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**Abstract** The symbolism of land and its covenantal associations are viewed as guiding structural elements in the Book of Mormon narrative. Involving “existential space” more than “geometric space,” the concept of land is central to an understanding of the book as a sacred, covenant-based record.

# THE COVENANT OF THE PROMISED LAND: TERRITORIAL SYMBOLISM IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Steven L. Olsen

In the Book of Mormon, the four most frequently used nouns by far are *people*, which appears 1,774 times, *God* (1,681 times), *Lord* (1,578 times), and *land(s)* (1,360 times).<sup>1</sup> While frequency per se is not a sure indicator of literary significance, it is symptomatic of it. Robert Alter, for example, has demonstrated the interpretive value of *Leitwörter*—frequently used words and phrases that identify main themes—in the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> By examining the frequency, placement, and contexts of the term *land(s)* in the Book of Mormon, I hope to illuminate how the authors intended this sacred text to be read and understood. Thus this study concerns the intentional crafting of the historical narrative in light of its literary symbolism rather than its cultural geography.

That the Book of Mormon is more concerned with spiritual than temporal realities is supported by statements of its principal authors. For example, Nephi states repeatedly that he records nothing on plates except that which is sacred, focused on Christ, pleasing unto God,

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1. R. Gary Shapiro, comp., *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1977), s.v. “land(s),” “people,” “God,” “Lord.”

2. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 88–113.

and of eternal worth.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in his preface to the surviving abridgment of the Nephite records, Mormon observes that after he had completed a substantial portion of his abridgment (i.e., of the sacred records of the spiritual leaders of the Nephites from father Lehi to King Benjamin), he “searched among the records which had been delivered into [his] hands, and [he] found these plates [i.e., Nephi’s small plates], which contained this small account of the prophets, from Jacob down to the reign of this king Benjamin, and also many of the words of Nephi” (Words of Mormon 1:3). He specifically states that the contents of this record pleased him “because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ” (v. 4), as well as other prophecies. Of these things he testifies, “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” (v. 4). In a wonderfully succinct purpose statement, Mormon then outlines the framework for his remaining abridgment (vv. 5–8):

1. Interpretive focus: “I chose these things [i.e., the prophecies and revelations of Nephi’s record], to finish my record [i.e., the abridgment] upon them.”

2. Primary source material: “[The] remainder of my record I shall take from the [large] plates of Nephi.”

3. Editorial strategy: “I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people.”

4. Structure of the finished product: “I shall take these [small] plates, which contain these prophesyings and revelations, and put them with the remainder of my record.”

5. Overall intended effect: “They are choice unto me; and I know they will be choice unto my brethren.”

6. Principal motivation: “Thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. . . . My prayer to God is . . . that [my people] may once again come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ.”

Thus in order to make eternal sense of the historical records of his people, Mormon adopts the interpretive focus of Nephi’s small plates

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3. 1 Nephi 6:3–6; 19:6–7; 2 Nephi 5:32; 25:7–8, 26.

and relies on the influence of the “Spirit of the Lord.” I have illustrated elsewhere Mormon’s use of Nephi’s verbatim account to abridge the vast records of his people.<sup>4</sup> I pursue a similar thesis here:

1. Nephi defines a concept of “land” that focuses his record on profoundly spiritual realities.
2. Mormon abridges the Nephite records consistent with Nephi’s concept of “land.”

### ‘Land’ in Nephi’s Small Plates Record

The first uses of *land* in Nephi’s account establish the initial spatial context of the story: the “land of Jerusalem” is Lehi’s immediate spiritual concern in that his revelation of Jerusalem’s impending destruction motivates his prophetic ministry (1 Nephi headnote).<sup>5</sup> A key event early in his record provides Nephi the opportunity to introduce a central focus of his narrative (1 Nephi 2:16–20). Nephi had prayed for a divine witness that his father’s dire prophecies concerning Jerusalem were indeed from God. In response, God softened Nephi’s heart so he could believe his father’s words. He also blessed Nephi, promising him that he and his family would be led to a land “choice above all other lands,” a land “prepared” by the Lord where they would “prosper” (v. 20). Nephi’s prayer is his first recorded action in the narrative, and God’s response is Nephi’s first recorded spiritual experience. In his seminal work on the Pentateuch, Robert Alter shows how first actions and first speeches of major biblical characters often reveal their personality and define their principal roles in the story.<sup>6</sup> Applying this literary convention to the Book of

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4. Steven L. Olsen, “Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 18–29.

5. This context is also vital for the rest of the story because of its correspondence with the traditional Jewish concepts of the territorial environment: “The Land of Israel is situated in the center of the world, and Jerusalem in the center of the Land of Israel, and the Holy Temple in the center of Jerusalem.” Midrash Tanhuma, Kedoshim 10, cited in *Towards the Eternal Center: Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple*, catalog of an exhibition at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1996, p. 6.

6. 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. 15, 207 n. 6, 222 n. 7), and Alter,

Mormon, we infer that Nephi's account will detail his being divinely blessed in terms of a "land of promise."

As the narrative unfolds, we find that Nephi's record is largely devoted to his family's obtaining, occupying, and prospering in the promised land. Acquiring the brass plates, recruiting Ishmael's family, and outfitting the group with tents, seeds, and other provisions are vital to the success of this endeavor.<sup>7</sup> The perilous journey through the wilderness and over the "great waters" is replete with miracles, spiritual experiences, and divine guidance (1 Nephi 11–18).

The Lord tells Nephi that after he obtains the promised land he will know that it is only by divine assistance that the journey succeeds, implying that arrival in the promised land is partial fulfillment of God's initial promise (1 Nephi 17:12–14). Thus it is fitting that God commands Nephi to begin the first record of his ministry only after the group has arrived in the promised land, and it is also fitting that the historical portion of Nephi's record, which includes the commandment to begin a second account of his ministry, ends with the establishment of the society that enables his followers to prosper in accordance with the divine promise (1 Nephi 19:1–6; 2 Nephi 5). Reinforcing this interpretive emphasis is Nephi's repetition of the phrases "land of promise" and "promised land" twenty-seven times throughout his small plates record.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being a primary emphasis in Nephi's historical narrative, the promised land is also a focal point in the prophecies that he includes in his record. While he does not include all of his father's prophecies, he acknowledges that Lehi had prophesied that his family "should be led with one accord into the land of promise" as part of the general scattering of Israel throughout the earth (1 Nephi 10:13–15). Similarly, Nephi devotes one-fourth of his own prophetic vision to the future history of the Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land. Specifically, this part of Nephi's vision foretells four large-scale

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*The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 47n (v. 5), 105n (v. 26).

7. 1 Nephi 4:14; 7:13–15; 8:1; 16:11–12.

8. Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "land."

historical events: “wars and contentions” prior to Christ’s coming, Christ’s ministry among the survivors of these destructions, four generations of righteousness following Christ’s ministry, and the eventual annihilation of his people (1 Nephi 12). Nephi also includes in his record an extended discourse of his brother Jacob, who cites many prophecies of Isaiah. Jacob mentions three grand purposes for doing so. The concept of “land” features prominently in two of the three:

And now, my beloved brethren, I have read these things that ye might know concerning the covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the house of Israel—that he has spoken unto the Jews, by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down, from generation to generation, until the time comes that they shall be *restored to the true church and fold of God*; when they shall be *gathered home to the lands of their inheritance*, and shall be *established in all their lands of promise*. (2 Nephi 9:1–2, emphasis added)

Prophecies from Nephi’s record concerning the land of promise in the last days occasionally refer to that land as “Zion,” identifying the establishment of Zion as preparatory to the millennial “kingdom of the Lamb,” a Nephite metaphor of salvation (1 Nephi 13:37). Finally, at the end of his writing, Nephi reprises the major prophetic themes that have occupied his ministry, including that of the promised land. Through Nephi, God states, “And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word shall also be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever” (2 Nephi 29:14).

In short, the prophecies included in Nephi’s record place Lehi’s family squarely within the prophetic tradition of the house of Israel. They identify Lehi’s descendants as among those who would be scattered throughout the world and divinely led to an alternative land of

promise. The possession of a promised land also links Lehi's family to Abraham, to whom God had promised a choice land as a

- sign of an everlasting heritage of his righteous posterity,
- symbol of an eternal covenant with God, and
- metaphor of salvation.

The formal terms of the covenant of the promised land in Nephi's writings further explicate these three spiritual roles. The covenant itself is often repeated in Nephi's record: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my [God's] commandments, ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments, ye shall be cut off from my presence" (2 Nephi 1:20).<sup>9</sup>

In its formal expression, the covenant consists of two clauses of two phrases each. The first phrase in each clause, called the antecedent, identifies the essential condition of keeping the covenant, that is, obedience to God's commandments. The second phrase in each clause, called the consequent, predicts the contrasting results, that is, blessings for obedience (prospering in the land) and curses for disobedience (being cut off from God's presence).

Dissecting the structural logic of this covenant, we find that the two antecedents exist in direct opposition to each other, while the two consequents exist in an interpretive progression. That is, the consequent of the second clause ("cut off from God's presence") helps to define by negation the first clause ("prosper") by introducing a new but related term. In short, the covenant of the promised land defines the concept of "land" as the temporal symbol of the presence of God among his people and "prosper" as a temporal representation of God's quality of life. In essence, the covenant promises that those who obey God's commandments will realize in mortality an approximation of God's life in heaven and will eventually attain the literal presence of

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9. Compare 1 Nephi 4:14–15; 2 Nephi 1:9. This wording is repeated in whole or in part to justify Nephi's slaying of Laban and to focus Lehi's final blessing of his posterity, two pivotal events in Nephi's record. The phrase "cut off" has strong covenant connotations, associated with the covenant's curse. Its use in the Book of Mormon is consistent with the covenant of the promised land and appears frequently throughout the Book of Mormon in covenant-related contexts. See Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. "cut."



God and enjoy the full measure of eternal life. By contrast, those who turn from the covenant will be cut off from God's presence and forfeit his heavenly protection. That is, they will live on earth as other, noncovenant groups, and in the next life they will be eternally separated from God. Occupying the promised land is the first step in the Nephites' fulfilling the terms of this divine covenant.

Formal logic also reveals additional insight about the antecedents of the two phrases as conditions or qualifications of the promised blessings. That the two antecedents are in direct contrast to each other means that they serve as necessary, not sufficient, conditions of the consequences. That is, while obedience to God's commandments is necessary to receive the promised blessings, it is not by itself sufficient to guarantee receipt of those blessings. While obedience is certainly necessary to receive the blessings of a covenant, other conditions are equally essential, for example, a righteous desire to serve God, a willingness to endure in faith to the end, a commitment to follow additional promptings of the Holy Ghost, and so on. In addition, some earthly circumstances—debilitating accidents and diseases, the evil consequences of others' actions, and the circumstances of life beyond one's control, to name a few—may limit the degree to which a person might prosper in mortality, in spite of his or her complete obedience to God's commandments. Thus the structure of the covenant of the promised land helps us understand the nature of its promised blessings and the conditions whereby the blessings are promised.

The covenant's explicit blessing, "prosper in the land," pervades Nephi's record.<sup>10</sup> Consistent with Nephi's general literary practice of following his father's lead, Nephi has Lehi initially define the concept of prospering in his final blessing of his posterity (2 Nephi 1:9, 20, 31) and then expands and refines the concept as he concludes the narrative portion of his record with the account of his establishing a separate ideal society in the land of Nephi (2 Nephi 5). Here he lists

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10. See Steven L. Olsen, "Prospering in the Land of Promise," *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 229–45, for a more detailed treatment of the concept of prospering as it is introduced in Nephi's record and as it pervades Mormon's abridgment. The main points of this study are summarized here.

nine defining characteristics of their society and twice associates these characteristics with prospering. They include obeying God's law, practicing domesticated economies, preserving sacred records and objects, bearing and raising children, securing adequate defense, constructively using natural materials, worshipping at temples, being industrious, and providing for righteous leadership (vv. 10–18).

Immediately following this listing, Nephi twice states that the “words of the Lord had been fulfilled,” restating the covenants from Nephi's first recorded encounter with God (2 Nephi 5:19–20; compare 1 Nephi 2:20–24). He next defines the Lamanites in contrasting terms so that they become the antithesis of the Nephites: “cut off” from the presence of the Lord and culturally, spiritually, and politically inferior. Nephi concludes with a summary of the objective of this covenant-focused lifestyle: “we lived after the manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:23–27).

Subsequent writers in the small plates expanded Nephi's concept of prospering in describing the Nephites for the next few hundred years:

The people of Nephi had waxed strong in the land. They observed to keep the law of Moses and the sabbath day holy unto the Lord. And they profaned not; neither did they blaspheme. And the laws of the land were exceedingly strict. . . . And we multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war. And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, they did not prosper against us. But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land. (Jarom 1:5, 8–9; see vv. 10–12; Enos 1:15–16, 21; Omni 1:5–7)

In summary, Nephi crafts his record in covenant-based terms using “land” as the symbol of a covenant by which God promises to pro-

tect, sustain, bless, and eventually save his righteous children. Nephi and subsequent writers in the small plates integrate covenant ideology into every aspect of their records: historical narrative, scripture citation, social commentary, doctrinal exhortation, and prophecy. The covenant of the promised land does not consume all of Nephi's literary attention, but it is pervasive enough to be considered a major focus of his writings. The next section of this paper illustrates the extent to which Mormon incorporates Nephi's concept of "land" into his abridgment of the Nephite records.

### 'Land' in Mormon's Abridgment

From a covenant-based perspective, the geographical details of Mormon's abridgment situate the narrative within God's promises of salvation as given to Abraham and as renewed through Lehi and Nephi. Thus the territorial environment also plays a major spiritual role in Mormon's record.

Mormon's abridgment identifies dozens of distinct lands, which were generally named for the leader of the initial settlement group (Alma 8:7).<sup>11</sup> Although each contributes to the narrative in its own way, major lands often existed in paired contrast. At the most general level of Nephite territorial consciousness, the "land of Jerusalem" ("Holy Land") was contrasted with the "isles of the sea," or with the remainder of the earth's landmass.<sup>12</sup> The Nephites considered one of the "isles of the sea" to be the "promised land," the place to which God had led them. Most generally, the promised land was divided between the "land northward" and "land southward," also called Mulek

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

12. The term *Jerusalem* appears liberally throughout the Book of Mormon and is treated with a great deal of ambivalence in the narrative, that is, as the traditional holy place of the house of Israel and as the wicked place that was destroyed by invading Babylonians at the time of Lehi's exile. By contrast, the phrase "isles of the sea" appears only in Nephi's writings (1 Nephi 19:10, 12, 16; 21:1, 8; 22:4; 2 Nephi 8:5; 10:8, 20–21; 29:7). A corresponding ambivalence accompanies this phrase and its equivalents. On the one hand, "isles of the sea" are estranged from the holy city of Jerusalem, but the particular "isle" that the Nephites occupy was specially prepared for them by God as an alternative "promised land."

and Lehi, respectively (Helaman 6:10). The major divisions of the land southward were the “land of Nephi” and the “land of Zarahemla.” In addition, the most northern portion of the land southward, called Bountiful, was adjacent to Desolation, the most southern portion of the land northward (3 Nephi 3:23).<sup>13</sup>

While other named lands are part of the land southward, Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful provide the primary geographical focus for the millennium-long narrative of Nephite occupation of the promised land. Those three lands relate to one another chronologically from first to last and geographically from south to north. The land of Zarahemla is north of the land of Nephi and is occupied after continued settlement in Nephi becomes untenable (Omni 1:12–15). Similarly, the land of Bountiful is north of the land of Zarahemla and becomes the focus of Nephite civilization after Zarahemla is destroyed in the catastrophes prior to Christ’s ministry (3 Nephi 8:8, 24). Even though Zarahemla is rebuilt during the two centuries of righteousness following Christ’s ministry (4 Nephi 1:7–8), Bountiful remains a principal focus of the narrative until the Nephites are driven into the land northward by the Lamanites, who are intent on their destruction.

It is in the land northward that the Nephites, like the Jaredites before them, are annihilated as a people. Even though the land northward had been occupied for some time by the Nephites, Mormon includes the names of only one of its constituent lands and few of its cities, besides the land and city of Desolation (Mormon 4:14, 19–20; 5:3; 6:2–6). The virtual elimination from his record of geographical details from the land northward seems to imply that Mormon does not consider it as important a settlement area for the purposes of his abridgment as the land southward.

Names given to a land are generally bestowed upon its major settlement, called a city. For example, the city Nephi is the major settlement in the land of Nephi, the city Bountiful is the main settlement in the land of Bountiful, and so on. A city in the Book of Mormon is the primary unit of territorial identity and control. While towns and

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13. Bountiful and Desolation are likely exceptions to the general naming pattern of Nephite lands and cities.

villages are also places where Nephites and Lamanites lived, Mormon includes the names of no towns and only one village in his entire abridgment, and none of these lesser settlements is detailed in any way (Alma 21:11). That towns and villages are hardly mentioned, only once named, and not described at all suggests that they serve the story merely as *de facto* places of residence, not as places of great cultural and religious significance.

By contrast, the way that cities are described in the narrative reveals their ultimate character. On the one hand, geographic and demographic size, even in relative terms, is hardly ever a descriptor of cities and their surrounding lands. Furthermore, the narrative hardly mentions markets, government buildings, or central squares as urban places of significance (Helaman 7:10). City walls occasionally figure into the story as boundaries and fortifications,<sup>14</sup> and prisons are mentioned primarily when God's servants must be miraculously released from captivity due to the society's moral decline.<sup>15</sup> Houses and homes are frequently mentioned, but only as places of residence, not as distinguishing features of the urban environment.<sup>16</sup> None of these features, then, can be said to distinguish or define the essence of a city in the Book of Mormon, because they are neither the focus of detailed description nor the locus of essential social action.

On the other hand, the narrative regularly associates cities with temples, synagogues, and sanctuaries. These religious structures serve as the primary locus of religious reform, community renewal, leadership succession, and spiritual conversion. Temples are the only civic structure specifically mentioned in Nephi's description of the ideal society (2 Nephi 5:16). They are also the venue for the major discourses of Jacob and Benjamin, the latter serving also as a ritual of community

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14. For example, 1 Nephi 4:4–5, 24–27; Mosiah 9:8; Alma 53:4–5; 62:21–26; Helaman 16:2–7.

15. For example, Alma 8:31; 9:32–33; 14:17–29; 20:2–30 *passim*; 21:13–15; Helaman 5:21–31; 9:9–14; 10:15–16.

16. For example, 1 Nephi 1:7; 3:11; Mosiah 8:4; Alma 8:1, 20–21; 10:7–10; 19:17–20; 30:56–58; 31:23; 43:45; 58:31; 3 Nephi 19:1.

renewal and of kingly succession (Jacob 1:17; Mosiah 2:1–7).<sup>17</sup> Christ appears to the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful, where he also administers his gospel, performs miracles, organizes his church, and rehearses the covenant history of the world (3 Nephi 11–22). While not frequent, the mention of temples is so central to the story that they must be recognized as the Nephites' most important civic structures. Synagogues and sanctuaries complement temples to define an urban landscape focused on religious functions. Although temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues are often included in complementary lists of religious edifices, temples seem primarily to serve periodic ritual functions for the entire community, while synagogues and sanctuaries are used for more frequent acts of private devotion and congregational worship (Alma 15; 16:13; 21–23; 26:29; 32; Helaman 3:9, 14).

The complementary nature of lands, cities, temples, synagogues, and sanctuaries suggests that the territorial environment in the Book of Mormon is given meaning not by statistical, material, and secular criteria, but by spiritual considerations. Indeed, equating cities with places of worship implies that cities and their associated lands are identified in the Book of Mormon primarily as ceremonial centers.<sup>18</sup> Even when cities are the prime locus of military conflict, social disintegration, and physical devastation, Mormon places these catastrophes in a spiritual

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17. See Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 243–56.

18. Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, trans. Willard Small (1864; repr., New York: Doubleday Anchor, n.d.), and Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), argue that the world's earliest cities grew out of ceremonial centers. Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy, and the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), describes the ritual founding and design of ancient cities that imbued them with metaphysical and cosmogonic significance. Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), and Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), describe the symbolic significance of the territorial order in many ancient civilizations. Steven L. Olsen, "Cosmic Urban Symbolism in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 23/1 (Winter 1983): 79–92, draws explicit parallels between the territorial environment of these ancient civilizations and that of the Book of Mormon.

context, not a scientific, secular, political, or humanistic one.<sup>19</sup> In sum, while the concept of “land” has political, economic, demographic, and social connotations among the Nephites, it is more generally associated in the Book of Mormon with moral and spiritual significance. Whether it involves the Jews, Mulekites, Jaredites, Nephites, or Lamanites, “land” is considered the proper place of human habitation and the locus of their identity as God’s covenant people.

In this sense, “land” contrasts with “wilderness.” While the Book of Mormon usually distinguishes individual lands by names and relative locations, it includes the names of only two areas of wilderness (Alma 2:37; Ether 14:3–4). While the word *land* appears frequently in the plural, *wilderness* never does. Furthermore, wilderness areas are generally described as being “dark and dreary,” associated with trials and afflictions, inhabited by “wild and ravenous beasts,” and characterized by human wandering and death.<sup>20</sup> Rather than being equivalent to a desert (an environmental wasteland),<sup>21</sup> *wilderness* connotes territory that is not properly settled—that is, not distinguished by and ordered for intentional, traditional, and meaningful occupation by a covenant people. In short, in the Book of Mormon the concept of “wilderness” seems to be the antithesis of “land,” the former being undifferentiated, disordered, savage, and residual space that is not suitable for proper habitation within the covenant-based society of the Nephites.

Nearly half of the fifty instances of the term *prosper(ed)* in Mormon’s abridgment occur in the phrase “prosper(ed) in the land,” suggesting that (1) “land” is the locus of “prospering” and (2) “covenant” is the meaningful context of both. Supporting this notion is the fact that this

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19. The Nephites wage war with the Lamanites “in memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children” (Alma 46:12; see chaps. 43–62). All of these motivations are extensions of the concept of “prospering.” Similarly, Helaman 12 is Mormon’s extended lament on the persistent depravity of man as manifest in Helaman 1 through 3 Nephi 7. Likewise, the heavenly voice that addresses the survivors of the widespread devastation immediately preceding Christ’s appearance names the wickedness of those cities as the sole cause of their destruction (3 Nephi 9).

20. For example, 1 Nephi 5:2; 8:4; 16:20, 35; 2 Nephi 1:24; 4:20; 5:24; Enos 1:20; Mosiah 7:4; 9:2–4; Alma 2:37–38; 16:10; 22:31. See also Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “lands” and “wilderness”; and Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 106–14.

21. *Desert* does not appear in the Book of Mormon text outside of the Isaiah passages; see 2 Nephi 8:3; 23:21.

phrase and the formal terms of the covenant occur at crucial junctures in Mormon's abridgment, such as times of moral renewal, social crisis, and transfer of power.<sup>22</sup>

While not all the contents of Mormon's abridgment can be explained in terms of Nephi's concept of prospering, the nine characteristics of prospering pervade the abridgment so thoroughly as to suggest that the correspondence between the two accounts is intentional and foundational. Indeed, the covenant of the promised land as introduced in Nephi's account operates as a basic principle for selecting and organizing the material for Mormon's abridgment. The nine characteristics serve as a measure of the strength of the Nephites' covenant relationship with God and help define their moral distinction from the Lamanites.<sup>23</sup> A further connection between the concept of prospering and the abridgment appears in Mormon's truncated description of the utopia following Christ's ministry among the Nephites. The table below shows the degree of correspondence between the distinctive features of this ideal society (4 Nephi 1:1–23) and the characteristics of prospering recorded by Nephi (2 Nephi 5:10–18). As will be noted, Mormon was not slavish to the precise wording of the latter; nevertheless, the degree of correspondence is noteworthy. To reinforce this connection, Mormon specifically mentions prospering three times in his brief exposition of the ideal society (4 Nephi 1:7, 18, 23).<sup>24</sup>

#### **Features of Utopia (4 Nephi)    Prospering (2 Nephi 5)**

the penitent are baptized and given the Holy Ghost (v. 1)	obedience to God's law (v. 10)
there are no contentions (vv. 2, 13, 15, 18)	obedience to God's law (v. 10)

22. For example, Mosiah 1:7, 17; 2:22, 31; Alma 9:13; 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1; 48:15, 25.

23. Olsen, "Prospering in the Land of Promise," summarizes the pervasiveness of Nephi's characteristics of prospering in Mormon's abridgment and illustrates how the covenant of the promised land informs such extended editorial asides as Mormon's lament on the depravity of mankind in Helaman 12. While relevant to the present study, this more detailed analysis is not replicated here.

24. I am grateful to Kevin Neilson for this insight.



the people have all things in common (v. 3)	sharing wealth (v. 11)
peace prevails in the land (v. 4)	adequate defense (v. 14)
miracles wrought in the name of Jesus (vv. 5, 13)	obedience to God's law (v. 10)
cities are rebuilt (vv. 7–8)	build cities and temple (vv. 15–16)
people multiply quickly (v. 10)	bear and raise children (v. 13)
marriages are performed (v. 11)	bear and raise children (v. 13)
people observe the commandments of God (v. 12)	obedience to God's law (v. 10)
cannot be a happier people (v. 16)	people live "after the manner of happiness" (v. 27)
a record is kept (vv. 20–21)	sacred records and objects preserved (v. 12)

In addition to pervading Mormon's abridgment through the concept of prospering, the covenant of the promised land is also abundantly manifest in the prophetic tradition of the Nephites. Nephi's prophecies that Mormon is able to witness in his historical abridgment as coming to their literal and complete fulfillment—"wars and contentions," Christ's ministry, righteous utopia, and the Nephites' final destruction—conform precisely to the covenant of the promised land.<sup>25</sup>

Prophecies from Mormon's abridgment that go beyond the narrative's historical frame extend the relevance of the covenant to the end of earth's temporal existence. The most explicit summary of these prophecies is uttered by Christ toward the end of his three-day ministry to the Nephites (3 Nephi 20–21). That these prophecies are expressed in the context of eternal covenants is evident in his use of the term *covenant(ed)* twenty-one times in this brief discourse. The covenant of the promised land is featured prominently in these prophecies. Christ reiterates a familiar theme in Nephite prophecy: the gathering of Israel in the last days. The gathering is to occur in two senses: spiritually by means of conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ and literally by means of gathering to the lands of inheritance. The literal

25. See Olsen, "Prophecy and History," for an exposition of the relevance of Nephi's prophecies in 1 Nephi 12 to the overall structure of Mormon's abridgment.

gathering of Israel will focus on two centers: Jerusalem in the Holy Land and the New Jerusalem (or Zion) in the promised land. In the promised land, the remnant of Israel will join with Gentiles, who have been gathered in the spiritual sense, to build up the New Jerusalem and establish Zion. Then, says Christ, “shall the power of heaven come down among them; and I also will be in their midst” (3 Nephi 21:25). By contrast, those who reject the gospel of Christ, whether of Israel or the Gentiles, will be “cut off” and their cities destroyed. Christ repeats seven times the phrase “cut off” in relation to the wicked as the consequence of their breaking this covenant. From this perspective, the millennial kingdom of God will be an urbanized society whose citizens are bound together by covenant and who enjoy the blessings of eternal life in his literal presence.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that the concept of “land” is central to an understanding of the Book of Mormon as a sacred, covenant-based record. Indeed, the Nephite story as crafted by Nephi and Mormon is more about sacred space than sacred time. Its authors are more attentive to spatial than temporal contexts in fulfilling the book’s spiritual purposes.

In the Book of Mormon, land is *sacred* space, being defined and regulated by covenant. Each dimension of the territorial environment—lands, cities, places of worship, human migrations, warfare, natural disasters, social welfare, cultural identity, and so on—finds meaning in terms of the covenant of the promised land. Lands are identified and distinguished by their proper settlement and ordering by a covenant people. Cities are the prime locus of territorial control and meaningful social action and are distinguished primarily by their sacred places of worship. Cities are also the primary focus of wars, social disintegration, and natural disasters, which occur largely when the Nephites break the divine covenant that otherwise affords them prosperity. Prospering is a comprehensive concept of social well-being, as defined by the covenant of the promised land. Mass migrations from one land to another are motivated primarily by spiritual

criteria. The symbolism of the territorial environment also helps to define the Nephites' prophetic traditions. Ultimately, land in the Book of Mormon is the symbol of a covenant relationship with God: a sign of his protective presence and promise of his saving grace.

From this perspective, Moroni's abridgment of the Jaredite record serves as another witness to the significance of the covenant of the promised land. Moroni emphasizes the promised land as the destination of this band of exiles from the "great tower" (e.g., Ether 2; 6). As prior occupants of the promised land, the Jaredites live for more than twenty-seven generations in terms similar to those of the Nephites. Obedience to God's commandments produces prosperity, and wickedness results in the disintegration and eventually the total annihilation of their civilization. Since Moroni abridges the plates of Ether at the direction of his father, one can imagine that he does so according to Mormon's covenant-based orientation.

In the end, the promised land in the Book of Mormon is best understood as more than a specific location where ancient civilizations lived and died. Although the Jaredites, Mulekites, Lamanites, and Nephites occupied actual physical locations, the meaning of "promised land" is not exhausted by what geographers call "geometric space," or empirically specified and fixed locations on the earth's surface. Rather, the Book of Mormon equates the promised land with the places where sacred covenants govern human relations and where the blessings of the gospel are realized by covenant-based communities. In short, the Book of Mormon equates "promised lands" as the places where the plan of salvation is manifest in the lives of a covenant people. This sense of "promised land" is consistent with what geographers call "existential space," that is, locations whose significance is defined primarily by experiential, not empirical and scientific, criteria.<sup>26</sup> For this reason the effective center of Nephite civilization could shift successively from Jerusalem to "the land of our first inheritance" to the

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26. For example, "This central axis of the universe, of the kingdom, the city, or the temple could be moved to a more propitious site or duplicated whenever circumstances rendered this desirable, for it was an attribute of existential rather than of geometrical space." Wheatley, *Pivot of the Four Quarters*, 417–18.

lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful without causing a spiritual catastrophe among the Nephites. In short, Book of Mormon authors identify their lands as “promised” on condition of the spiritual lives of the residents. When the people’s lives and relationships exemplify covenant characteristics (those circumscribed by the general concept of “prospering”), the land is considered “promised” (a source of eternal blessing). When covenant conditions do not prevail among the people, the inevitable curses of the covenant characterize their communities and the associated landscape.<sup>27</sup>

This study claims that the Book of Mormon was consciously crafted by ancient prophets in a manner consistent with explicit directions they had received from God. Nephi’s first recorded spiritual experience focused his attention on a covenant-based relationship with God defined in part by the symbolism of land. Nephi’s later visions, revelations, and experiences are best understood within that covenant framework, which was the foundation of the divinely directed record of his ministry.<sup>28</sup> Nephi’s covenant-based record integrates God and man, heaven and earth, and eternity and time into a compelling drama of salvation, of which his record is a small but essential part. Mormon understood the eternal relevance of Nephi’s record in interpreting the vast archive of the Nephites, and he fashioned his abridgment accordingly. The result is one of the few books to which God himself could witness, “It is true” (Doctrine and Covenants 17:6).

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27. For this reason, the land of Nephi lost its prior status as “promised” once it had been profaned by the general wickedness of the Nephites during the reign of King Mosiah I (Omni 1:12–13). Thus the subsequent effort of Zeniff and his followers to reclaim the land of Nephi was considered “over-zealous” and foolhardy and eventually led to disaster (see Mosiah 9–22).

28. Steven L. Olsen, “The Centrality of Nephi’s Vision,” *Religious Educator* 11/2 (2010): 51–65.