



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 22 | Number 1

Article 10

2010

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Olsen, Steven L. (2010) "Prospering in the Land of Promise," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 10.

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NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Prospering in the Land of Promise

Author(s) Steven L. Olsen

Reference *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 229-45.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Nephi and Mormon both treat the covenant of the promised land, expounding on characteristics of prospering in the land: obeying God's law, practicing domesticated economies, preserving sacred records, bearing and raising children, securing adequate defense, constructively using natural materials, worshipping at temples, requiring industriousness, and providing righteous leadership.

PROSPERING IN THE LAND OF PROMISE

Steven L. Olsen

In his remarkable textual study of the Pentateuch, the eminent biblical scholar Robert Alter identifies a key literary convention for the narrative portions of this sacred Judeo-Christian scripture: “It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character’s first recorded speech has particular defining force as characterization.”¹ Alter, Meir Sternberg, and Erich Auerbach also make comparable observations about the first recorded *actions* of biblical characters.² While this literary convention is not a universal feature of the Hebrew Bible, biblical writers frequently employed it to place empirical events in an interpretive context that appropriately focuses the attention of the serious reader. Certainly modern readers stand to gain much insight into biblical narratives from a careful study of this literary convention.³

1. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 158 n. 1, also 77 n. 2, 160 n. 16, 207 n. 6, 222 n. 7; and Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 47 n. 1, 105 n. 2.

2. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), e.g., 321–41. See also Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 3–23; and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114–30.

3. For example, the first quoted speeches of Sarah and Rachel involve their respective childlessness, a central theme of both their lives (Genesis 16:2; 30:1–2); the young Joseph’s first words in Genesis focus on the prophetic quality of his dreams, a key to his saving not only his own life but also the Abrahamic lineage and the lives of many

Since the Book of Mormon comes from a biblical culture, this convention might be of comparable value in understanding the ancient Nephite text. For example, the first reported actions of both Lehi and Nephi involve prayer.⁴ Even though the precise words of their respective prayers are not included in the narrative, the account implies that through their prayers these holy men received from God sufficient knowledge and direction to begin the ministries that would define the central focus of the sacred history that follows.

What about the entrance of God into the narrative? What are his first quoted words, and how do they contribute to the meaning of the text? Although the beginning of Nephi's record reports several spiritual experiences, the text does not include any of God's actual words until the second chapter of 1 Nephi. When God does speak, he promises divine blessings, first to Lehi and second to Nephi (1 Nephi 2:1, 19), signaling that the sacred narrative will emphasize how God blesses the spiritual dynasty founded by this father-son prophet duo.

As full of promise as these initial statements are, they do not specify how God intends to bless Lehi and his posterity. However, immediately after promising to bless Nephi, God himself reveals his strategy for doing so.

And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands. And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of

Egyptians (Genesis 37:5–11; 41:1–45); and Ruth's first explicit speech act sets in motion a series of events that culminates in her becoming the maternal ancestor of King David (Ruth 1:14–16; 4:13–22); the first specific recorded actions of the patriarch Abraham reveal his abiding desire to do God's will, the central quality of his life (Genesis 12:1–9); Rebekah's first recorded actions and sayings fulfill the fervent prayer of Abraham's servant in anticipation of her critical role of preserving Abraham's patriarchal lineage (Genesis 24:12–28); and the first explicit actions of Moses in the biblical narrative liberate from oppression two of his kinsmen, prefiguring his more expansive biblical role with the house of Israel (Exodus 2:11–13).

4. Lehi prays on behalf of the people of Jerusalem, and Nephi pleads for God to soften his heart so that he can accept the inspired direction of his father (1 Nephi 1:5; 2:16).

the Lord. And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren. For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. (1 Nephi 2:20–24)

From this passage we see that the Lord promises to bless Nephi by means of covenants that establish an eternal relationship between God and his chosen people. The central themes of these covenants—prospering in a land of promise and ruling in righteousness over its inhabitants—become two of the dominant themes of Nephi’s sacred record.⁵

The first of these covenants could be called the covenant of the promised land. The formal expression of this covenant finds repeated expression throughout the Book of Mormon: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence.”⁶ Its structure is a classic binary contrast: blessings for the faithful and curses for the rebellious.⁷ In this case, the contrast turns on two terms: *prosper* and *land*. The formal terms of the covenant imply that prospering is the proximate blessing for those who obey God’s commandments and that the promised land is the earthly equivalent of the heavenly presence of God. The covenant also implies that the faithful will eventually enjoy eternal life in the literal presence of God.

5. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 92–95, discusses the interpretive value of terms and themes that are frequently repeated in the biblical narrative. It is instructive in this regard that *land(s)* is repeated 164 times and *people* an additional 183 times in the books of 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, making them among the most frequently repeated nouns in Nephi’s record.

6. 2 Nephi 1:20; 4:4; see Jarom 1:9–10; Mosiah 1:7, 17; 2:22; Alma 36:1, 30; 38:1; 48:15, 25; Helaman 4:13–15; 12:1–2; 4 Nephi 1:7–11. In addition, paraphrases of the covenant of the promised land abound in the text.

7. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 120–42.

In exploring the concept of prospering in the Book of Mormon, I will make two central points: (1) Nephi initially defines and illustrates the concept of prospering in his small plates record, and (2) Mormon uses Nephi's concept of prospering to abridge the large plates.

'Prospering' Defined by Nephi

Consistent with his explicit declaration "My soul delighteth in plainness" (2 Nephi 25:4; compare 33:6), Nephi introduces the concept of prospering in clear, explicit terms. For example, in the course of Lehi's final blessing to his righteous posterity, in which he twice repeats the formal terms of the covenant of the promised land (2 Nephi 1:9, 20), Lehi partially defines *prospering*: "They shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves. . . . And there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever" (2 Nephi 1:9; see v. 31). According to Lehi, protection, peace, persistence, and safety are the hallmarks of those who keep God's covenants in the promised land.

At the conclusion of the historical portion of his account, Nephi enlarges upon the concept of prospering by defining the qualities of his newly founded society in the land of Nephi. He lists nine characteristics that distinguish his followers from those of his wicked brothers, from whom Nephi's people had recently separated (see 2 Nephi 5:1–18). Twice Nephi associates these qualities with prospering ("we did *prosper* exceedingly," v. 11; "we began to *prosper* exceedingly," v. 13).

1. Obeying God's law. "And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses" (v. 10).
2. Practicing domesticated economies. "And . . . we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind" (v. 11).
3. Preserving sacred records. "And I, Nephi, had also brought the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass; and

- also the ball, or compass, which was prepared . . . by the hand of the Lord” (v. 12).
4. Bearing and raising children. “And it came to pass that we began . . . to multiply in the land” (v. 13).
 5. Securing adequate defense. “And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us” (v. 14).
 6. Constructively using natural materials. “And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance” (v. 15).
 7. Worshipping at temples. “And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . after the manner of the temple of Solomon ” (v. 16).
 8. Requiring industriousness. “And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands” (v. 17).
 9. Providing for righteous leadership. “And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power” (v. 18).

To further align these characteristics with the covenant of the promised land, Nephi immediately declares that the initial promises of the Lord “had been fulfilled” (2 Nephi 5:19–20; compare 1 Nephi 2:20–24). The fulfillment of the prior promises occur in both covenantal senses: blessing Nephi and his followers for their obedience and cutting the wicked off from God’s presence. As a result, the Lamanites become the antithesis of the Nephites, being characterized as rebellious, loathsome, idle, nomadic, mischievous, and aggressive.⁸ Nephi concludes his historical account of the establishment of this ideal, covenant-based society with the general declaration of its

8. Each of these qualities directly contrasts with those listed above as being indicative of Nephi’s people prospering after their separation from the Lamanites. Compare 2 Nephi 5:19–26 with 2 Nephi 5:10–18 and 1 Nephi 2:20–24.

ultimate objective: “And it came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27).

‘Prospering’ in Mormon’s Abridgment

Following Nephi’s lead, Mormon features the covenant of the promised land in his abridgment. He does this through the frequent repetition of the term *land(s)* and by giving prominence to Nephi’s nine characteristics of prospering.⁹ As will be seen, for Mormon some characteristics of prospering play a more central role than others, and not all are required for the Nephites to be considered in compliance with the covenant. Mormon’s abridgment is more complex and sophisticated than what a formulaic application of the characteristics might imply. Nevertheless, Nephi’s characteristics of prospering permeate Mormon’s abridgment in both positive and negative senses. They serve as a measure of the strength of the Nephites’ covenant relationship with God and their moral distinction from the Lamanites. The rest of this study summarizes Mormon’s use of Nephi’s concept of prospering to abridge the Nephite records.

1. *Obedying God’s law—keeping the commandments.* The quality of personal and group righteousness, as defined by obedience to the law of Moses and the gospel of Christ, is the focal point of virtually every major discourse in the abridgment, including those of King Benjamin, Abinadi, Alma the Elder, Alma the Younger, Amulek, Samuel the Lamanite, and Christ.¹⁰ The principle of obedience to divine commandments also provides a consistent explanation for the success or failure of Nephite military, political, and social initiatives, and it is regularly the focus of Mormon’s extended editorials.¹¹ Righteousness is also a key condition for the fulfillment of prophecies, the realization of gospel blessings, and the reception of spiritual experiences throughout Nephite history. Clearly, this characteristic of prosperity is interwoven throughout Mormon’s abridgment and

9. Mormon uses *land(s)* 1,024 times in his abridgment (Mosiah 1 to Mormon 7).

10. Mosiah 2–4; 12–16; 18; Alma 5, 9–13, 32–34; 38–42; Helaman 13–15; 3 Nephi 11–18.

11. E.g., Mosiah 11; 19–21; Alma 4:3; 59:12; Helaman 4:12–13; 12.

serves as a standard by which Mormon measures the faithfulness of the Nephites in keeping the covenant of the promised land.

2. *Practicing domesticated economies.* Agriculture and animal husbandry play an important role in Mormon's abridgment of the Nephite records, in both positive and negative terms. On the positive side, abundance of grain and of "flocks and herds" is often mentioned as a consequence of increased or renewed righteousness.¹² During times of war and oppression, the material resources of the Nephites are often destroyed or wasted.¹³ By contrast, the Lamanites are described as living by nondomesticated practices, for example, by nomadic wandering and hunting "wild beasts" in the wilderness.¹⁴

In the Book of Mormon, material wealth is frequently, but not universally, connected with prospering. Consistent with the covenant of the promised land, when wealth is a means to aid the poor, free the oppressed, comfort the disadvantaged, or strengthen the church—it is a prime virtue.¹⁵ However, as a means of oppression, a source of social stratification, a symptom of pride and materialism, or an end in itself, wealth is a great evil.¹⁶ As a prime example of the corrupting potential of wealth, "priestcraft"—that is, religious activities for the purpose of "getting gain"—is a particularly reprehensible evil among the Nephites.¹⁷

3. *Preserving sacred records.* The need to preserve sacred records, as well as sacred objects such as the Liahona and the sword of Laban, receives specific mention throughout the abridgment, especially on auspicious occasions such as the transfer of authority from one Nephite leader to another.¹⁸ Sacred records figure prominently when significant segments of the Nephite society are reunited and upon

12. E.g., Mosiah 21:16; Alma 1:29; 4:4–6; 62:29; Helaman 6:12; 3 Nephi 3:22; 6:1–2.

13. E.g., Mosiah 7:22; Alma 3:1–2; 4:2–3.

14. E.g., Enos 1:20; Alma 22:28; 31:3; 3 Nephi 4:2, 18–20.

15. E.g., Mosiah 4:24–26; Alma 1:24, 27; 4:13; 35:9; 4 Nephi 1:3.

16. E.g., Alma 1:16; 4:6–12; 17:14; Helaman 4:12; 6:12–17, 39; 3 Nephi 6:12–15; Mormon 8:37.

17. E.g., 2 Nephi 26:29; Alma 1:12–16; 11:3–20; 30:35; Helaman 7:21; 4 Nephi 1:26; Mormon 8:33–40.

18. E.g., Mosiah 1:3–16; 22:14; Alma 37; Helaman 3:13–15; 3 Nephi 1:1–2; Mormon 1:1–4.

the resolution of political, military, or moral crises.¹⁹ The sacredness of records and the necessity of their preservation are the subject of numerous editorials.²⁰ On one occasion Mormon identifies belief in the sacredness of the records as a defining feature of Nephite identity, and on another occasion he records that the wicked people of Ammonihah destroyed the “records which contained the holy scriptures” as part of a genocidal program (Alma 3:11–12; 14:8).

During his three-day ministry to the Nephites, the resurrected Christ makes sure that the Nephites’ scriptural record is accurate and complete by adding information that had been inadvertently omitted by prior record keepers and by “expound[ing] all the scriptures unto them which they had received” (3 Nephi 23:6–14). Christ also clarifies the scope and purpose of the Nephites’ sacred writing:

Write the things which ye have seen and heard, save it be those which are forbidden. Write the works of this people, which shall be, even as hath been written, of that which hath been. For behold, out of the books which have been written, and which shall be written, shall this people be judged, for by them shall their works be known unto men. (3 Nephi 27:23–25)

4. *Bearing and raising children.* The importance of bearing and raising children in righteousness finds expression, on the one hand, in terms of demographic increase and geographic spread and, on the other, in the care with which families and children are protected and nurtured by the entire community.²¹ By contrast, the loss of children through evil practices and the treachery of their abandonment are considered to be serious breaches of the moral order.²² The necessity

19. E.g., Mosiah 8:5–19; 22:13–14; 28:10–20; Alma 63:1, 12–13; Helaman 3:13–16; 3 Nephi 2:8–9; 5:18–19.

20. E.g., 1 Nephi 6; 9; 19; Words of Mormon; 3 Nephi 26:6–8.

21. E.g., Mosiah 2:5; 9:9; 23:20; Alma 43:9, 45; Helaman 6:12; 11:20–21; 3 Nephi 17; 18:21; 19:1; 22:13; 4 Nephi 1:10–11.

22. E.g., Mosiah 19:11–24; 26:1–4; Alma 2:25; 3:1–2; 14:8; 3 Nephi 1:29–30; Mormon 4:14–21; Ether 14–15.

of becoming pure like a child is also mentioned in major Nephite doctrinal expositions.²³

5. *Securing adequate defense.* Nephites readily defend their lands, cities, “flocks and herds,” homes and families, manner of worship, liberties, and all other blessings of prospering in the promised land. Their doing so is both a moral right and a covenantal obligation. Nephites regularly risk the loss of individual life in order to ensure the continuity of the covenant community (e.g., Alma 43–62). Covenants also play a specific role in rallying the Nephites to defend themselves at crucial times in their history (e.g., Alma 43–45) and in assuring that the vanquished aggressors preserve the newfound peace at the end of the conflict (Alma 44:15; 50:36).

Two great threats to Nephite society that periodically require an armed response include internal dissension, as manifest by such groups as the Zoramites and the “king-men,” and external invasion, as undertaken by the Lamanites. Nephite-Lamanite conflicts are of three general types, each of which is anticipated and interpreted by the covenant of the promised land. When the Lamanites invade during times of Nephite righteousness, the Nephites always prevail, usually with few Nephite and many Lamanite casualties. This outcome is a general reminder that the covenant identifies the Nephites as the “rulers and teachers” of the Lamanites (1 Nephi 2:22–23). By contrast, when the Nephites are weakened by wickedness, Lamanites often succeed in their aggression, usually with heavy losses on both sides. Lamanite military success in these cases has the effect of “scourging” the Nephites into remembrance of their covenant duties.²⁴ Finally, when the Nephites turn altogether from the covenants by which they have been protected for a millennium in the promised land, they become the aggressors, “delight in bloodshed,” and sorrow for the loss of their kinsmen but not for their own abundant sins. In this condition of abject wickedness, they are swept off the promised land and are altogether destroyed by the Lamanites (Mormon 1–6; 8).

23. E.g., Mosiah 3:18–21; 3 Nephi 17; Moroni 8.

24. 1 Nephi 2:24; compare Alma 4:3; 59:12; 60:15–17; Helaman 4:12–13.

It is often the case that Nephite dissenters or their descendants incite the Lamanites to wage war on their former “brethren.” Most of the warfare in the century and a half before Christ’s appearance in the promised land results from unresolved factional conflicts within Nephite society that are escalated by personal ambition to civil strife and sedition. The dissensions of the Amlicites, Zoramites, people of Ammonihah, and king-men follow this model. In an ironic fulfillment of the covenant of the promised land, it is usually Nephite dissenters who eventually become the leaders of the Lamanite armies, often by treachery, in order to foment their hatred of the Nephites.²⁵

The Gadianton robbers are a particularly heinous example of dissension. They erode Nephite society from within and without and are motivated primarily by the evil objectives of Satan, not simply the personal ambitions of conquest, greed, and revenge. The contrast between following unrighteous personal ambitions and consciously embracing satanic objectives seems to distinguish “priestcrafts” in the Book of Mormon from “secret combinations.” The latter organize themselves according to the “secret oaths and covenants” of Satan and “spread the works of darkness and abominations over all the face of the land” in order to bring “the people down to an entire destruction, and to an everlasting hell” (Helaman 6:25–30). Because of their categorical opposition to the covenant of the promised land, Mormon credits the “band of Gadianton” with “the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi” (Helaman 2:13).

6. *Constructively using natural materials.* The constructive use of natural materials is the characteristic of prospering least developed in Mormon’s abridgment. A possible reason why Mormon minimizes this quality of prospering is that it is not as distinctive a characteristic of covenantal prosperity as many of the others. Fine workmanship serves materialistic and other evil ends as often as it serves righteous intentions (e.g., Mosiah 11:8–13; Alma 4:6). Nevertheless, this characteristic is featured in the narrative as righteous Nephites spread their habitations, after the Lamanites and Nephites establish a temporary peace, as the Nephites develop their extended spiritual

25. E.g., Alma 43:4–7; 46–48; 52; Helaman 1:14–34.

utopia following Christ's ministry, and as the Jaredites realize the benefits of their righteousness.²⁶

7. *Worshipping at temples.* While the specific mention of temples in Mormon's abridgment is not frequent, their general significance in Nephite society is considerable. Two of the spiritual high points of Mormon's abridgment—King Benjamin's sermon and Christ's ministry—take place initially or completely at temples (Mosiah 2:1–7; 3 Nephi 11:1). In a millennial vein, Christ prophesies, quoting Malachi, that in the last days and as the “messenger of the covenant” he will “suddenly come to his temple” (3 Nephi 24:1). Temples also seem to distinguish the central cities of the Nephites, are an object of the building activity in times of prosperity (e.g., Helaman 3:9–14), and, along with synagogues and sanctuaries, are the centers of Nephite worship (e.g., Alma 16:13).

8. *Requiring industriousness.* The importance of being industrious is emphasized in sermons and prophecies; typifies the lifestyles of righteous priests, generals, commoners, and converts alike; and is regularly contrasted with the indolence of the Lamanites and Nephite dissenters.²⁷ The Book of Mormon even classifies the progress of the gospel ministry and the plan of salvation as “work” or “labor.”²⁸ However, like the characteristic of the constructive use of natural resources, industriousness, improperly applied, can lead to pride (Alma 4:6) and economic stratification (3 Nephi 6:10–14), which undermine the equality and unity of the covenant community and prepare the society for moral collapse.

9. *Providing for righteous leadership.* The prime quality of leadership in the Book of Mormon is righteousness. While not all leaders are considered prophets, all are expected to keep God's commandments, exercise righteous judgment, have compassion for those whom they govern, act in the best long-term interest of the society, uphold the law, act with justice and equity, and receive and follow divine inspiration,

26. Helaman 3:6–9; 6:11–13; 4 Nephi 1:7–9; Ether 10:22–28.

27. E.g., Mosiah 2:12–18; 9:11–12; 10:5; 11:1–6; 18:24–26; 27:5; Alma 1:3, 26; 17:14–15; 24:18; 47:36; 48:12; 62:29; Ether 10:22.

28. E.g., 1 Nephi 14:7; 2 Nephi 3:7–8; 27:20–34; 28:5–6; Alma 17:16; 26:3, 8; 28:14; 30:33–34; 42:13; 3 Nephi 21:7–9, 26–28; Moroni 9:6.

whether directly through the Holy Ghost or indirectly through living prophets.

Whether it pertains to society, church, government, military, or home, the value of righteous leadership in the narrative cannot be overstated. King Benjamin stresses it in his valedictory sermon (Mosiah 2). Concerned about the wickedness of members in the newly founded church, Alma resigns his position as chief judge to concentrate on his duties as chief priest (Alma 4:15–20). Lamanite kings who are converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ risk position, power, and their very lives to act in a manner consistent with their spiritual conversion (Alma 24).

While it is not the case that the moral tenor of society in the Book of Mormon automatically reflects that of the leaders, it is particularly true that Nephite society cannot escape the negative consequences of evil or ineffective leadership. Because of the impact of one evil despot (King Noah), the Nephites redefine their polity, adopting judgeship to replace kingship, which had served the society well for several hundred years (Mosiah 23, 29). General Moroni threatens chief judge Pahoran with overthrow because Moroni perceives him to be weak and indifferent to the society's fundamental needs. Then, when Moroni understands the true condition of Nephite political instability, he restores order to the government before successfully defeating the invading Lamanites (Alma 60–62). The successive assassination of judges at the time of Helaman signals a systemic eroding of Nephite society from within (Helaman 1–4). In stark contrast to the general righteousness of Nephite leaders, Mormon's abridgment also includes examples of evil, treacherous, uncaring, and ambitious leaders.²⁹

Some Conclusions

A striking example of how Mormon integrates the complementary characteristics of prospering into his abridgment involves his extended editorial lament on the natural depravity of mankind

29. E.g., King Noah (Mosiah 11), Nehor (Alma 1), Amilici (Alma 2), Korihor (Alma 30), Zerahemnah (Alma 43–44), and Amalickiah (Alma 46–49).

(Helaman 12), which is inserted between his accounts of the largely frustrated ministries of Nephi, the son of Helaman (Helaman 5–11), and of Samuel the Lamanite (Helaman 13–15). In this brief but poignant commentary, Mormon identifies the conditions of prosperity—material abundance, wealth, adequate defense, peace, safety, welfare, happiness—that the Nephites have taken for granted or perverted, thus placing them in a position of spiritual and temporal jeopardy (Helaman 12:1–3). That Mormon mentions “prospering” three times in the enumeration of this list suggests that he intends his commentary to be understood in terms of the covenant of the promised land. Interestingly, Mormon omits from his list the characteristics of prospering that are more difficult to pervert—obedience to God’s commandments, preservation of sacred records, temple worship, and righteous leadership. Mormon then identifies various antitheses of prosperity—foolishness, vanity, evil, iniquity, boastfulness, slothfulness, pride, disobedience, ingratitude, and rebelliousness—that characterize those who have broken the covenant (vv. 4–5). The point here is that prosperity in the Book of Mormon is a unified concept, not a collection of disparate qualities. Mormon testifies that those who feel that they can selectively emphasize certain qualities and ignore others are not keeping the spirit of the covenant and cannot qualify for its blessings.

Continuing his extended commentary on the consequences of disobedience, Mormon next uses the terms of the covenant of the promised land in an unfavorable comparison between “children of men” and “dust of the earth” (Helaman 12:7–19). In this comparison, Mormon asserts that ‘dust’ (i.e., the most insignificant component of ‘land’) is more worthy of God’s blessings than ‘man’ because ‘dust’ is more obedient to God’s commandments. Interestingly, the various ways by which Mormon illustrates the obedience of earth to the commands of God (e.g., earthquakes, convulsions, tsunamis, and landslides) foreshadow the ways that Nephite lands of promise are destroyed by God prior to Christ’s appearance, in fulfillment of prophecy and in accordance with the curse for disobedience connected with the covenant of the promised land (compare 1 Nephi

12:1–5 and 3 Nephi 8–9). Finally, Mormon identifies a special power of the earth—to hide the treasure of evil men—as the antithesis of prosperity, which promises material sufficiency to the obedient.³⁰ As a dire warning to those who persist in their rebellion against God, Mormon twice invokes the ultimate curse of the covenant—namely, that the disobedient will be cast out of God’s presence (Helaman 12:21, 25). He also promises that the penitent and obedient will be saved through God’s grace (vv. 22–24).

While Mormon’s abridgment of the large plates is not consumed by an attention to the Nephites’ prospering in the land of promise, the foregoing summary has shown that prospering is a major theme in his historical narrative. Using frequent repetition of the covenant concept and pervasive use of its particular characteristics, Mormon crafts a sacred narrative that is consistent with the covenants by which God established a relationship with Nephi and distinguished his followers in the promised land. The resulting text illustrates a detailed understanding of the Nephite covenants of salvation and the commitment on the part of its writers to interpret Nephite history accordingly.

Even though Nephi’s aforementioned characteristics of prospering are individual commandments in their own right, obedience to the letter of the law does not, of itself, satisfy the terms of the covenant. The covenant of the promised land requires a level of spiritual commitment beyond merely keeping records, building temples, amassing wealth, and preparing a defense. Numerous examples from Nephite history document the negative consequences of satisfying only the outward requirements. To qualify Nephites for covenant blessings, their records had to be sacred, their wealth used for righteous purposes, their temples devoted to worshipping God, and their military directed to defend covenant-based institutions and relationships.

A further implication of Nephi’s and Mormon’s treatment of this covenant is that the unit of prosperity is the community as a whole

30. Helaman 12:18–19. In addressing the covenant of the promised land in his discourse to rebellious Nephites, Samuel the Lamanite mentions this power of the earth to “hide” material treasures from wicked humans (Helaman 13:18–21).

more than its individual members. The narrative indicates that even during times of righteousness individual Nephites suffered from poverty, illness, untimely death, physical handicaps, and other ills of mortality. Faithfulness does not necessarily prevent all individual misfortunes. Required by the covenant to be conscious of and committed to the welfare of the entire community, individual citizens, in turn, benefit in large measure from the virtues and blessings realized by the community as a whole. By the same token, the wicked portions of Nephite society do not necessarily render the entire society susceptible to the covenant's curse, particularly if concerted efforts are made by the rest of the community and its leaders to stem the spread of evil. Unfortunately, when the Nephite society as a whole turns from the covenant, the few righteous who remain also suffer collaterally from its curse (e.g., Mormon 8).

This study reveals a degree of conscious intentionality on the part of the principal authors of the Book of Mormon. Given the detailed and systematic correspondence between their respective accounts, Nephi and Mormon seem to be aware of and committed to achieving the Lord's objectives for their writing because of their rigorous use of all the historical sources, interpretive skills, spiritual gifts, and literary conventions at their disposal. This clear direction and these committed resources do not make easier the daunting task of writing the enduring record of their civilization. They do, however, make it possible.

The perspective that Mormon's abridgment amplifies and fulfills prescriptions of Nephi's sacred record is consistent with Mormon's explicit statement of editorial intent. In his extended introduction to the abridgment, Mormon reviews how he has decided to append the small plates of Nephi in their entirety to his abridgment of the large plates, even though he has just completed an abridgment from the large plates that covered the same time period. Reminding future readers of the special contents of Nephi's small plates, Mormon explains,

And the things which are upon these plates pleasing me, because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ; and my fathers knowing that many of them have been fulfilled; yea, and

I also know that as many things as have been prophesied concerning us down to this day have been fulfilled, and as many as go beyond this day must surely come to pass—wherefore, I chose these things, to finish my record upon them, which remainder of my record I shall take from the [large] plates of Nephi; and I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people. But behold, I shall take these plates, which contain these prophesyings and revelations, and put them with the remainder of my record, for they are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren. (Words of Mormon 1:4–6)

This declaration suggests that the sacred contents of Nephi’s small plates serve Mormon as an interpretive framework by which he abridges the voluminous records of the Nephites. The present study illustrates one of many possible connections between Nephi’s verbatim account and Mormon’s abridgment.³¹

The concept of prospering, as developed within the context of the covenant of the promised land, is one key to understanding the Book of Mormon narrative as crafted by its major writers. This perspective suggests that the more empirical contents of the text are as essential to its overall meaning as are its more patently spiritual contents. Seen in this light, no secular or purely descriptive contents exist in the narrative, only those “which are pleasing unto God” (1 Nephi 6:5).

Finally, this study demonstrates one way that a sacred history may be distinguished from that which has primarily mundane or merely scholarly value. The sacredness of the Book of Mormon narrative derives not only from the spiritual value of particular contents, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the conscious crafting of these contents into a coherent narrative, in accordance with a divinely revealed perspective. That is, a sacred history like the Book of Mormon can be seen as a narrative whose structure is defined by

31. Steven L. Olsen, “Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 18–29, argues this thesis by comparing homologous structures of prophecy and narrative in the Book of Mormon text.

divine covenants and whose contents amplify the eternal purposes of those covenants.

The point of view of the present study is that the concept of prospering is revealed by God to the founding prophet of a righteous civilization in the context of a divine covenant that defines the special identity of his people and ensures, in a qualified manner, their longevity and eventual salvation. Nephi, in turn, uses the covenant to make sense of his own ministry and of the society that he has founded. Following Nephi's lead, Mormon crafts the sacred history of his people consistent with this divine focus.