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Signs of the Times

Racism, Tribalism, and Disinformation before the Comings of Christ

Luke Drake

“The Lord has placed in our hands a volume of scripture which is both ancient and modern.”¹

Each of the major narrators/compiler of the Book of Mormon evince varying degrees of understanding that their work is destined for modern readers who would face a set of modern concerns.² This essay suggests that Mormon’s editorial hand—on display both in the redaction of the words of Samuel the Lamanite and in the narration of the events surrounding Samuel’s ministry—can be understood to address pressing issues faced by latter-day readers: specifically, the perils posed by racism, “tribalism,” and disinformation.

At the heart of this study are “signs” and their significations in the Book of Mormon narrative, particularly those signs preceding the birth and death of Jesus (Hel. 13–3 Ne. 8). While in many ways these signs resemble what we find broadly in ancient Israelite literature (that is, they portend and accompany the workings of God in human history, fostering belief among the faithful), it is precisely in the differences between the ancient biblical record and the Book of Mormon narrative that a unique set of warnings are brought into relief. God’s people, according to the Nephite record, are at risk of spurning inspired messengers on

1. Bruce R. McConkie, in *Official Report of the One Hundred and Thirty-Fifth Annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), 28.

2. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially 59–86, 92–102, 221–22.

account of racist or hyperpolarized worldviews and thereby risk thwarting signs of salvation by suppressing the truth. Furthermore, Mormon's account depicts a people whose capacity to appreciate and act on divine signs is diminished by their propensity to propagate falsehoods, many of which have been circulated by bad actors.

To demonstrate all of this, I'll begin by describing the nature and function of signs in biblical literature, with an emphasis on ancient discourse surrounding the "signs and wonders" of the Exodus, which were anciently understood as unmistakable, persuasive expressions of the divine hand in Israelite liberation. I'll turn then to the prophetic ministry of Samuel the Lamanite and its aftermath. There, too, divine signs gesture toward human redemption, but their communicative power is threatened, and at times even thwarted, by this interrelated set of social ills.

Divine Signs in Ancient Israelite Literature

Ancient Israelite literature is brimming with signs.³ They permeate the cosmos: the sun and moon signify the changing times and seasons (Gen. 1:14), and the arc of the rainbow indicates that God will never destroy the world by water again (Gen. 9:12–15). Signs shape and imbue human bodies with various meanings: Cain's body is marked with a sign to ward off would-be vigilantes (Gen. 4:13–15), and male Israelites are circumcised as a sign of belonging to God's covenant (Gen. 17:11). Religious practice is frequently described in terms of signs and their significance: Sabbath observance, for example, is described as "a sign between [God] and the children of Israel for ever" (Ex. 31:17), and the blood of the Passover lamb acts as a sign that restrains the Lord's destroying hand (Ex. 12:13).

The Exodus narrative especially abounds with signs, which tend to be miraculous events that demonstrate God's liberating hand in the destiny of Israel. Hence, when Moses doubts his capacity to free his people from Egypt, the Lord promises him a sign (Ex. 3:10–12). Prior to approaching Pharaoh for the first time, Moses and Aaron gather the "elders of the children of Israel," and Moses performs "signs in the sight of the people," leading them to believe (Ex. 4:28–31). Furthermore, in a passage that has proved troublesome to Jewish and Christian readers

3. "Action[s] . . . occurrence[s] . . . event[s] by which a person recognizes, learns, remembers, or perceives the authenticity of something." F. J. Helfmeyer, "Ôth," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:170.

since antiquity, Exodus portrays God as saying, “I hardened [Pharaoh’s] heart, and the heart of his servants, *that I might shew these my signs before him*: And that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son’s son, what things I have wrought in Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them; *that ye may know how that I am the Lord*” (Ex. 10:1–2, emphasis added).⁴ In other words, according to this rendering of the tradition, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart in order to multiply the number of signs that the Israelites see in order that they, and future generations, might know that the Lord is God.⁵

Of particular importance to this essay is the phrase “signs and wonders.” It appears at least eighteen times in biblical literature, and is first used to describe Moses’s miraculous displays of power before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:3). In later Jewish memory and tradition, the phrase becomes practically synonymous with the Exodus narrative⁶—a point that we will return to below.

Finally, we should take note of two common characteristics of signs in ancient Israelite literature. First, while they serve various functions—such as communicating knowledge, instilling confidence in believers, confirming covenantal relationships, and so forth—signs are generally depicted in positive terms. Like divine fingerprints, they are the evidence of God’s hand in ancient Israelite life, history, and salvation.⁷ It

4. “The central problem,” notes Claire Mathews McGinnis, “has been how to reconcile God’s goodness and justice with the portrayal of God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart so that he will not let the people go, and then punishing him apparently for that refusal.” Claire Mathews McGinnis, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Christian and Jewish Interpretation,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 43.

5. Other passages that reflect this tradition include Exodus 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17; Deuteronomy 29:2–4; and Joshua 11:20. Note that biblical literature is not consistent on the cause of Pharaoh’s hardened heart: for example, Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34. In his inspired revision of the biblical texts, the Prophet Joseph Smith modified many of these passages in accordance with restored gospel principles regarding human agency. Hence, the Joseph Smith Translation of Exodus 7:3 reads, “*And Pharaoh will harden his heart, as I said unto thee; and thou shalt multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt.*”

6. Deuteronomy 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:2–3; 34:10–12; Nehemiah 9:10; Psalms 78:42–53; 105:26–36; 135:9; Jeremiah 32:20–21; Nehemiah 9:10. Later Jewish witnesses include Baruch 2:11; Sirach 36:5–6; Wisdom 10:16–19. See Karl Rengstorf, “σημείον,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Freidrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 9 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964–73), 7:200–69, especially 210–21.

7. Through later prophets, for instance, God repeatedly gives divine signs to Israel (Isa. 20:1–6; 55:12–13; Jer. 44:24–30; Ezek. 12:1–16), Israel’s monarchs (Saul: 1 Sam. 10:1–13;

should be no surprise, then, that later recipients of biblical literature (early Christians, early Jews, and the descendants of Lehi) would likewise elaborate on divine signs in their own retellings of God's dealings. Second, in most biblical narratives, signs are an efficient and frequently persuasive means of divine communication. Only in very rare instances are they misapprehended by their intended audiences.

Signs and Sign-Seeking in the New Testament and Book of Mormon

Like the accounts in the Old Testament, the New Testament Gospels tend to reiterate the reality and faith-affirming value of divinely given signs in God's redemptive activity.⁸ In the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the disciples ask Jesus to reveal to them the signs of his coming, which Jesus does without reprimand (Matt. 24:3–26; Mark 13:3–23; Luke 21:7–23). The author of Luke and Acts is especially fond of illustrating that God's activity in history is marked by signs: the babe in the manger (Luke 2:12), the miraculous deeds of the Apostles (Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 8:13; 14:3), and even the form of Jesus himself (Luke 2:34; 11:30) all variously act as signs that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Divinely sanctioned signs play an even more pronounced role in the Gospel of John. In fact, the fourth Gospel goes so far as to describe itself as a *collection of signs* that has been assembled to attest to Jesus's divinity, in order "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:30–31).⁹ This tendency in John, however, is largely masked if one only reads the Gospel in the King James Version, which systematically renders Jesus's miraculous "signs" (Greek: *sēmeia*) as "miracles."¹⁰ Hence, the New Revised Standard Version's rendering of John 2:11 ("Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him") is probably more in the spirit of what the

Jeroboam: 1 Kgs. 13:1–5; Ahaz: Isa. 7:10–25; Hezekiah: 2 Kgs. 19–20; 2 Chr. 32:20–26; Isa. 38:4–22), and the surrounding nations (Isa. 19:19–22; Isa. 66:18–21).

8. Rengstorf, "σημείον," 230–37.

9. The Gospel of John narrates seven miraculous events prior to Jesus's resurrection, five of which are called "signs" (a detail that is obscured by the KJV's use of the term "miracles"): turning water to wine (2:1–11), healing the official's son (4:46–54), multiplying loaves (6:1–14), healing a blind man (9:1–16), and raising Lazarus (11:1–45). Signs are mentioned elsewhere at 2:23; 3:2; 6:2; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; and 12:37. See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), cxxxviii–cxliv.

10. John 2:23; 3:2; 4:54; 6:2, 14; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:18, 37.

author of the fourth Gospel had in mind than what we find in the King James translation (“This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him”).¹¹

When the New Testament Gospels refer to divine signs in negative terms, it is not with respect to their value in the divine plan but rather to the human practice of *sign seeking*. Each of the synoptic Gospels contains shared traditions in which Jesus excoriates those who would *demand signs* from heaven in order to engender belief (for example Matt. 12:38–42; 16:1; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:29).¹² This trend is manifest in the Book of Mormon as well. While “signs” are described positively in a handful of passages,¹³ there are also memorable “sign seeking” episodes that denounce prominent antagonists who make hostile or disbelieving demands from prophetic authorities.¹⁴

In sum, there is a rich tradition of divine signs and their signification in ancient Israelite literature, as well as in later Jewish, Christian, and Nephite writings. God is characteristically understood to give signs that persuasively communicate particular truths, covenants, warnings, and promises to his people.

Signs of Salvation in the Words of Samuel (Hel. 13:5–15:17)

With this backdrop in place, we are in a position to turn to the most extensive treatment of divine signs in the Book of Mormon narrative—the signs of Jesus’s birth and death as foretold by Samuel and then narrated by Mormon. Like their ancient Israelite forebears, both Samuel and Mormon understand signs to be an established aspect of sacred history. At key moments, however, their formulations of such signs diverge both from biblical tradition and from one another in ways that point neatly to the latter-day threats of racial animus, tribal sentiment, and the spread of disinformation. We begin, then, with Samuel.

11. Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul describes his success among the Gentiles as the product of the “Spirit of God” and his ability to work “signs and wonders” (Rom. 15:18–19). He describes the signs of a true Apostle in language of “signs, and wonders” in 2 Corinthians 12:12. See also Mark 16:17.

12. In Matthew 12:38–42, Jesus rebukes some of the scribes and Pharisees for seeking a sign but then proceeds to give them a sign.

13. Mosiah 3:15; Helaman 9. Nephi also quotes ancient prophets who view the term favorably: Zenos (1 Ne. 19:10, 13) and Isaiah (2 Ne. 17–18). These references do not include Samuel’s use of the term, which I discuss below.

14. Specifically, Sherem (Jacob 7) and Korihor (Alma 30), but note also Alma’s speech to the Zoramites in Alma 32:17.

Samuel's dominant message from atop the walls of Zarahemla is one of repentance (Hel. 13:6–13, 29–39; 14:9–11, 19; 15:1–3, 12–17). He begins by warning the Nephites of specific consequences if they fail to repent (Hel. 13:6–39). He concludes by comparing the respective predicaments of both the Lamanites and the Nephites: unlike the penitent and steadfast Lamanites, the Nephites face the threat of utter annihilation unless they repent on account of the “many mighty works” that the Lord has done among them (Hel. 15:2–17). Between these two exhortations is Samuel's discussion of signs, which connects variously to his overarching message.

In Helaman 14, Samuel identifies two sets of signs that will mark the birth and death of the Messiah. To herald the birth of Jesus, wondrous lights will convert the night of Christ's birth into a time with no darkness (14:3–4), a new star will appear in the night sky (v. 5), and multiple other “signs and wonders” will appear in the heavens (v. 6).¹⁵ At the death of Christ, the promised signs will be correspondingly antithetical to the signs of his birth. Instead of offering more light to the world, heavenly bodies will withhold it, leaving the land in darkness (v. 20).¹⁶ Further signs will be given both in the heavens and on the earth in the form of dissolution and ruin: the land will tremble and rage, yielding cataclysmic changes to its form and landscape, producing increases in extreme weather, and even driving many of the righteous dead from their graves (vv. 21–27). The function of these signs, according to Samuel, corresponds to the role of divine signs elsewhere in Israelite literature and aligns with the prevailing theme of his preaching: they will be given to generate belief unto repentance (Hel. 14:11–13; 15:3).

Notably, Samuel restricts his usage of the term “sign(s)” to the cosmic happenings that will occur concurrently with the birth and death of Jesus (Hel. 14:2–8, 12, 14, 20–28). There appears to be little doubt in Samuel's mind that these signs—like the signs given to Israelites of old—will effectively communicate God's liberating hand in human history: “ye shall *all* be amazed, and wonder,” he predicts to his Nephite listeners, “insomuch that ye shall fall to the earth. And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall believe on the Son of God, the same shall have everlasting life” (Hel. 14:7–8; emphasis added).

15. On Samuel's use of “signs and wonders” and other biblical language, see Shon Hopkin and John Hilton III, “Samuel's Reliance on Biblical Language,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 45–48, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol24/iss1/3>.

16. See also 1 Nephi 19:10.

Immediately after describing these signs, Samuel adds that many would see “*greater things* than these, to the intent that they might believe that these signs and these wonders should come to pass upon all the face of this land, to the intent that there should be no cause for unbelief among the children of men” (Hel. 14:28; emphasis added). The meaning of this passage depends, in part, on how you punctuate it. The original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, of course, had no punctuation. As it currently stands, the passage suggests that “*greater things*” will be given in order to inspire belief in the cosmic signs described by Samuel (which themselves are given to engender belief in the birth and death of the Christ). Royal Skousen has suggested an alternative interpretation based on a comparative analysis of grammar elsewhere in the Book of Mormon and marked by a subtle change in punctuation (an inserted dash), as reconstructed here:

and the angel said unto me

- (1) that many shall see greater things than these, to the intent that they might believe[—]
- (2) that these signs and these wonders should come to pass upon all the face of this land, to the intent that there should be no cause for unbelief among the children of men.¹⁷

Skousen’s proposed insertion of a dash results in the angel making two separate declarations: (1) that many will see things that are greater than the promised cosmic signs, to the intent that they might believe, and (2) that everyone on the face of the land will see the cosmic signs of Jesus’s birth and death, to the intent that they might not disbelieve.¹⁸ Regardless of whether Skousen’s reading accurately captures the angel’s intended meaning, it appears to be in line with Mormon’s understanding of the events that follow, as we will see below. Neither Samuel nor the angel elaborate on what these “*greater things*” will be.

17. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Five, Alma 52–3 Nephi 7*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2017), 5:3257, italics and bolding removed.

18. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 5:3257: “The righteous believe because the Lord reveals even greater events before they [the signs of Jesus’s birth and death] have happened, while the world will have no excuse for not believing after these events [the signs of Jesus’s birth and death] have actually occurred.”

Nephite Racism and the Misapprehension of Divine Signs

Samuel interrupts his prophetic exposition on divine signs to indict his listeners for attempting to thwart his message: “And now, because I am a Lamanite, and have spoken unto you the words which the Lord hath commanded me, and because it was hard against you, ye are angry with me and do seek to destroy me, and have cast me out from among you” (Hel. 14:10). Commentators on Samuel’s sermon wisely emphasize that prophetic words too often go unheeded because they are “hard against” those who hear them.¹⁹ But this, at best, comprises only a portion of Samuel’s critique. His listeners seek to silence him not just because he speaks the word of the Lord, but because *he is a Lamanite who speaks the word of the Lord*.²⁰ In modern terms, we might say that the Nephites of Zarahemla seek to suppress Samuel’s message—a message meant to attune them to the signs of God’s liberating activity—on account of racist ideologies²¹ or their commitment to cultural polarization, what we might refer to as “tribalism” (addressed in the section below).

Mormon’s editorial work surrounding Samuel’s mission seems to punctuate the charge that the Nephites’ sense of racial superiority inhibits their reception of the divine message. Mormon repeatedly—almost excessively—calls attention to Samuel’s Lamanite heritage when narrating his prophetic activity.²² Whenever he introduces or reintroduces Samuel’s name in the narrative, Mormon begins by referring to him as “a” or “the Lamanite” (Hel. 13:2; 14:1; 16:1; 3 Ne. 1:5; 8:3).²³ By so doing, Mormon ensures that the prophet’s name is mnemonically inseparable from his race (in Latter-day Saint circles he is *always*

19. *Book of Mormon Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 286.

20. In 1954, Spencer W. Kimball referred to this verse in a general conference address that condemned Latter-day Saint discrimination against Native Americans. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Evil of Intolerance,” in *One Hundred Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1954), 103–8.

21. For decades, interpreters have variously sought to describe the function of race in the Book of Mormon as well as the text’s posture toward racist ideologies. For an introduction with bibliography, see Patrick Q. Mason, “Mormonism and Race,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, ed. Kathryn Gin Lum and Paul Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 156–71.

22. As noted already in Jared Hickman, “*The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse*,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 452, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2717371>.

23. Jesus, as recorded by Mormon, does the same: 3 Nephi 23:9.

“Samuel the Lamanite”), serving perhaps as an ongoing indictment of Nephite bigotry. Furthermore, the book of Helaman is structured in ways that emphasize a racialized element to Samuel’s rejection by the people of Zarahemla. After all, Samuel is not the only figure in the book of Helaman to stand on a high place, call the Nephites to repentance, and point to signs as evidence of God’s intervening hand: the prophet Nephi goes through a similar exercise just a few chapters earlier (Hel. 7–9). That Mormon is inviting us to read Nephi’s and Samuel’s stories alongside one another is further suggested by his pairing of the two prophets in a section heading prior to Helaman 7: “The Prophecy of Nephi, the Son of Helaman—God threatens the people of Nephi that he will visit them in his anger, to their utter destruction except they repent of their wickedness. God smiteth the people of Nephi with pestilence; they repent and turn unto him. Samuel, a Lamanite, prophesies unto the Nephites.”²⁴

Nephi’s sermon mirrors Samuel’s, with a few striking differences. Both prophets receive mixed responses from their Nephite listeners, eliciting conversions as well as calls for violence—but only Samuel is met with actual stones and arrows. The Nephites who believe Nephi’s words defend him in the face of impending aggression (Hel. 8:1–10), while those who believe Samuel’s words abandon him in order to seek out Nephi (Hel. 16:1). And although both prophets foretell remarkable events with specificity, only Samuel’s words are treated with some degree of neglect, as corrected by the resurrected Jesus (3 Ne. 23:9–13). In the words of Jared Hickman, “Laid bare here is a reluctance on the part of the Nephite prophets to include in their narrative something they themselves recognize as true prophecy, because, at least in part it seems, it came from a Lamanite. The text’s editorial process is brought into view, and it is at least suggested that the values governing that process may have as much to do with ethnic pride as divine inspiration.”²⁵

In fierce contrast to its reception among ancient Nephites, Samuel’s prophetic address is not only among the longest in Mormon’s entire abridgement,²⁶ but it is also the final speech that Mormon includes

24. Mormon refers to Samuel alone in the subsequent section heading, prior to Helaman 13: “The prophecy of Samuel, the Lamanite, to the Nephites.”

25. Hickman, “Amerindian Apocalypse,” 452.

26. Along with public sermons given by the resurrected Jesus (3 Ne. 12–16), Benjamin, the great Nephite king of the land of Zarahemla (Mosiah 2–5), and Abinadi (Mosiah 12–16).

prior to the ministry of the resurrected Christ himself. Samuel, then, is the featured voice of warning before the establishment of a messianic kingdom, a remarkable narrative detail that subverts facile Nephite conceptions of election and participation in the history of salvation.²⁷

When read along such lines, these passages might serve as resources for Latter-day Saints who see the imperative to “review processes, laws, and organizational attitudes regarding racism and root them out once and for all”²⁸ as inseparable from their covenantal relationship with God²⁹ and who seek to nourish a Church whose membership becomes increasingly distributed across racial and ethnic lines. Samuel’s narrative is a sobering reminder that a “chosen people of the Lord”—in this case, the Nephites (Hel. 15:3)—is not guaranteed immunity to widespread outbreaks of racist ideologies.³⁰ It offers another layer of meaning to the 1832 warning against the ruinous effects (both to the individual and

27. Hickman, “Amerindian Apocalypse,” 450–55.

28. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Locking Arms for Racial Harmony in America,” *Medium*, June 8, 2020, https://medium.com/@Ch_JesusChrist/locking-arms-for-racial-harmony-in-america-2f62180abf37. This statement was published approximately two weeks after the killing of George Floyd (May 25, 2020) and was signed by Russell M. Nelson (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and by Derrick Johnson, Leon Russell, and Amos C. Brown (NAACP).

29. After a 2017 White supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, culminated in the murder of Heather Heyer, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued statements that publicly disavowed claims that the Church was neutral toward White supremacist views, stating that “nothing could be further from the truth,” that “white supremacist attitudes are morally wrong and sinful, and we condemn them,” and that “Church members who promote or pursue a ‘white culture’ or white supremacy agenda are not in harmony with the teachings of the Church,” in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Church Issues Statements on Situation in Charlottesville, Virginia,” *Church Newsroom*, August 15, 2017, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-statement-charlottesville-virginia>.

30. See Kimberly Matheson Berkey, *Helaman: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020); Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 94; Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” *Ensign* 36, no. 5 (May 2006): 58. Darius Gray has offered a valuable set of concrete questions to help Latter-day Saints understand, reflect on, and repent of latent racist tendencies. Such questions include: would I “have difficulty welcoming someone of a particular race into [my] family”? Do I “feel less compassion toward those of a different race who suffer the effects of poverty, war, famine, crime”? Do I “prefer associating only with those of [my] own race and think others should too”? See Darius Gray, “Healing Wounds of Racism,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, last modified April 5, 2018, <https://ca.churchofjesuschrist.org/healing-wounds-of-racism>.

to the collective) of “treat[ing] lightly” the narrative complexity of this “new covenant, even the Book of Mormon” (D&C 84:54–58).³¹

Nephite Tribalism and the Misapprehension of Divine Signs

Samuel’s function within the Book of Mormon narrative may offer another set of resources for the modern reader, particularly when read as a critique of Nephite tribalism and its capacity to keep otherwise good people from embracing new, or previously unappreciated, truths. The term “tribalism,” as I am using it somewhat loosely here, refers to something that goes beyond the profound human impulse to belong to, protect, and preserve one’s tribe.³² Rather, by “tribalism” I refer to the human propensity to place particular group loyalties and “victories” *above all else*, including, among other things, previously held moral values, commitment to established truths, the acquisition of new truths, ideological consistency, and the well-being of individuals in other tribes. Tribalism prevents us from hearing God’s voice in the words of those with whom we disagree politically.³³ It tends toward the sort of insularity that presumes that truths will be received and revealed exclusively by those within our own walls.³⁴ It impedes the restored gospel imperative

31. For a discussion on how literary echoes within Samuel’s sermon can be read as an internal critique of Nephite racial discrimination and patriarchy, see Kimberly M. Berkey and Joseph M. Spencer, “‘Great Cause to Mourn’: The Complexity of The Book of Mormon’s Presentation of Gender and Race,” in *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon*, ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 298–320. For a recent treatment on racism elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, see Deidre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020), 74–80.

32. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1–7.

33. Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.

34. Joseph Smith asked, “Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up or we shall not come out pure Mormons.” “History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1681 (July 23, 1843), the Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 8, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/51>. Brigham Young said it this way: “Be willing to receive the truth, let it come from whom it may; no difference, not a particle” in *Discourses of Brigham Young: Second President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 17. See also Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Faith of Our Father,” *Ensign*, 38, no. 5 (May 2008):

to seek out light and learning from the arts and sciences (D&C 88:118). Contemporary research on human behavior demonstrates that people across ideological divides are prone to accept falsehood and reject truth if and when doing so might safeguard their status within cherished group affiliations.³⁵

A remarkable conclusion within the burgeoning field of the science of science communication (that is, the scientific study of how scientific findings are communicated to various audiences³⁶) is that our scientific literacy and reasoning abilities do *not*, in themselves, make us more likely to accept scientific truths that run counter to our tribal affinities. In fact, the more adept we are at scientific reasoning and actively open-minded thinking, the more able we are to repurpose scientific findings in ways that support tribal alliances, thus exacerbating cultural polarization.³⁷ Tribe too often comes before truth.

One of the more instructive aspects of the figure of Samuel is the way in which he is so thoroughly illustrated by Mormon as the quintessential outsider. Samuel originates from a foreign land (Hel. 13:2). He preaches a countercultural message (Hel. 13:2–4, 24–28). His sojourn is short-lived; his departure, final (Hel. 16:7–8).³⁸ Even his spatial relationship to the city is meaningfully narrated. First expelled (Hel. 13:2), then denied reentry, Samuel is forced to scale the walls of Zarahemla to deliver the Lord’s message—walls that were built precisely to keep outsiders *out*. His act of preaching, then, is an act of intrusion. Significantly, of Samuel’s many teachings the only ones that Mormon records are those that are preached atop—but never within—those walls (Hel. 13:4). The Lord informs his people of signs by means of one “outside” of the tribe—and because of this many fail to hear his voice.

75; and Eboo Patel, “What It Means to Be Educated,” Brigham Young University forum, October 22, 2020, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/eboo-patel/what-it-means-to-be-educated/>.

35. For summaries of such studies, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012); and Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader, 2020).

36. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dan M. Kahan, and Dietram A. Scheufele, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Science of Science Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

37. Dan H. Kahan, “Why Smart People Are Vulnerable to Putting Tribe before Truth,” *Scientific American*, December 3, 2018, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/why-smart-people-are-vulnerable-to-putting-tribe-before-truth/>.

38. Hickman, “Amerindian Apocalypse,” 452, discusses these narrative details through the lens of race.

Today tribalism is widespread but not insurmountable. Recent social-science research suggests that individuals who are more likely to embrace scientific findings, even when such findings threaten previously held worldviews or tribal affinities, share a common characteristic. In addition to possessing some degree of science literacy (knowledge, reasoning abilities), they exhibit a marked degree of science *curiosity*.³⁹ High-curiosity individuals' yearning for light and knowledge eclipses the security offered by a tribe. Such curiosity is a fundamental principle of restored gospel discipleship. Curiosity prompted Jesus's followers to step away from prior allegiances in order to "come and see" (John 1:39). It led the Prophet Joseph to the Sacred Grove. It is a spiritual gift worth seeking.

A recent Brigham Young University devotional by President M. Russell Ballard may serve as a model for how a genuine spirit of curiosity can be used to overcome propensities toward tribalism.⁴⁰ President Ballard begins his speech by acknowledging and then rejecting the generational tribalism that pervades contemporary discourse, specifically the criticisms leveled at younger generations by older ones. He speaks of an earnest desire to "understand and learn more" about millennials and Gen Zs,⁴¹ and recounts many hours "listening, pondering, learning, and praying about" them. He then dedicates a significant portion of his address to celebrating specific qualities that he finds in these younger generations. He specifically praises Gen Zs and millennials for their sensitivity to questions of identity and social change; their commitment to environmental, economic, and social sustainability; and their "desire for authenticity and transparency," stating that members of older generations could learn from these younger tribes. President Ballard's words are instructive in that they simultaneously

39. "Afforded a choice, low-curiosity individuals opt for familiar evidence consistent with what they already believe. Consuming a richer diet of information, high-curiosity citizens predictably form less one-sided and hence less polarized views. This empirical research paints a more complex picture of the cognitively virtuous democratic citizen. To be sure, she knows a good deal about scientific discoveries and methods. But of equal importance, she experiences wonder and awe—the emotional signatures of curiosity—at the insights that science affords into the hidden processes of nature." Kahan, "Why Smart People Are Vulnerable."

40. M. Russell Ballard, "Children of Heavenly Father," Brigham Young University devotional, March 3, 2020, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/children-heavenly-father/>.

41. The Pew Research Center defines "millennial" as one born between 1981 and 1996 and "Gen Z" as one born after 1997. Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," *Fact Tank*, January 17, 2019.

acknowledge the differences between tribes (in this case, generations) and preach a message of unity through our shared spiritual ancestry (as children of Heavenly Parents) and destiny (wrought through the unifying power of Christ's Atonement).⁴² His message is a reminder that the hard work of overcoming tribalism requires significant time, energy, humility, and charity and that it is easier and significantly more self-gratifying to point out the tribalistic tendencies in others than it is identify and eradicate them from within ourselves. It is a message made more urgent by Mormon's alarming description of the Nephite state of affairs just decades after Samuel's sermon: the persistent neglect of divine signs gives rise to inequality and other manifestations of wickedness (3 Ne. 6), culminating in the absolute fracture of Nephite society, with "people . . . divided one against another," "separate[d] one from another into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends" (3 Ne. 7:2).

Invoking Exodus:

Signs of Liberation in Mormon's Narrative (Hel. 16–3 Ne. 8)

When narrating the events leading up to the birth and death of Jesus, Mormon uses the term "signs" in ways that differ subtly from what we find in Samuel's speech. Whereas Samuel limits his usage of the term "sign(s)" to conclusive, cosmic events that are concurrent with Jesus's faraway birth and death, Mormon applies the term to a variety of miraculous happenings (often described as "signs and wonders"⁴³) that take place over extended periods of time, that are frequently the product of prophetic activity, and that are often misapprehended. Hence, those who believe in Samuel's words find Nephi "showing signs and wonders, working miracles among the people, that they might know that the Christ must shortly come" (Hel. 16:4). The "more part of the people," however, remain hardened (Hel. 16:6, 10–12).⁴⁴ In his description of the

42. For another model sermon on unity and diversity, see Chieko N. Okazaki, "Baskets and Bottles," *Ensign* 26, no. 5 (May 1996): 12–13.

43. The term "signs and wonders" (and terms closely related to it) appears seven times in Mormon's narration of the events leading up to Jesus's appearance (Hel. 16:4; 16:13; 16:23; 3 Ne. 1:22; 2:1; 2:3). In addition, the term is found three times in Samuel's speech, one of which being in a paraphrase of an angel's words (Hel. 14:6, 28; 15:3).

44. Although the term "sign" isn't specifically used to describe Samuel's miraculous escape from the stones and arrows of the people of Zarahemla, the event seems to function as a sign which, like many of the other signs in Mormon's account, is largely rejected (see Hel. 16:3, 6). That some Nephites interpret Samuel's survival as a sign of divine intervention suggests a relatively small city wall.

years that follow, Mormon refers to “great signs given unto the people, and wonders”—once more, however, the majority of people “harden their hearts, all save it were the most believing” (Hel. 16:13–15, 23). After Nephi’s departure from the land, Mormon states that “there began to be greater signs and greater miracles wrought among the people,” though these too are dismissed by the unbelieving majority (3 Ne. 1:4–9). All of these (mostly misapprehended) signs precede the cosmic signs foretold by Samuel, which at last persuade the people to believe and repent (3 Ne. 1:10–26). Later, when narrating the events leading up to the death of Jesus, Mormon describes the wonder-working abilities of Nephi’s son (also named Nephi) as “signs . . . among the people” that are on par with the more stunning deeds of Jesus in the Gospels: he casts out demons, he raises the dead, and angels minister to him daily (3 Ne. 7:18–22; see also 8:4). Even Nephi’s words function as compelling signs of power which serve to enrage the majority of those who hear them (3 Ne. 7:18–20). Once more, Mormon has laid out a number of signs that are generally misapprehended prior to the cosmic, convincing “sign” of Jesus’s death as prophesied by Samuel.

It appears, then, that Mormon has reformulated the “greater things” promised by the angel and Samuel (Hel. 14:28) into an extended set of “greater signs” (3 Ne. 1:4; emphasis added)—signs that have little effect on a Nephite audience until the climactic, cosmic heralding foretold by Samuel. Skousen’s suggestion that the angelic prophecy contains two separate declarations (that many would see greater things prior to the cosmic signs in order that they might believe and that everyone would witness the cosmic signs so that none could disbelieve) accords with Mormon’s formulation of Nephite history.

And yet Mormon’s narrative, I suggest, does more than just give historical fulfillment to prophecy; it articulates Nephite history in ways that evoke a sacred past, namely ancient Israelite conceptions of the Exodus.⁴⁵ By shaping the Nephite narrative in terms of “signs and wonders” that are largely misapprehended by a “hardened” human audience,⁴⁶ Mormon draws a loose set of parallels between the emancipatory efforts of Moses and the liberatory life and death of Jesus Christ.

45. A trend seen elsewhere in Mormon’s, and Nephi’s, writings. See S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 75–98; Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 41–47 (Nephi) and 157–60 (Mormon).

46. Helaman 13:8, 12, 29; 16:12, 15, 22; 3 Nephi 1:22.

Such parallels are accentuated by the types of phenomena included in Mormon's narration. Whereas the specific signs promised by Samuel are strictly phenomena of *nature* (heavenly light and darkness, earthquakes, and so forth), the "greater signs" described by Mormon often refer to the miraculous wonder-workings of God's elect (for example, Nephi [son of Helaman], Hel. 16:4; the righteous, 3 Ne. 7:22; Nephi [son of Nephi], 3 Ne. 7:15–20). Just as Moses performed miraculous "signs and wonders" before a hardened Pharaoh prior to Israel's liberation, so God's righteous servants performed signs and wonders before the Nephites prior to the redemptive birth and death of Jesus. Any doubt as to whether these literary parallels are, in fact, part of Mormon's editorial program can be dispelled by the presence of the subsequent and more widely celebrated parallelisms between Moses and Jesus as lawgivers: for just as Moses experiences a vocal theophany (Ex. 19:16–25) prior to receiving the law on Sinai (Ex. 20), so the Nephites hear the voice of Christ (3 Ne. 8–9)⁴⁷ prior to receiving the law from the resurrected Jesus (3 Ne. 11–18).⁴⁸ All of this narrative artistry aligns with Mormon's editorial tendencies elsewhere in his abridgment: he calls his modern readers' attention to historical patterns and parallelisms that serve as evidence of God's hand in human history, and he delights in thoroughly documenting the fulfillment of prophecy.⁴⁹

47. Exodus associates Moses's encounter with the voice of God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19) with violent forces of nature: the mountain shakes and is enshrouded by thick smoke (because "the Lord descended upon it in fire"). Even the Lord's response (Ex. 19:19) to Moses can be read in terms of extreme natural phenomena: the King James Version reads, "Moses spake, and God answered him *by a voice*" (Hebrew: *b'qôl*, emphasis added)—a phrase that could just as well be rendered, "God answered him *with thunder*." The latter reading is more in line with the broader themes of the passage, as well as with the "stereotypical features of theophany in ancient Semitic poetry," as discussed in Carol Meyers, *Exodus: The New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 155. Meanwhile, prior to Jesus's deliverance of the law in Bountiful (3 Ne 11–18) the voice of the resurrected Christ speaks in the aftermath of another set of terrible natural forces: earthquakes (3 Ne. 8:6, 10–12), fires (v. 8), storms (vv. 6, 12), thunder (vv. 6, 12), and eventually, darkness (v. 19).

48. The parallelisms between Moses's teachings as a lawgiver in Exodus and Jesus's Sermon on the Mount were recognized in the ancient Mediterranean as early as the fourth century AD (Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 3.2), and have been the subject of much contemporary academic research. Consider Dale C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 172–94.

49. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 110–11, 154–66 (historical parallelisms) and 112–13, 180–213 (fulfillment of prophecy).

And while Mormon works to accentuate similarities between the signs surrounding Israelite liberation (through Moses) and the signs heralding human redemption (through Christ), he likewise draws our attention to specific differences between the Israelite and Nephite reception of such signs. It is to these differences that we will turn in the final section of this paper.

Mormon's Warning:

Disinformation and the Misapprehension of Divine Signs

One key difference between the “signs and wonders” in the Exodus narrative and in Mormon’s abridgment of Nephite history is the manner in which they are received by God’s people. When the enslaved Israelites are presented with divine signs, there is no indication that they question them, as Moses had feared. Rather, they immediately believe (Ex. 4:29–31). Even Pharaoh’s magicians express belief soon after seeing the divine signs produced by Moses (Ex. 8:18–19). Only Pharaoh remains obstinate.⁵⁰ When later biblical literature critiques the ancient Israelites for unbelief in or faithlessness toward God’s signs and wonders, it is always with respect to their actions *after* they believed in divine signs, *after* their successful emancipation from Egypt.⁵¹ Later Jewish authors critique their Israelite forebears for forgetfulness and neglectfulness of prior graces but do not accuse them of disbelieving the signs and wonders that were immediately before them.

Mormon presents a very different picture of the Nephites for his latter-day audience. Not only do the Nephites fall prey to the same sort of spiritual amnesia that is lamented in later Jewish literature (3 Ne. 2:1), but many of them fail to recognize and act on divine signs and wonders in the first place—even when such signs are before their very eyes (Hel. 16:4–6, 13–15, 23; 3 Ne. 1:4–6). In other words, the Nephite posture toward divine signs corresponds more with *Pharaoh’s* disposition toward the divine hand than it does with the attitude of ancient Israelites prior to their liberation. But unlike Exodus’s somewhat nondescript portrait of Pharaoh’s “hardening,” Mormon describes a handful of specific Nephite justifications for their disbelief in the signs before them. They “depend upon their own strength and . . . wisdom” to interpret the signs and wonders given to them (Hel. 16:15). They attribute signs to coincidence or false tradition, deny the reasonability of Samuel’s words, and peddle

50. Though even he expresses contrition now and then (Ex. 9:27–28 and 10:17).

51. Nehemiah 9:16–17; Psalm 78:42–58; Jeremiah 32:20–23.

in unfounded conspiracies, contentions, and other “foolish and vain” forms of discourse (Hel. 16:16–22).⁵² Most strikingly—and to my knowledge this is a point that has not been discussed at length—Mormon suggests that these socially and spiritually disruptive behaviors derive from a nefarious third party who has the power to act as a deceptive intermediary between the signs of truth and the people of God. According to Mormon, Satan goes about “spreading *rumors and contentions* upon all the face of the land,” contributing to “foolish and vain” imaginations, and hardening “the hearts of the people against that which was good and against that which should come” (Hel. 16:22; emphasis added). Unlike ancient Israelite narratives that blame the perceiver for misperceived signs,⁵³ Mormon suggests that the principal threat to a clear-eyed view of divine signals is *disinformation*, disseminated into the hearts and minds of good people.

Disinformation is different from misinformation.⁵⁴ Misinformation is bad information: all of us are variously misinformed and prone to spread misinformation throughout our lives. Disinformation is bad information that is *intentionally circulated by a bad actor*. And while the spread of misinformation is detrimental to us all, disinformation has the power to be acutely destructive, since bad actors can (and do) design their messages in ways that produce specifically deleterious effects.

We live in an era of unprecedented access to disinformation. Advances in technology allow bad actors (trolls, ideologues, conspiracy theorists, hyperpartisan outlets) to manipulate what multitudes of people see and hear (for example, false information, photo manipulation, “deepfakes”) on a global scale, using social networks and mass

52. Ancient Israelite tradition may have informed the Nephite accusations in Helaman 16:18–19 as well as their justifications for violence against Samuel. Deuteronomy 13:1–5 warns the Israelites of prophets who produce heavenly signs and wonders in order to lead the people to worship other gods and instructs that such figures be put to death. According to Helaman 16:18–19, some Nephites disbelieve signs and wonders by accusing Samuel of preaching a geographically “foreign” God: “if [the Christ is] . . . the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, as it has been spoken, why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem? Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?”

53. Or those traditions that blame the Lord: see the discussion at note 5 above.

54. Luciano Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 260; Dean Jackson, “Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and ‘Fake News,’” *National Endowment for Democracy*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/>.

media to misrepresent both the past and the present. These efforts are then magnified by a digital landscape that incentivizes institutions and individuals to seek “clicks, retweets, and likes” — “whatever can attract ‘eyeballs.’”⁵⁵ Complicating all of this is the degree to which you or I may assume (wrongly) that we are not susceptible to believing or promoting false information⁵⁶ as well as the way in which the term “fake news” is frequently appropriated to discredit *accurate* information that is politically unfavorable.

Modern disinformation campaigns target all aspects of human experience. Religious disinformation targets the spiritual development and well-being of honest seekers of truth by weaponizing historical and cultural information in ways that are designed to unsettle, wound, and mislead. Totalitarian regimes employ disinformation to exercise political control over their subjects.⁵⁷ Other disinformation campaigns—such as those waged by tobacco industry executives for decades in the twentieth century—target the physical well-being of individuals and global populations, trading in pseudoscience and false narratives that conflict with the hard-earned truths that past and present generations have gained through rigorous intellectual inquiry.⁵⁸ Over the last decade, we have witnessed a rise in geo-political disinformation warfare, disseminated to garner power by sowing chaos and distrust among nations and their citizens.⁵⁹ These disinformation initiatives are particularly effective when they exploit existing societal divisions and aggravate tribal sentiment.⁶⁰

55. Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online* (New York: Data and Society Research Institute, 2017), 42.

56. Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread of True and False News Online,” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–51, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

57. Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt: From an Interview,” *New York Review* 25, no. 16 (October 26, 1978), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview/>.

58. See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 10–35.

59. Alina Polyakova and Spencer Phipps Boyer, *The Future of Political Warfare: Russia, the West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, March 2018).

60. Robert S. Mueller III, “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election. Volumes I & II. (Redacted version of 4/18/2019),” *U.S. Department of Justice Publications and Materials* (2019): 21–27, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usjusticematls/47>.

Mormon's depiction of a society that is undermined by bad actors who spread "rumors and contentions upon all the face of the land" is truly a message for the modern reader (Hel. 16:22).⁶¹ It is especially notable that the Nephite propensity to consume and propagate disinformation comes (literarily, at least) on the heels of their rejection of Samuel and in tandem with the rejection of other countercultural prophetic voices: Nephite racism and tribalism, it seems, exacerbate their tendency to label truth as fiction, while broadcasting falsehoods conceived in bad faith. Because of their failure to recognize and act on the divine signs before them, the Nephites open themselves up to their own destruction—their prosperity wanes, they fall into civil war, and the Spirit is withdrawn from among them.

In recent years, a chorus of modern voices has joined with Mormon in warning against the tides of disinformation, offering insight into how governments and individuals can combat its destructive spread. A simple, but recurring, bit of wisdom for individuals is to *seek the counsel of a diverse set of well-qualified and well-intentioned experts on issues of importance*. In response to hundreds of solicited questions put to him by Brigham Young University students, President M. Russell Ballard said, "My calling and life experiences allow me to respond to certain types of questions. There are other types of questions that require an expert in a specific subject matter I worry sometimes that members expect too much from Church leaders and teachers—expecting them to be experts in subjects well beyond their duties and responsibilities. If you have a question that requires an expert, please take the time to find a thoughtful and qualified expert to help you."⁶² Hence, while we believe that the authority to communicate doctrine, to govern the Church, and to administer the ordinances of salvation resides with those whom the Lord has called, we can combat disinformation and its ill effects in other critical arenas of human experience by seeking to apply the wisdom of those who have paid the price for expertise: be it in the realms of human health, history, climate, education, economics, the environment, or public policy.⁶³ Current cultural trends that devalue expertise in a field of study might

61. In 2017, the lexicographers of Collins Dictionary named "fake news" their word of the year. In 2019, "disinformation" was the word of the year for NPR's *Fresh Air*.

62. M. Russell Ballard, "Questions and Answers," Brigham Young University devotional, November 14, 2017, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard/questions-and-answers/>.

63. Melody Barnes, "The Education of the American Mind," Brigham Young University forum, September 29, 2020, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/melody-barnes/education-american-mind/>.

be compared to the Nephites' propensity "to depend upon their own strength and . . . wisdom" (Hel. 16:15), leading to unfounded and false conclusions about the "signs" before them.

In matters of spiritual disinformation, it is of utmost importance to seek out reputable, thorough, and well-meaning experts on topics that are challenging or controversial. Speaking to university students, Elder D. Todd Christofferson warned against "form[ing] conclusions based on unexamined assertions or incomplete research" as well as against "be[ing] influenced by insincere seekers": "While some honestly pursue truth and real understanding, others are intent on finding or creating doubts. If there are differing interpretations possible, they will pick the most negative . . . They may share their assumptions and speculations with some glee, but either can't or won't search further to find contradictory information."⁶⁴ Such counsel can cut both ways: well-meaning religious educators were recently cautioned against spreading bad information in the form of "faith-promoting or unsubstantiated rumors or outdated understandings and explanations of our doctrine and practices from the past."⁶⁵ The refrain "Don't study Church history too little" is a tacit prescription against the strains of spiritual disinformation that prevent us from seeing and embracing the restored gospel in its fullness.⁶⁶ The Gospel Topics essays were produced precisely to offer "balanced and reliable interpretations of the facts for controversial and unfamiliar Church-related subjects" in an environment where students have "unlimited access to information."⁶⁷

Conclusion

"It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he [or she] who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."⁶⁸ Faced with the challenge of choosing how to narrate the years prior to Jesus's first coming for a distant audience who would anticipate an imminent Second Coming, Mormon presents a historical narrative in which signs are both abundantly given and abundantly misconstrued.

64. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Prophet Joseph Smith," Brigham Young University–Idaho devotional, September 24, 2013, accessed February 8, 2021, <https://www.byui.edu/devotionals/elder-d-todd-christofferson>.

65. M. Russell Ballard, "By Study and by Faith," *Ensign* 46, no. 12 (December 2016): 27.

66. Christofferson, "Prophet Joseph Smith."

67. Ballard, "By Study and by Faith," 26.

68. Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* 2d ed. (New York: Penguin: 1987), 11.

Racial animus. Tribalistic thinking. Disinformation. These, according to Samuel and Mormon, are among the evils that led scores of unwitting Nephites to misinterpret the signs before them. In parallel fashion, such evils threaten to deceive the elect today—infecting minds, clouding judgment, and impeding people’s full participation in the blessings of the restored gospel and human flourishing. If Mormon’s record is, in fact, meant to shed light on what we might expect prior to the end of times, then the widespread misapprehension of signs itself serves as a sign of those times. In this way, the Book of Mormon, in concert with inspired contemporary voices, may serve as a witness and a warning against these latter-day dangers, thereby offering safety for the soul.

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