on the particular codes of reading preserved in the larger historical archive of semiological practices and sociopolitical developments.⁹²

Of course, the utility of this interpretive approach depends on the selection of a suitable “master code.” Some people may believe, for example, that psychohistory is the appropriate master code to apply to the Book of Mormon and to Mormon history, but using that master code causes one to pay a price in superficiality. It makes one ignore plentiful details in the text whose relevance is either unrecognized by or irrelevant to that master code.

For Vogel, a psychological master code is the key to textual analysis, and so he brings to his task certain presuppositions about how the Book of Mormon narrative operates—namely, that it must be autobiographical and the product of Joseph Smith’s mind, history, and fears. Of course, applying any such a theory carries with it certain consequences and ideologies. “To read a text as literature is not to make one’s mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one

91. Robert Scholes, *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 33.

92. James L. Machor, “Historical Hermeneutics and Antebellum Fiction: Gender, Response Theory, and Interpretive Contexts,” in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 63.

must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for.”⁹³ Thus sound textual analysis depends on what Jonathan Culler calls “literary competence”; one must have it in order to make proper sense of a text. Both readers and authors must share the conventions needed to judge a poem a good poem, a novel a bad novel, or an account a sound history. Vogel’s competence in making literary judgments is at stake here. He uses Freudian theory and Joseph Smith’s biography as a procrustean template to impose on all Book of Mormon stories at a highly abstract level when the narrative is better explored using other conventions. One wonders about the usefulness and legitimacy of Vogel’s reductionist reading of the Book of Mormon.

What are the consequences of applying a psychoanalytic theory to the Book of Mormon? Are they acceptable? The author of a psychohistorical reading of the text ought to engage in some self-reflection about why this approach should be used.

In attempting to make explicit what one does when reading or interpreting a poem one gains considerably in self-awareness and awareness of the nature of literature as an institution. As long as one assumes that what one does is natural it is difficult to gain any understanding of it and thus to define the differences between oneself and one’s predecessors or successors. Reading is not an innocent activity. It is charged with artifice, and to refuse to study one’s modes of reading is to neglect a principal source of information about literary activity.⁹⁴

Culler further notes that if readers are self-critical about their assumptions and why they apply them to the text at hand, they are more likely to see where the text resists their impositions on it and hence how they go beyond the expectations brought to the task of reading.

A reader’s awareness of ideological commitments and how they influence readings does not necessarily mitigate that impact, but

93. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 113–14.

94. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 129.

awareness of the creed is better than being uncritical about it. Ideology cannot be escaped, but it can be explored. It is better to have the reader explain the consequences of ideological commitments than to have opponents who are going to place them in a less favorable light:

In the endless struggle to obtain some understanding of the ways in which our thinking is simultaneously constrained and facilitated by the structures of discourse we use, and have no option but to use, it is obviously important to do everything we can to establish some distance from the associations, distinctions, limits, metaphorical habits, and other systematic features that condition our discursive practices, whether in the criticism of literature or across much wider cultural domains.⁹⁵

It is naïve to believe that the reader's tools, disciplinary predilections, life experiences, theoretical structures, and ideologies do not shape and at least partially create the interpretation that results. Without this recognition, the ideological content in readings is likely to be even more expansive and unrestrained: "Hindsight has frequently revealed 'historical' readings to be little more than the enlisting of past texts in a current theoretical/ideological battle."⁹⁶

While it is true that readers are never free of ideology, this does not mean that all readings are equally ideological. Reader-response criticism does not imply that the reader is all and the text or the past is nothing. One must see the text and the reader in a dialectical dance, with a range of contributions from each partner at different moments in the dance.

We must also realize that the responsibilities of reading involve far more than merely fidelity to the "facts" of the text or of its history of production and reception. By the same token, the "facts" of historical acts of reading are not simply

95. Derek Attridge, "Puttenham's Perplexity: Nature, Art, and the Supplement in Renaissance Poetic Theory," in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 257.

96. Attridge, "Puttenham's Perplexity," 257.

“factitious,” the contrivances of our own free, unfettered wills or whims. The factual and factitious are entangled in every act of reading, and the peculiar way in which they are knotted and woven tells us what we have made of the past and informs others for what we are responsible. It is not a matter of cutting the Gordian knot of others’ readings or merely admiring the ingenuity of the one who tied it, but a matter of following the curls of the rope as if we were loosening its grip on us.⁹⁷

In order for the ideological portion of the text not to overwhelm the dialectic (converting it into a unilectic and transforming dialogue with a text into monologue), the reader must stay focused on the details of the text and remain open to its upsetting of our cherished notions of what the text means. The reader is responding, after all, not just to the text but to his or her own historical and ideological circumstances. The reader should not get locked into a circular pattern with his or her own ideology.

One reader-response theorist notes that all stories are filled with omissions, gaps that are filled in by readers. For different readers, this gap-filling process will be completed differently. “For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities.”⁹⁸ This reading process is never noncircular, for “the text refers back directly to our own preconceptions—which are revealed by the act of interpretation that is a basic element of the reading process. With all literary texts, then, we may say that the reading process is selective, and the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations.”⁹⁹

97. John Carlos Rowe, “Swept Away: Henry James, Margaret Fuller, and ‘The Last of the Valerii,’” in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 50–51.

98. Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 55.

99. Iser, “Reading Process,” 55.

Reader-response theory has also generated some radical ideas. Stanley Fish argues that a given text has no stable parts, that all parts of the text need filling in. “Evidence brought to bear in the course of formalist analyses—that is, analyses generated by the assumption that meaning is embedded in the artifact—will always point in as many directions as there are interpreters; that is, not only will it prove something, it will prove anything.”¹⁰⁰ Fish calls it a positivistic fallacy to assume that meaning is “embedded or encoded in the text, and that it can be taken in at a single glance.”¹⁰¹ For Fish, readers are not left to their own devices for determining meaning, because they belong to overlapping interpretive communities that share reading strategies and ideological commitments. So the reading process is not entirely arbitrary.

Many will find Fish’s explanation unsatisfactory, even if it is not individual readers who determine a text’s meaning but communities. An interpretive community shares certain strategies for making meaning from a text. “These strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around.”¹⁰² If you agree with a community that God does not intervene in history and probably does not even exist, your reading of the Book of Mormon will be radically different from that of a reader who belongs to a community of believers. Old-fashioned readers believe that the truth lies in the facts of the matter or in the text itself, but Fish says that the facts, as extensions

100. Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” in Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, 166. I tend to side with Iser rather than Fish about how plastic texts are—that is, how amenable they are to meaning production by the reader; but these generalizations are not very helpful. A text needs to be judged in its specificity. I do not believe that the name *Laban*, nor the shared elements of clothing and drunkenness in the analogous biblical stories, is something I impute to the Book of Mormon narrative. Rather, I simply supply the notion that Laban’s name is not meaningless or incidental. I borrow from Robert Alter the idea that a name may be intended to trigger an intertextual connection that any adequate reader has the duty to track down. But here again, I supply the notion that the Book of Mormon ought to be read intertextually with the Bible because what happens to the fathers, happens to the sons.

101. Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” 172.

102. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 171.

of our beliefs, “emerge only in the context of some point of view.”¹⁰³ In this view, facts are never brute, uninterpreted states of affairs but have to be actuated by a particular theory of the text, of truth, or of the world. “One cannot appeal to the text” in cases of disagreement about meaning between two critics “because the text has become an extension of the interpretive disagreement that divides them; and, in fact, the text as it is variously characterized is a *consequence* of the interpretation for which it is supposedly evidence.”¹⁰⁴ For Fish, a text like the Book of Mormon would have no meaning until Vogel, I, or any other reader enables that text to take a particular shape.

A Case for Complexity

Vogel and I find very different meanings in the Laban narrative because our assumptions and strategies enable very different possibilities. With both sets of assumptions, possibilities are both lost and created. “We cannot check our interpretive accounts against the facts of the text because it is only within our accounts—that is, within an already assumed set of stipulative definitions and evidentiary criteria—that the text and its facts, or rather *a* text and its facts, emerge and become available for inspection.”¹⁰⁵ We cannot exercise the option of reading the Book of Mormon without biases because “without them there would be nothing either to see or to say.”¹⁰⁶ We can, however, say that some interpretive strategies and biases reveal the text in its richness and complexity while others are superficial and represent unreflective ideological impositions. Vogel’s reading strategies are political because they have a relationship to several communities of interpretation—Latter-day Saint believers, so-called cultural Mormons, evangelical Christians, and producers of anti-Mormon material, for example—and because they advance some people’s ideological interests and attack others.¹⁰⁷ “Bias is just another word for seeing from a particular

103. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 338.

104. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 340.

105. Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 143–44.

106. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 176.

107. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 251.

perspective as opposed to seeing from no perspective at all, and since seeing from no perspective at all is not a possibility, bias is a condition of consciousness and therefore of action.”¹⁰⁸

Both Vogel’s Book of Mormon readings and mine are political. Vogel’s superficialist approach permits its critics to dismiss it since such readings merely serve the interests of those who reject the story of the restoration articulated by Joseph Smith. Vogel fills the “gaps” in the Book of Mormon with his own commitment to shallow reading. In contrast, my readings of deep continuities and canonical relationships between the Book of Mormon and the Bible enable the growth of true exegesis of the text. The ancient rabbis believed the Torah was so multifaceted and sophisticated that it required their best efforts as readers. Diamondlike facets can reflect the light in a number of complex and productive ways. “The struggle for control of textuality is nothing less than the struggle for control over the definition of reality.”¹⁰⁹ We do well to keep in mind that textual arguments have political consequences, and they often reflect the reader’s own image more than they do the text being read. Reading matters, and in the sense adverted to here, so does nonreading.

108. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, 176.

109. Judith Fetterley, “Reading about Reading: ‘A Jury of Her Peers,’ ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” in Flynn and Schweickart, *Gender and Reading*, 160.