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# Reading Competency in the Book of Mormon

## Abish and Other Model Readers

*Michael J. Call*

In chapter 19 of the book of Alma, we are introduced to Abish, described in the narrative as one of the “Lamanitish women” serving in King Lamoni’s court (Alma 19:16). Mormon’s account of her experience on the day of the king’s conversion is compelling for many reasons, but I would like to explore here how Abish and other important figures in the text function as model readers, exhibiting the traits and competencies that the Book of Mormon authors expected the future reader of their text to bring to the reading act. In fact, a careful analysis of important reading acts described throughout the Book of Mormon leads to a clear understanding of the several authors’ definition of an ideal or competent reader of their record. For though the authors are several, they seem to share a common conviction about competency. As the narrative progresses, it becomes more and more evident that the competent or ideal reader possesses one vital skill—something we might call spiritual sensitivity—that separates her or him from all the rest. Through their juxtaposition of various types of readers, the Book of Mormon chroniclers invite us to compare and contrast competing textual interpretations, a process that is meant to lead us, as actual readers, to evaluate our own particular competencies in deciphering the text before our eyes. The reading act itself is indeed among the book’s core themes.

As a theoretical basis for this study, I draw from the work of such reception theorists as Gerald Prince, who propose that embedded in every narrative are examples of the very act in which the actual reader is engaged at every moment of the reading process, that is, the assimilation

## Michael J. Call

Many years ago, I happened to read Abish's story in my morning scripture study the very week I was discussing reception theory in my interdisciplinary humanities interpretive theory class, and the episode fairly leapt off the page as a perfect example of the "nonreading reading act" I had been trying to explain to my students. I shared my discovery with them the next class period, and their reaction was so positive, I decided to include it in further iterations of the course, which I did over the remaining years of my teaching career at BYU. This article owes much to those bright students, their encouragement, and their enthusiasm for learning, both sacred and secular.



and interpretation of observed phenomena.<sup>1</sup> The reader's experience with the text is, they argue, the central—and perhaps only—theme of the text. Prince explains, "Every author, provided he is writing for someone other than himself, develops his narrative as a function of a certain type of reader whom he bestows with certain qualities, faculties, and inclinations according to his opinion of men in general (or in particular) and according to the obligations he feels should be respected."<sup>2</sup> Prince and other reception theorists suggest that the observant reader should therefore pay particular attention to descriptions of reading acts occurring in a text because, first, they provide important clues about the optimal relationship the author hopes to create between text and reader; second, they mirror the challenges and pitfalls associated with textual reception itself; and, third, they showcase examples of characters whose

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1. For a general overview of reception theory, see Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

2. Gerald Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, 9.

flaws produce misreadings that compete directly with those of more reliable readers. After all, as in the real world, not all readers are equally competent.

For our study here, it is useful to remember that, in their analysis of reading acts, reception theorists do not limit themselves only to descriptions of characters actually reading written material. Equally worthy of our attention should be any narrative event that imitates closely the reading act's process of assimilating and interpreting observed phenomena. Thus, any act that incorporates looking, watching, or observing is also deserving of our attention. The Book of Mormon text is especially rich in this regard, and Abish's story is one of the most fruitful.

Interestingly, it is a reading act that initiates the long sequence of events composing the Book of Mormon narrative. In the very first chapter of his record, Nephi recounts that his father, Lehi, receiving a book from the hands of an angel, is instructed to read it. The book contains prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem, the coming of a Messiah, and the redemption of the world (1 Ne. 1:18–19). But when Lehi tries to share his “reading” with his neighbors, he is mocked and ridiculed and his life threatened. From the outset, then, we are presented with a world divided into those who interpret the book correctly and those who resist. The consequences of misreading are dire: the competent readers escape the predicted destruction, and the incompetent are either killed or taken into slavery. Merely possessing the book or record does not guarantee success. Laban had evidently possessed the brass plates for some time but had either not read them or had chosen to ignore their teachings, since he appears to have been driven by greed and love of power to seek the lives of Lehi's children.

There is no substitute for a competent reader. Once in the promised land, Nephi begins to teach his brethren from the records that had been so jealously guarded by Laban:

And it came to pass that I did read many things to them, which were engraven upon the plates of brass, that they might know concerning the doings of the Lord in other lands, among people of old. And I did read many things unto them which were written in the books of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning.” (1 Ne. 19:22–23)

We assume that Nephi was not required to read the scriptures to them simply because no one else in the family could read. It is unlikely

that he, as the younger brother of Laman and Lemuel, would have been singled out to be “taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father” (1 Ne. 1:1). That access to learning would have been granted the elder sons as well, perhaps even to a greater degree based on practices of the day.<sup>3</sup> But would Nephi’s brethren, confronted with the same passages as readers and left to their own devices, have discovered for themselves the truths contained therein about the “Lord their Redeemer” (1 Ne. 19:23)? Obviously not, for Nephi records that, after hearing the passages read, they came to him and asked for an explanation of their meaning (compare 1 Ne. 22:1). And this gifted interpreter then reveals the key: “By the Spirit are all things made known unto the prophets” (1 Ne. 22:2). Nephi models competent reading for other potential readers, but he brings something to the reading act his older brothers evidently lack, a key component that transforms him from actual reader to ideal reader for the text at hand.

This critical competency will be emphasized repeatedly in the succeeding pages of the narrative. An early example is the confrontation between Jacob, Nephi’s younger brother, and Sherem, a learned anti-Christ. In answer to Jacob’s question, Sherem declares that he believes the scriptures, suggesting that he has read them, to which Jacob replies: “Then ye do not understand them” (Jacob 7:11). Jacob is essentially calling Sherem an incompetent reader. Jacob understands the scriptures because of “the power of the Holy Ghost” (Jacob 7:12). When Sherem demands that he be shown a sign “by the power of the Holy Ghost,” he is admitting that he is entirely unfamiliar with—or willingly ignorant of—the concept of the Holy Spirit’s role and function. Only after being struck down and on his deathbed does he acknowledge that he has learned for himself of its power. The irony of the sign itself is its ambiguity: as Christ taught, signs in and of themselves have no convincing power (see Matt. 16:4). All is in the reading, in what we can call the deciphering. The wicked and adulterous, like Sherem, seek for signs but are incapable of reading them, for they lack the very thing required to decode them.

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3. Alternatively, Brant A. Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55, proposed that Nephi, as a younger son, received a scribal education that his older brothers, inheritors of their father’s business, did not receive, to prepare him for an alternative career.

A striking example of this kind of misreading is the story of Abish, a servant to King Lamoni.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the powerful teaching of Ammon, Lamoni had come to a realization of his sins and, having begged for mercy from God, “fell unto the earth, as if he were dead” (Alma 18:42). His wife, the queen, is convinced he is not dead, in spite of the opinions of many around her, and summons Ammon, who assures her that Lamoni will rise the following day. When Lamoni does, he declares, “I have seen my Redeemer;” and, overcome with joy, he sinks down again and this time, his wife with him, is “overpowered by the Spirit” (Alma 19:13). Ammon too, overcome with joy, sinks to the earth, as then do all the king’s servants. That is, all but one: Abish, who “having been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of her father” (Alma 19:16),<sup>5</sup> remains standing. We can only imagine the scene: perhaps ten people lie prostrate on the floor, unconscious, with Abish as the lone observer. The record tells us that, because she had been converted, “she knew that it was the power of God” that had created this unique event (Alma 19:17). Then an idea comes to her: she will put this magnificent manifestation of God’s power to good use “by making known unto the people what had happened among them, that by beholding this scene it would cause them to believe in the power of God” (Alma 19:17). And so our well-intentioned, missionary-minded Abish runs out to call her neighbors in to “read” the scene that she, a believer, has already correctly interpreted.

What follows is a wonderful description of the vast range of potential misreadings incompetent readers can derive from a set of signs. The crowd sees the king, the queen, and their servants all lying on the

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4. For previous discussion of this story, see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:298–310; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987–92), 3:137–42; Monte S. Nyman, *The Record of Alma*, vol. 3 of Book of Mormon Commentary series (Orem, Utah: Granite, 2004), 250–58; Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990*, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah: FARMS; American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2004), 2:305–9; Matthew L. Bowen, “Father Is a Man: The Remarkable Mention of the Name Abish in Alma 19:16 and Its Narrative Context,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 77–93.

5. On the conversion of Abish and her father’s vision, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Was Abish Mentioned by Name?” June 22, 2016, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-was-abish-mentioned-by-name>.

ground “as though they were dead” (v. 18). Then they notice that in this group of bodies is also someone not like the others—a Nephite, in fact—noticeable perhaps by his different dress or color of skin or some other distinguishing factor.

Three separate interpretations are proposed. One group associates the Nephite with the evident tragedy: he is the cause of the deaths. But they are refuted by another group who claim it is a punishment the king has brought upon himself for his cruelty to his own servants, whom he had had executed for failure to protect his flocks against bandits (see Alma 17:28). This theory is opposed in turn by relatives of the very bandits who had taken the flocks, one of whom draws his sword in anger to attack the prostrate Ammon. When, in the very act of lifting his sword, he suddenly falls down dead, the stunned crowd is now confronted with a new sign to decipher, and “they began to marvel again among themselves what . . . these things could mean” (Alma 19:24).

The narrative beautifully captures for us the tumult of competing readings that follow. To the original three interpretations, the group now adds four new variations: (1) Ammon is the Great Spirit or (2) not really the Great Spirit but someone sent by the Great Spirit or (3) a monster sent by the Nephites to torment them or (4) a monster sent not by the Nephites but by the Great Spirit to afflict them. The seven various readings bring to mind the famous poem of the six blind men who, upon encountering an elephant for the first time, propose six opposing and equally ludicrous descriptions of the wondrous animal (see sidebar).<sup>6</sup> Abish, who had started with such high hopes, is driven to tears by this show of incompetence. But then she, the competent reader, resolves the whole issue by taking the hand of the queen and raising her up. When Lamoni is raised up in turn, he rebukes the crowd of onlookers. Some are converted by his words, but “there were many among them who would not hear his words; therefore they went their way” (Alma 19:32). So even when the sign gets up and tells you exactly what it means, you can still refuse to believe it.

No better description of this kind of willing blindness appears in the Book of Mormon than that of Korihor, the philosophical successor to Sherem. In the classic confrontation between Alma and the anti-Christ, the argument turns on competent reading. Korihor declares that he will believe in God if shown a sign. Alma rejoins: “Thou hast had signs

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6. John Godfrey Saxe, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” in *The Poems of John Godfrey Saxe* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), 259–60.

## The Blind Men and the Elephant

*John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887)*

### I

It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

### II

The *First* approached the Elephant  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
“God bless me—but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!”

### III

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried: “Ho, what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me ’t is mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!”

### IV

The *Third* approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!”

### V

The *Fourth* reached out an eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
“What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;  
“’T is clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!”

### VI

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch then ear,  
Said: E’en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!”

### VII

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
“I see,” quoth he, the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!”

### VIII

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly right,  
And all were in the wrong!

enough” (Alma 30:44). He then lists the various texts to which Korihor has already had access: (1) “the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets,” (2) “the scriptures,” (3) “the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it,” and (4) “[the earth’s] motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form.” In much the same way as other Christians like Anthony of Egypt would declare after him, Alma suggests that the cosmos—its forms, its movements, and its order—is as much a text to be read as the written words of the prophets. But, Alma maintains, not all readers of these various texts are equally competent at “making sense” of what they see; to many, like Korihor, the signs are illegible because they lack a key skill factor. And as we, the actual readers, assimilate this story, we are simultaneously challenged to evaluate our own reading skills.

Shortly after the episode with Korihor, Alma has occasion to quiz another group of readers, this time the poor living among the Zoramites, about their reading proficiency. Because of their poverty, they have been cast out of the synagogue. Mistakenly they consider this interdiction from formal worship services as having a serious impact on their relationship with God. Alma, however, teaches them that worship takes many forms and may be practiced anywhere. Reading the scriptures, for instance, plays a major role in spiritual growth, and this group, in spite of being barred from entering the church structure, obviously has access to them outside the synagogue walls, for Alma asks: “Now behold, my brethren, I would ask if ye have read the scriptures?” His next question seems to presume that they read with the same competency as he, the ideal reader: “If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God?” (Alma 33:14). This assumption, however, as Alma surely knew from his experiences with Korihor and other unbelievers, is highly problematic, leading us to speculate that Alma meant his question to be rhetorical. Essentially, Alma says to them: “If you have read the scriptures as I have, you will have arrived at the same conclusions as I have about the Savior.” Here again, by including the details of this discussion of reading competency, the abridger of the record, Mormon, appears to target us directly, challenging us to evaluate the outcome of our personal experience with his record.

As we saw in the case of Abish, historical events too are subject to misreading, even when one has experienced them personally, for the motivations for human behavior and therefore the causes of the events are not often clear to the participants themselves. But as human beings seem to be obsessed with the problem of causation, retelling the past

becomes a competition between alternative narratives, each attempting to explain the causal agents that have precipitated certain events. Emblematic of this problem is the story of Nephi (son of Helaman) and the assassinated chief judge. After scolding his people about rejecting the testimonies of the prophets—Moses, Abraham, Zenos, Zenock, Ezias, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lehi, Nephi, and “almost all of our fathers, even down to this time”—Nephi concludes by saying: “Ye have rejected all these things, notwithstanding so many evidences which ye have received; yea, even ye have received all things, both things in heaven, and all things which are in the earth, as a witness that they are true” (Hel. 8:22, 24).

Wishing to give them a sign or hard evidence of the level of wickedness and anarchy to which their civilization has sunk, he informs them that their chief judge has at that very moment been assassinated. Five listeners run to verify his statement and, shocked at the sight of the murdered judge lying in his blood, collapse on the spot, unconscious. A crowd then gathers and immediately proves itself as incompetent at deciphering signs as Abish’s compatriots: they conclude that the five unconscious men are not only the perpetrators of the crime but that “God has smitten them that they could not flee” (Hel. 9:8). It is always interesting to see how often the wicked claim the capacity to interpret the mind and will of God for others. Christ referred to such as “blind leaders of the blind,” with the result that “both shall fall into the ditch” (Matt. 15:14).

Fortunately, the five innocent men are exonerated, but in the process of explaining the real sequence of events, they only succeed in implicating Nephi, who had given them their first clue. Questioned by the mob, Nephi declares, “Because I showed unto you this sign ye are angry with me, and seek to destroy my life,” after which he then gives them “another sign” through revelation, which leads to the unmasking of the real perpetrator (Hel. 9:24–25). At the conclusion of these events, the narrative enumerates the various interpretations of these signs arrived at by the disparate reading communities: “There were some of the Nephites who believed on the words of Nephi; and there were some also, who believed because of the testimony of the five, for they had been converted while they were in prison. And now there were some among the people, who said that Nephi was a prophet. And there were others who said: Behold, he is a god, for except he was a god he could not know of all things” (Hel. 9:39–41). The debate over which of these interpretations is correct becomes so heated that the people refuse to continue the discussion and divide up “hither and thither,” leaving Nephi, the prophet of

God, standing alone (Hel. 10:1). Disheartened by this divisiveness in the face of what should have created unity among believers, Nephi begins walking home, the narrative tells us, “much cast down” (Hel. 10:3). Like Abish before him, he cannot help but be disappointed at the outcome.

The debate over historical causation is in fact the very basis of the Nephite-Lamanite rift. At the outset of his record, Nephi (son of Lehi) states forthrightly, “I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge” (1 Ne. 1:3). We must remember that he begins the small plates record toward the end of his life, many years after the arrival in the promised land and the subsequent split with his brethren. He is obviously concerned that the right story be told about the events that led to the split, for indeed there is an alternate version floating around and very popular among his enemies.<sup>7</sup> This alternate version became a staple of Lamanite mythology and was used as justification for the incessant warfare between the two peoples. Zeniff, who heard it straight from the mouths of the descendants of Laman and Lemuel, gave its general outline as follows: “[They believed] that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren, and they were also wronged while crossing the sea; and again, that they were wronged while in the land of their first inheritance, after they had crossed the sea. . . . They were wroth with [Nephi] when they had arrived in the promised land, because they said that he had taken the ruling of the people out of their hands; . . . and again, they were wroth with him because he departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, for they said that he robbed them. And thus they have taught their children that they should hate them, and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them” (Mosiah 10:12, 15–17).

Later, Ammoron repeats the same story as justification for his invasion of Nephite lands in approximately 63 BC: “Your fathers did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them. . . . I am Ammoron,

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7. See Richard L. Bushman, “The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: FARMS, 1990), 2:52–72.

and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem. And behold now, I am a bold Lamanite; behold, this war hath been waged to avenge their wrongs, and to maintain and to obtain their rights to the government” (Alma 54:17, 23–24).

These radically opposed historical narratives thus compete for the minds of Lehi’s descendants. When Captain Moroni’s troops have the Lamanite army cornered and threaten to annihilate them, Moroni sends a message to the opposing general, Zarahemnah, and tells him, “Ye behold that the Lord is with us; and ye behold that he has delivered you into our hands. . . . Now ye see that this is the true faith of God; yea, ye see that God will support, and keep, and preserve us, so long as we are faithful unto him, and unto our faith, and our religion” (Alma 44:3–4). Zarahemnah, however, does not “read” it in that way: “Behold, we are not of your faith; we do not believe that it is God that has delivered us into your hands; but we believe that it is your cunning that has preserved you from our swords. Behold, it is your breastplates and your shields that have preserved you” (Alma 44:9). So the Book of Mormon narrative in Alma offers us two competing and contradictory readings of the events and leaves us to decide which side we will believe.

We see then that Mormon’s record repeatedly brings us, the actual readers, face-to-face with situations that mirror our very own. We cannot help but measure ourselves against the varying degrees of incompetency manifested in these stories. The possession of one crucial skill separates the ideal readers portrayed in the text—Nephi, Alma, Abish, Captain Moroni and others—from their less-able colleagues. It is no surprise then to find the last of the record’s contributors, Mormon’s son, Moroni, including the following admonition as he concludes his part of the narrative:

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, . . . and ponder it in your hearts. And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moro. 10:3–5)

The multiple examples of misreadings in the text emphasize the fact that there is only one way to make sense of the record we hold in our

hands. All other methods to arrive at a knowledge of its claim as the revealed word of God will only lead to unsatisfying, unconvincing, and perhaps even incorrect conclusions. The record itself shows us that only competent readers like Abish, endowed with the companionship of the Holy Spirit, will see “things as they are” (D&C 93:24); all other sorts of readers are condemned to an endless war of words about possible origins, causes, and motives.

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