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Charity as an Exegetical Principle in the Book of Mormon

Matthew Scott Stenson

Writing is an act of faith; understanding is an act of charity.

The eclectic Book of Mormon effectively collapses intellectual and sacred history. Anachronisms have drawn and do currently draw the attention of some Book of Mormon students and researchers. Nicholas J. Frederick, for instance, has written extensively on the presence of New Testament language in the largely pre-Christian Era record.¹ Not all anachronisms are so extensive and involved as those Frederick traces.² Some are minor and comparatively unimportant. However, there is a significant and pervasive conceptual anachronism that deserves critical attention. I speak of the primary narrators of the Book of Mormon using faith, hope, and charity (or love) as textual and exegetical principles. Divine love (and love of the divine and the divine within the human), or *charity*, was employed by the ancients, more or less, as a hermeneutic.³ But Christian charity as a fully articulated principle of exegesis⁴ began with Augustine (who was

1. See, for example, Nicholas J. Frederick, "If Christ Had Not Come into the World," in *Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 117–38.

2. According to one source, anachronisms are "claims that ideas, words, events, persons and objects are historically out of place." The "anachronism" I explore in this project relates to ideas and words. Stephen D. Ricks, "Anachronisms, Alleged," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 55–57.

3. A hermeneutic is a method for interpreting sacred texts.

4. Exegesis is the critical explanation of a sacred text.

inspired by Ambrose⁵) and continued for a thousand years or more until other less theologically oriented methods of interpretive reading emerged during the Renaissance and Reformation.⁶ Allegorical reading—historically what reading charitably (or sympathetically) permitted⁷—was replaced slowly by more literal, rhetorical, Protestant, and enlightened approaches to difficult texts.⁸ An entire meditative tradition developed around this affective attribute of love.⁹ Love was the key to every quest. The diversity of historical approaches to interpreting texts (sacred and legal) is dramatized in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. There, Bassanio, the male protagonist, demonstrates what Augustine borrowed from Plato and adapted to Paul when reading the third casket differently than Portia’s other two suitors. Bassanio unlocks the riddle because of his true love for Portia.¹⁰ Romantic love and divine love have been the key to

5. Ambrose gave Augustine a vision of how he might reconcile his distaste for the sacred books with his classical learning. Ambrose demonstrated that the scriptures could be read spiritually or allegorically. By this method that allowed for levels of understanding, a “literary scholar and rational critic” like Augustine might endlessly delight in a book (or collection of books) that also appealed to the “devout faithful.” Carol Harrison, “Augustine,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 76.

6. In *Confessions*, Augustine explains, in some depth, his methodology and applies the same at length to Genesis 1. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 273–305. Francis Petrarch explores reading theory while being guided by his admired predecessor, Augustine, in his *My Secret Book*. According to Peter S. Williamson, “Renaissance humanism paved the way for a renewal of exegesis through its interest in the biblical languages and its advances in textual criticism.” Peter S. Williamson, “Catholic Biblical Interpretation,” in Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, 103.

7. Peter S. Williamson explains that “medieval writers and preachers expounded the four senses of Scripture taught by some church fathers”: (1) literal, (2) allegorical (revealing Christ in the Old Testament using typology and other strategies), (3) moral (Latter-day Saints call this application to daily living), and (4) anagogical (or eschatological). Williamson, “Catholic Biblical Interpretation,” 103. For a complete history of allegory from classical times to early modern times, see Mindele Anne Treip, *Allegorical Poetics and the Epic: The Renaissance Tradition to Paradise Lost* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

8. Although somewhat dated, Michael Murrin documents in his book on allegory, in a brief and accessible way, the gradual swing from allegory to rhetoric during the Renaissance. Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory: Some Notes toward a Theory of Allegorical Rhetoric in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

9. Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

10. Matthew Scott Stenson, “Unlocking Meaning: The Act of Reading in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Christianity and Literature* 64, no. 4 (September 2015): 377–99. *The Merchant of Venice* is full of Catholic motifs and Christian exegetical

understanding texts from classical times until more modern times. Similarly, the Book of Mormon, in a day of rigorous rationalistic approaches to interpretation, articulates the exegetical value of faith, hope, and especially charity. Nephi and Moroni both seem to understand that these three Christian virtues are principles of both composition and reception, if not also of comprehension and, ultimately, conversion and salvation (see 1 Ne. 19:6–7; 2 Ne. 26:29–31, 33; Ether 12; Moro. 7, 10).¹¹

In this essay, I do three things: (1) describe briefly and very broadly Augustine’s exegetical method (a method he creatively adopts and adapts from his reading of authors such as Virgil, Matthew, and Paul); (2) explain how two of the primary narrators of the Book of Mormon (Nephi and Moroni) describe the Nephite record’s eventual emergence as a good gift and marvelous miracle, even while paradoxically and anxiously anticipating its mixed Gentile reception due to these two narrators’ weaknesses and limitations as writers; and (3) demonstrate that faith, hope, and charity are principles not only of the Nephite record’s *production* but also of its Gentile *reception*, not altogether unlike what Augustine (and those he influenced for hundreds of years) advocates in his writings.¹² It is not my purpose to recount the history of medieval or Augustinian exegesis but just to point out that the Nephite record interacts with an exegetical principle connected however tenuously to the once-prominent exegetical tradition.

implications. Anne Barton writes, “It is precisely because he [Bassanio] does not fear the ominous inscription on the third casket—‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath’ (2.7.16)—that Bassanio is able to win Portia.” His presumably flawed but somehow more perfect love for Portia enables him to not get bogged down in the text itself nor fear its threatening implications. Bassanio decides, a kind of exegetical judgment in Shakespeare’s day, to venture and choose the casket not of gold, or silver, but of lowly lead, a bold choice having nothing to do with precious appearances or careful reading of the inscription. Anne Barton, “The Merchant of Venice,” in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 285–86.

11. Scripture has always had something to say about its own reception, whether written or spoken (see Matt. 13:3–9). This is nowhere more true than in the Book of Mormon.

12. For instance, after discussing the many good gifts of his influential mother, Monica, whose eyes Augustine had just closed in death, Augustine reports that “an overwhelming grief welled into my heart.” He was worried that those around him would read his gushing tears as grounds for fault finding and mocking him (see footnote 46). His description of this pivotal time in his life encapsulates the principles involved in this exegetical study. Augustine hoped for “a [sympathetic] person of much charity” to consider his case so that he could openly suffer without “some human critic who would put a proud interpretation on [his] weeping.” Augustine, *Confessions*, 174–76.

Augustine's General Doctrine of Hermeneutics

Before Augustine arrived on the religious scene to articulate his complex theories of interpretation as found in *On Christian Doctrine* and *Confessions*, others, pagan and patristic, had already developed methods of reading spiritually and allegorically. In other words, he inherited and systematically Christianized an extant classical tradition. For the morally pious among the Greeks, reading allegorically was a way for some of them (and later Christians) to accept the theological problems in Homer's epics: the Greek Bible of the gods and their dealings with men and women.¹³ First-century Christians similarly used ingenious methods to demonstrate that Christ was present in the Hebrew Bible. As one scholar put it, "rapidly a battery of proof texts was assembled" by early Christians to demonstrate that Christ was *the* Messiah anticipated by the Old Testament writers.¹⁴ These Christians employed the language of the Septuagint to show that Christ was foreshadowed by the Hebrew records. Matthew, for instance, seeks to persuade the Jews that the prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ. These early Christians attempt to demonstrate a Christological level in the Hebrew Bible by different methods, including that of typology (that is, an allegorical level or reading approach that requires believing in "God's overarching providential plan" and watchfulness over history and its texts¹⁵). Accordingly, Augustine, himself a Catholic father, develops a more elaborate and distinctive method that reaches for Christ (and other theological truths) in extant scripture using a spiritual approach. His basic reasoning is that if "Christ is the end of the law' ([Rom.] 10:4) and 'love is the fulfilling of the law' (13:10 NRSV)" and that "all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40) hang on Jesus's twofold great commandment, then love alone can manifest the meanings of scripture.¹⁶ If the greatest commandment is to love God (and secondarily, to love one's neighbor) (Matt. 22:35–40), then according to Augustine, any good-faith attempt at reading by fallen humans that tends to reach for Christ and God (the ultimate

13. Alan Jacobs writes that "Basil the Great counsels an 'equitable' way of reading Homer that renders that authoritative text usable for the Christian reader. But Augustine's explicit invocation of love seems to be unique among early theologians." Alan Jacobs, "Love," in Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, 466.

14. Frances M. Young, "Patristic Biblical Interpretation," in Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, 566.

15. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Providence," in Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, 642.

16. Jacobs, "Love," 465–66.

hermeneutic end) through using in love the signs and words of scripture (the ultimate means) to find him who is the embodiment of love and his truths must be admissible, particularly if consistent with doctrinal understandings of the church and its traditions.

Augustine believes that this journey toward a Christocentric understanding is scripture's intention. He finds a unity within scripture by assigning a Christocentric purpose to it, and yet he also allows for a diversity of readings where that intention and the two great commandments are honored.¹⁷ For Augustine, the Holy Spirit has inspired fallen human beings to produce a multivalent collection of sacred texts that is only seemingly fallible. Through the reader's sustained and searching efforts, the sacred books may be understood to contain inerrant doctrinal diversity within Christocentric unity. The initial "discrepancies" and "contradictions" can be negotiated by an appeal to the love for God and an adherence to the purpose of scripture in a way that manifests that the providence of God has allowed the sacred texts to register in a harmonious way, edifying possibilities.¹⁸ In effect, God has prepared the way for a hierarchy of acceptable readings because he is "the true Author of the whole of Scripture."¹⁹ All roads lead to Christ if the meek reader avoids proud idolatry and single-mindedly walks the interpretive path with the lamp of love.²⁰ As indicated, accessing truth through this "hermeneutical circle" of sorts is not without serious difficulty and considerations.²¹ But it is, for Augustine, the challenge of finding the potential within a passage that makes exegesis endlessly rewarding and character refining.

According to Harold Bloom, an important though controversial literary critic, Augustine is the primary progenitor of modern reading theory and practice: "It is from [him] that we learn to read." For Augustine, "to read well (. . . absorbing the *wisdom of Christ*) is the authentic imitation of God and the angels." Further, "for him the purpose of reading," Bloom asserts, "was our conversion to Christ." Nevertheless, in Augustine's theory

17. Harrison, "Augustine," 77.

18. Harrison, "Augustine," 76.

19. Jacobs, "Love," 466.

20. For Augustine, interpretation of scripture is generative. The Lord's command to increase and multiply can be read as a command to birth new means into the world. Not unrelatedly, for Augustine the firmament is compared to a text that has been stretched out. To read it, one must therefore carefully attend to the past, present, and future. The past is accessed by means of memory, the present by means of attention, and the future by means of hopeful expectation of Christ. Traces in the text are like breadcrumbs leading one to him. Augustine, *Confessions*, 273–305.

21. Jacobs, "Love," 466.

and practice some have found room for “a type of skepticism.” That is, there is a concern in Augustine that centers in and encompasses the reader and his or her limitations as a fallen creature. In this connection, Bloom quotes Brian Stock as saying, “Augustine believes that reading is essential for ‘spiritual’ development in the individual, but he is pessimistic about the degree of ‘enlightenment’ that reading itself confers.” For Stock, there is a “hopelessness [surrounding] human interpretive efforts.”²² Thus, since we see the divine only darkly, there is a need for patience with each other and for charity toward readings that differ from our own. Although these last ideas may seem discouraging, there is value in them. Readers and writers, though not destitute of all light (the image of God is within them and they can and were guided by the Holy Spirit in Augustine’s theories), have inherent flaws and limits that tend to mingle with the divine truth’s presentation and reception. Augustine understood that the books composed by God and his well-meaning, human instruments (the prophets) were in many places obscure, ambiguous, and challenging, even if, with effort, rewarding.²³ For Augustine, the balance in proper reading of scripture must be maintained between believing in the providence of God in preparing the scriptural record and acknowledging that readers are often distracted and, in religious terms, proudly idolatrous in their desires.

John Milton, careful student of Augustine’s theology of hermeneutics, articulates in poetic terms the Christian father’s theory of idolatrous love (cupidity) at a meaningful moment in his epic poem on the Fall of humanity. The passage spoken by the Miltonic narrator suggests that

22. Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 278–79.

23. For Augustine, a person trained in the schools of Ciceronian elocution and Hellenistic and Neoplatonic philosophy, and a teacher of the same himself, the Bible was vulgar and obscure. It was not until he heard Ambrose’s allegorical work with the Bible and its anthropomorphisms that he realized the record, if approached in an open way, might lead to Christological wisdom. (This is how the Greek writers dealt with Homer’s theological improprieties and unorthodoxies.) The hermeneutical principles—love chief among them—that enabled Augustine to read allegorically were the solution. Charity was a liberating principle that allowed Augustine to read the text variously without narrowness or dogmatic rigidity. All readings were acceptable to him, even if they were in error, if they promoted faith and charity. Of course, this allegorical method pertained to the most obscure passages. The plain parts of the Bible taught faith and love, and so any reading that established these principles was acceptable and considered harmless. Augustine drew his reading method from scripture. He follows Paul in his mind. I claim that the writers of the Book of Mormon seem to use a similar principle, not in terms of moral impropriety or suspect theology but in terms of disjunctive structure, grammatical errors, and other categories for disorientation or textual imperfections.

one can be near to (or even within) something of great worth and yet not perceive its qualities or its real worth because one does not regard as one should its actual maker. The love of God allows the attentive seeker to properly use what has providentially been placed in their path. Distractions and inordinate desires, if one is not puffed up, will not always lead one away from understanding well the wisdom of truth. Travelers will eventually grasp it even if they should at first stumble on their searching journey:

Thence up he [Satan] flew, and on the Tree of Life,
 The middle Tree and highest there that grew,
 Sat like a Cormorant; yet not true Life
 Thereby regained, but sat devising Death
 To them who liv'd; nor on the vertue thought
 Of that life-giving Plant, but only us'd
 For prospect, what well us'd had bin the pledge
 Of immortality. So little knows
 Any, but God alone, to value right
 The good before him, but perverts best things
 To worst abuse, or to thir meanest use.²⁴

In the foregoing poetic excerpt, the fallen angel, Satan, fails to perceive the obvious use of the tree he sits upon because he is proudly bent on finding and destroying the work of God. He seeks for Adam and Eve that he might in some way retaliate against his Maker. Thus he passes over the spiritual life the tree might provide. Milton's epic embodies Augustinian interpretive theory since it in effect ensnares and distracts readers who want to fault the poet's language or take issue with his apparent theology. The epic, like the lush garden (itself a textual metaphor), must be read in an attentive and single-minded way if one is not to be led astray by the lexical, syntactical, and ideological complexities of it.²⁵ Cupidity, or the love of anything other than God and presumably his truths, may cause one to wander off instead of reach the divine wisdom or presence within the epic's seeming obscurities and indeterminacies. Reading reveals character and is a process that is educative.

24. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), bk. 4, lines 194–204, 447.

25. I explore the reader's journey through Milton's long epic in my dissertation: Matthew Scott Stenson, "Lifting Up the Serpent in the Wilderness: The Reader's Journey through John Milton's *Paradise Lost*" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2009). Reading as a journey is systematically theorized by Augustine but is also implicitly suggested in many earlier sources that influenced Augustine, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*.

For Augustine, one is to honestly approach the difficulties of sacred texts humbly and in the spirit of sincere effort and openness to myriad acceptable possibilities. In our own Latter-day Saint tradition, George Handley has advocated for a balance between what he calls “triumphalist” readings (faithful but static interpretations that are predetermined by one’s established belief) and those readings that are ever “idiosyncratic . . . but never transcendent.”²⁶ Given the daunting journey and, for Augustine, ascent of understanding God’s obscure word, he allowed, as mentioned, for interpretive variation so long as the proposals complied with what came to be known after him as the rule of *faith* and the exegetical principle of *charity*. If a reading edified and encouraged the love of God and neighbor and, by implication, that which is good and edifying, it was profitable and should not be rejected out of hand, where there is no plain counterexplanation by Deity on record. Exegetes, for Augustine, were to do their best in their weakness to spiritually mature and to thereby interpret divine passages given their native gifts, capacities, and faculties. For Augustine, the command in Genesis to “multiply, and replenish the earth” was more than an injunctive to populate the sky, seas, and lands with creatures (Gen. 1:28); it was, on an allegorical level, to use the Book of Mormon’s phrase, a command to “lay hold upon every good thing” by more fully recognizing the treasures of Christ’s written wisdom and word (Moro. 7:20).²⁷ The following is a simplified summary of Augustine’s theory of exegesis:

26. George Handley, “On the Moral Risks of Reading Scripture,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: 2 Nephi 26–27*, ed. Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2016), 89–104.

27. Augustine’s exegetical methods as explained in his works *Confessions* (397–400) and *On Christian Doctrine* (396–427) relied primarily on Matthew 22:35–40 and 1 Corinthians 13, where charity—the love of God and of all people—is expounded. On the principle of love “hang[s]” (depends) an understanding of “all the law and the prophets.” *Confessions* is a two-part intellectual autobiography that recounts Augustine’s conversion through his mother, Monica (his love for her leads him to accept and love what she loves herself), and provides an extensive discussion on reading and some practical allegorical criticism of Genesis 1. It is common for writers since Augustine’s time to bridge the gap between material earth and immaterial heaven by means of an angelic woman. (The woman may also play the part of obstacle or distraction to divine truth and being if she is loved too much, or idolatrously.) Cupidity is the concept that Augustine develops in this regard. God should receive all our love, and all else, in Augustine’s view, is only to be *used* to seek out and lay hold of God and his wisdom embodied in Christ. Augustine, *Confessions*; Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997).

1. God's divine wisdom, truth, and word come by means of weak and simple human instruments (though prophetic persons) and are Christocentric.
2. God, through his Holy Spirit, has providentially inspired a challenging but inerrant²⁸ record that can and should be unified at the level of divine and prophetic intention and purpose where possible.
3. God, according to his foreknowledge, has prepared a way that the seeming imperfections (discrepancies, strangeness, contradictions, and other "problems") of the records can be reconciled or negotiated by taking an increasingly spiritually mature, loving, and sympathetic approach to them that allows for creative variety amid doctrinal unity.
4. God desires to reward with deep understanding of heart the sympathetic reader who uses the words of the text in love to reach for the object of that love—Christ and God—and who uses the words of it to encourage love of his or her fellow travelers.

Among the many Augustinian thoughts that may overlap with current exegetical traditions (including those among Latter-day Saints) are a handful that seem worth underscoring. These concepts appear consistent with Latter-day Saint belief. First, although we do not believe in textual infallibility, we do accept that the reader is fallen (imperfect in his or her perceptions of language and truth) and thus will struggle to appreciate and apprehend divine scriptural meanings. Next, we grant that the general aim of all scripture is to illuminate the character of God and to communicate his salvific truths to his children across time and space. Commensurate with that is our acceptance that the divine being has watched over the process that has ultimately resulted in the availability of these sacred texts in our day. They have been kept and preserved for future generations and are revealed under his directive to accomplish his purposes in this dispensation (1 Ne. 9:5–6; Alma 37).²⁹ Finally, we acknowledge that a diversity

28. In this context, perhaps it should be noted that Latter-day Saints do not believe in scriptural infallibility. That is, we allow for error within sacred texts. This error may have been introduced into the text through transmission, translation, or, in the case of the Bible, tampering.

29. James Faulconer has recently written about these interpretive and reception issues in his work on Mosiah. Faulconer suggests that "theological reflection means thoughtful, imaginative response to scripture." He further explains, "What I mean [by speculative reading] is that it cannot avoid being conceptual and conjectural. A theologian looks at the text carefully. Based on what she observes in the text, the theologian

of approaches, and even arrival at a diversity of conclusions, is acceptable and commendable so long as the one who advocates for any given thesis does his or her best to edify and enlighten and not to destroy and tear down. With these shared intellectual axioms in mind, I now intend to demonstrate that the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and charity were not far from the minds of even the earliest Nephite writers. Specifically, it is my position that the prophets who produced the Book of Mormon brought it forth in faith and somehow conceived of charity not merely as a divine attribute to be acquired in order to inherit the kingdom of God but as a principle of reception, one that predates much of the exegesis among the pious Homeric interpreters and any associated with the Christian Era.

To be clear, then, I do not intend to demonstrate a strong correspondence between Augustine's specific theories and Nephi's and Moroni's words. Instead I desire in a more general way to suggest that the Nephite prophets had some sense that charity served as a principle of textual reception long before Augustine or his followers ever systematized and baptized the now-outdated exegetical term.

Nephi Leads with Faith, Hope, and Charity

Second Nephi ends with a somewhat-developed passage on faith, hope, and charity (2 Ne. 33).³⁰ But before jumping into that material, it would be profitable to ask ourselves what kind of reader Nephi was. How did he see the records in his own hands? The sequence of chapters composed of 1 Nephi 19–22 represents Nephi reading to his older brothers chapters that closely resemble Isaiah 48 and 49. But more than that, Nephi tells his reader that he “did read many things to them [his brethren], which were engraven upon the plates of brass,” including the five “books of Moses” and “that which was written by the prophet Isaiah” (1 Ne. 19:22–23). It is in 1 Nephi 19 that we first view Nephi as a charitable reader.

constructs a set of concepts that reflect what she has seen. So,” he concludes, “theological speculation is neither mere guessing nor an exact science like mathematics. It is an interpretive discipline.” Accordingly, Faulconer acknowledges that “the unavoidability of our assumptions affecting our interpretations makes difficult the traditional advice that interpreters of scripture should do only exegesis, . . . not eisegesis.” Thus, from Faulconer’s perspective, reading in the same ways is not all that realistic. Hence, we should allow for the flexibility to find a range of meanings when examining sacred scriptures. James E. Faulconer, “Introduction,” in *Mosiah: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 2–10.

30. The three virtues of faith, hope, and charity are first alluded to together in 2 Nephi 31:19–21.

Before 1 Nephi 19, we learned that Lehi was a voracious reader of the brass plates and that Nephi had been a careful student of his father's writings, revelations, and prophecies, but we had not seen Nephi as a reader. It is true that 1 Nephi 17 suggests that Nephi was a careful student of the brass plates and valued the word of the Lord to his father and others before him. In 1 Nephi 19, we are told that Nephi read to his brothers before expounding on that which he reads from Isaiah.

First Nephi 19 begins with metadiscourse (a term that in this case refers to when the Book of Mormon speaks of itself). Nephi informs his reader that he has "plates of ore" in addition to the brass plates they brought from Jerusalem (1 Ne. 19:1). On his large plates he records items such as the things of his father, some of his own prophecies, his family's genealogy, and his people's wars and contentions. The large plates were produced by commandment. As is well known, Nephi also speaks of another, smaller record that he has been commanded to create, a record he consistently calls "these plates," on which "the more sacred things may be kept" (1 Ne. 19:5). It is in this text-producing setting that Nephi shows his hand as a sympathetic reader of the brass plates in his possession. Notice that Nephi acknowledges that there were errors (of what kind we are not told) on the brass plates made by prophetic men with real weaknesses; nevertheless, Nephi found their writings to be of "great worth," presumably because of his charity and his understanding of the demanding task of writing (bracketed commentary going forward is mine³¹). Nephi confesses to his reader,

I do not write anything upon plates [large or small] save it be that I think it be sacred. And now, if I do err, even did they err of old; not that I

31. My method for guiding the reader through my analysis will require two strategies: (1) I bracket fairly extensively to insert clarifying commentary that would otherwise require many pages to explain, thereby avoiding the necessity of lengthening the project beyond what would be manageable for readers; in other words, generously bracketing inserted commentary is, ironically, a kind of shorthand that I trust is helpful; and (2) I italicize language on occasion when it seems to make following my reasoning easier. I have found that implementing such standard measures, if not excessive, is helpful for readers. I acknowledge that some of the commentary may seem as if I am reading something *into the text*. The glosses, however, are informed by a careful reading of the broad scriptural context and localized details and thus are more *exegetical* than they may seem. In short, I attempt to recover the probable logic of the prophet based on his lexical and syntactic signals. My commentary is not definitive and may change from time to time as I develop a still-better sense for the author involved. My inserted language is in no way an attempt at recreating the text based on some relation to Hebrew or Egyptian. Instead, my comments are often best viewed as peripheral.

would excuse myself because of other men, but because of the weakness which is in me, according to the flesh, I would excuse myself.³²

For the things [specifically records] which some men esteem to be of great worth, both to the body and soul, others set at naught and trample under their feet. Yea, even the very God of Israel do men trample under their feet; I say, trample under their feet but I would speak in other words—they set him at naught, and hearken not to the voice of his counsels [as they are recorded in sacred texts]. (1 Ne. 19:6–7)³³

Nephi exemplifies charity as a reader here because he is willing to call that which is fallible “of great worth,” presumably due to its Christocentric message and his regard for others before him who produced records as he does. On the heels of this revealing passage, wherein we learn that Nephi understands that there were errors on the brass plates, he gives his reader to understand that even Christ would be misjudged because of “iniquity,” though he himself was the embodiment of charity: “Yea [Nephi further explains], they [Christ’s own people] spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men” (1 Ne. 19:9). Nephi’s great enthusiasm for the prophets on record is abundantly apparent: Christ, he points out, “yieldeth himself, . . . into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up, *according to the words of Zenock*, and to be crucified, *according to the words of Neum*, and to be buried in a sepulchre, *according to the words of Zenos*, which he spake concerning the three days of darkness” (1 Ne. 19:10, emphasis added). In 1 Nephi 19, Nephi places emphasis on proving

32. Notice that Nephi acknowledges the errors of the brass plates that he values so much, but he allows for errors (or is not deterred by them) because he understands human nature and, presumably, the process of recordkeeping. Similarly, Augustine, whom we examined earlier, acknowledged distractions and the ever-present variable of human fallibility (or fallenness) in preparing and perceiving texts that represent the transcendent. Nephi implies that people trample certain things under their feet because they cannot bear the thought that something of supposed great worth might be dressed to a degree in the garb of human weakness and evidence of the struggle for expression. The divine must be conveyed by means of the human instrument. Ineffability is yet another Augustinian doctrine. For instance, it is manifest repeatedly in his *Confessions*. He pleads to the Lord, “Have mercy so that I may find words.” Augustine, *Confessions*, 5. Augustine’s famous first encounter with the Bible while a student of rhetoric at Carthage is telling in this regard: “[Before I learned to read it and properly value the Bible,] it seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero. My inflated conceit shunned the Bible’s restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness. . . . I disdained to be a little beginner.” Augustine, *Confessions*, 40.

33. Notice that for Nephi the point of scripture is to persuade people of the God of Israel and to make known his counsels to the children of men.

all things with the heart.³⁴ Using Zenos's writings, Nephi indicates that Jesus would be rejected when "those who are at Jerusalem . . . turn their hearts aside" from him (1 Ne. 19:13), but that he would be received by them "when that day cometh, saith the prophet, that they no more turn aside their hearts against the Holy One of Israel" (1 Ne. 19:15). Nephi ends this chapter by citing Zenos and Isaiah, then inviting his reader to receive with "hope" what Isaiah has written, "for after this manner has the prophet written" (1 Ne. 19:24).³⁵

Nephi's early embrace, though not explicit, of the principle of sympathy or charity, a principle having more to do with the heart than the head when it comes to receiving messengers and truth, is evident in the latter part of 2 Nephi, where readers see the concept alluded to alongside the reception of oral and written teachings. The context is the Book of Mormon's sudden emergence in "the days when the Lord God shall bring these things forth" (2 Ne. 26:14). In 2 Nephi 26:12–30, Nephi prophesies of his record's destined role among the proud and learned Gentiles. In the midst of that lengthy, explanatory prophecy, Nephi gives his reader another glimpse at how he understands charity to be a principle of openness and receptivity. The Gentiles, he predicts, will "preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning . . . and grind upon the face of the poor," but the Lord will work a work in plainness among them because "he loveth the world" (2 Ne. 26:20–24). Among the sins Nephi identifies in the arrogant and heady Gentiles is priestcraft (2 Ne. 26:29). In contrast to Gentile priestcraft, which for its proliferation relies on the learning and charismatic talents of its ambitious adherents, Nephi juxtaposes the humble teachers of God, the "laborer[s] in Zion," associated with the people of God (2 Ne. 26:30–31). Notice Nephi's emphasis on charity in receiving the humble efforts of the unsophisticated laborer in Zion:

Behold, the Lord hath forbidden this thing [practice of priestcraft for "gain and praise of the world" (2 Ne. 26:29)]; wherefore, the Lord God hath given a commandment that all men should have charity, which charity is love [for Christ and his servants]. And except they should

34. Augustine calls this equivalent "way of discovering" the "road of the affections." Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 7, 16.

35. Nephi's great passion for the words of those who labored to record prophecy before him is manifest in his psalm: "And upon these I write the things of my soul, and many of the scriptures which are engraven upon the plates of brass. For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children" (2 Ne. 4:15). Clearly Nephi has covered a multitude of errors by concentrating on and rejoicing in the truth.

have charity they were nothing [they should receive nothing of true value from those servants, and therefore become nothing like their Lord (see Moro. 7:45)]. Wherefore, if they should have charity they would not suffer the laborer in Zion to perish [because of his poverty; but they, by implication, would assist him in his efforts to minister and teach].

But the laborer[s] in Zion [they who have worked with their own hands for their support and yet were also called to teach the people of God] shall labor for Zion; for if they labor for money [instead of for love] they shall [also] perish. (2 Ne. 26:30–31)

Reading this passage, one gets the sense that whereas the proud and contentious teachers among the Gentiles would be received according to their native gifts and talents, the ministers and teachers among the people of God who would labor with their own hands for their support would necessarily rely for their sustenance and success on God's grace and the goodwill of the people whom they served and taught. They would be received not because they were learned and polished but because, though humble in circumstance, they were sent by God. The talented Gentile would teach "for money" that which the people itched to hear. In contrast, the humble Nephite teacher, if he labored "for Zion" and not for himself, would teach the truth in love, trusting that his diligent labors and his Christocentric message would be supported temporarily, and at least tolerated spiritually, if the people had charity in their hearts (2 Ne. 26:31). He did not ask for money. Significantly, the commandment was "that all men should have charity" and not just that the people of God should have charity (2 Ne. 26:30).³⁶

36. Second Nephi 27 also has much to say about reading. Nephi adapts and repurposes Isaiah 29 in this chapter. The Lord through the prophet seems to make two distinctions: The first is that the record spoken of would be both sealed and made available. The sealed portion would come later; the opened portion would come forth to a wicked world in apostasy. Its coming forth would be the "turning of things upside down" (v. 27). The other distinction drawn by the Lord in the chapter has to do with readers. Readers are of two dichotomous sorts: (1) the "learned" with impure motives (of which Professor Anthon is the representative [vv. 15–20]) and (2) the "not learned" with ostensibly purer motives (of which Joseph Smith is the representative [vv. 19–20, 25–26]). Within this second categorization of readers are the "deaf," "blind," "meek," and "poor" who love the Lord's name and rejoice in him (vv. 29–30, 34). These readers have a pure love of Christ, "their joy shall be in the Lord," and they are the antithesis of those who have long since "removed their hearts far from [him]" (vv. 25, 30). Interestingly, in that day that the unsealed record comes to light, it will be "read by the power of Christ," which sounds like the "spirit of prophecy" or the testimony of Jesus Christ that Nephi had already spoken of in the prologue to the longer prophecy (v. 11; 2 Ne. 25:4).

In 2 Nephi 33, Nephi's prophecies (2 Ne. 25–30) and doctrinal teachings (see 2 Ne. 31–32) now concluded, he writes directly about the reception of the record he has referenced since at least 1 Nephi 6. He suggests a concern about its latter-day reception due to his “weakness” in writing and explicitly conveys to his readers that the “words which [he has] written in weakness” are motivated by his faith, hope, and charity (2 Ne. 33:3–9) and, he predicts, “will be made strong [or spiritually powerful] unto them” (2 Ne. 33:4). Nephi believes in what he has been commanded to do and places unqualified trust in God that much good will come of it in future generations (2 Ne. 33:7). Let us examine here Nephi's palpable concern about his record's reception in some detail. Nephi reveals in the first two and half verses of 2 Nephi 33 that his concern centers on the fact that his words will be received as a *written record* and not as words *from his own mouth*. Here Nephi's anxieties are articulated with his latter-day audience in mind:

And now I, Nephi, cannot write all the things which were taught among my people; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking; for when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men [the heart can be opened and penetrated by the powerfully spoken word almost against a person's will].

But behold [here is the contrasting logic], there are many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them; wherefore, they cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught. [This language reminds us of Nephi's concerns in 1 Nephi 19:6–7 and anticipates Moroni's final promise. The logic is that the act of reading his words will require more than listening to him would require. It will require demanding effort and a measure of charity to choose to concentrate on his content and not on his weakness in writing.]³⁷

37. In the passage I cited earlier about Augustine's first encounter with the Bible, we learn how the theologian and theorist of hermeneutics understood scripture from the vantage point of later in his life. From that vantage point, he understood (and Milton also has much to say about this) that to value a text does not mean that the text is plain, but that rigorous effort exercised in love is how we honor and demonstrate respect for a sacred text. Augustine compares the reading of the Bible to climbing a mountain: “I . . . decided to give attention to the holy scriptures and to find out what they were like. And this is what met me: something neither open to the proud nor laid bare to mere children; a text lowly to the beginner but, on further reading, of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries.” He continues, “I was not in any state to be able to enter into that, or to bow my head to climb its steps.” Augustine, *Confessions*, 40. Milton, following in Augustine's shadow to a degree, describes his ideal reader as necessarily of good character and

But I, Nephi, have written what I have written [characteristically, Nephi doubles down on what he has been commanded to do], and I esteem it [my record] as of great worth, and especially unto my people. (2 Ne. 33:1–3)

I am aware that this passage has been used by Elder David A. Bednar to teach about the role of the learner's agency in the reception of truth;³⁸ however, I cannot shake free from the idea that there is yet another profitable reading to be discovered in it. Nephi, as I understand him, suggests that if he could speak face-to-face with his modern reader, his message would readily be embraced because of his gift for speaking in power and authority. However, as indicated, the above passage contains a binary logic, as did the former passage from 2 Nephi 26:29–31. What Nephi compares is the reception of the spoken word to the reception of the written word.³⁹ Nephi concerns himself with the reception of his record because its reading will be made difficult by his weakness for writing (a weakness he does not have as speaker), and thus valuing it will require more effort and generosity of spirit for his audience than if he could convey his message in direct speech.⁴⁰ Nephi, like Moroni, has this concern

judgment and possessed of a "charity of open dialogue needed in the long work of" finding truth and understanding. His ideal reader is variously "strenuous" and "charitable." Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Milton's Readers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 237–38.

38. In Elder David A. Bednar's reading, he explains that what Nephi is saying is that the truth can be carried "unto" the heart of a learner, but whether or not it eventually has any place "in them" (or in the learner's heart) depends on the learner's faith and agency. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," *Ensign* 37, no. 9 (September 2007): 61. Learning is invited into the heart through preparation. This is an edifying point and one that has great pedagogical significance and obvious application to gospel living, but because the passage can be read that way does not suggest that it cannot also be understood alternatively, if both readings are edifying and profitable to the reader. As the scriptures themselves demonstrate, one passage can contain many possible meanings and applications, all of which can have some value. This is one of Augustine's central points and a necessary idea. Does it lessen God's or his servants' authority that the scriptures can mean many things? Is not more truth better than only some truth?

39. Many scholars have explored the oral and written traditions among the Nephites, such as Hugh Nibley, Brant Gardner, and Samuel Brown. I have also published an article through *BYU Studies Quarterly* that speaks to the subject. Matthew Scott Stenson, "Answering for His Order: Alma's Clash with the Nehors," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2016): 127–53. In another article not yet in print, I explore in detail early expressive prophetic rhetoric that may bear on King Benjamin's powerful speech.

40. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 42–43. Augustine suggests that the key to reading difficult passages is made possible through the faculty of memory. In Augustine's

in part because, he confesses, “neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking,” and “there are many [who will] harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit,” so much so that they will (if they are not downright angry at what he writes) “cast many things away which are written” for their eternal benefit (2 Ne. 33:1–2).

In 2 Nephi 33, Nephi identifies his target audiences: (1) “my people,” (2) the “Jew,” (3) “the Gentiles,” and (4) “all ye ends of the earth” (2 Ne. 33:7–10). Nephi’s concern about his record’s reception is subdued because of his faith in Christ and his firm expectation (hope) that it will be well received by many (see 2 Ne. 30:3). Nephi believes that they will be convinced by it, “for it [the record] persuadeth them to do *good*, . . . and it speaketh of *Jesus*, and persuadeth them to believe in him” (2 Ne. 33:3–12, emphasis added). Nephi explains that the record will be received by many of his people, “for,” he says, “I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night [intercessory acts of love for his intended audiences], because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith, and I know that he will hear my cry” (2 Ne. 33:3). Nephi knows that his prayers of faith will assure that his written words are received by many souls. He knows that “the words which [he has] written in weakness will be made strong unto them,” “notwithstanding [his] weakness” in writing (2 Ne. 33:4, 11).

As here, the language of the three virtues typically associated with Paul’s eloquent words to the high-minded and contentious Greeks of Corinth prefigures much of what we encounter in Ether 12 and in Moroni 7 and 10, where Moroni considers the day of the Gentiles and the record’s destined, miraculous appearance among them. We now turn our attention from Nephi’s beginnings focused on his record’s production and reception to Moroni’s attempted endings (of which there are several) as representative of a Nephite hermeneutics of production and reception.

formulation, for the reader to understand, he must acquaint himself with the text thoroughly. He must come to possess it. Then, once possessed, the more open and plain passages can be used to illuminate the more obscure ones by means of the reader’s memory of the familiar text. Mastering plain places in scriptures for Augustine is fundamental to interpretive work. Memory is best explored when the reader can read in silence so that she can ponder and make connections. What may be of interest to Latter-day Saints is that thinking is the process by which truths are gathered from their scattered condition among the lands of the memory.

Moroni Ends with Faith, Hope, and Charity

Now that we have seen that faith, hope, and charity are referenced by Nephi in passages that generally discuss oral reception and textual production, we need to examine how the principle of charity more directly applies to the Book of Mormon's reception according to Moroni. Nephi only suggests that the principle of charity has various useful applications to reception; Moroni explains that this application more fully and deliberately connects the principle to the receipt of the Book of Mormon. Since Ether 12 is an obvious example of what I claim, I spend less time with it than with Moroni 7 and 10, less well-known examples. In what follows, I provide a relatively new reading of Ether 12⁴¹ and Moroni 7 and 10, a reading that focuses on these three virtues, especially charity, as exegetical principles not unlike those developed and used by Augustine and others who claimed that sacred texts should be received with an eye single to God as well as with an open mind and generous allowance for faithful interpretive possibilities and even faithful misreadings.

Ether 12–13:12 constitutes one of Moroni's first attempts to conclude his own writings (Moro. 1:1).⁴² In each (or nearly all) of his attempted

41. Rosalynde Welch portrays Moroni's concept of the receipt of scripture as an event or process that depends on the reader's charity. This process she calls "scripturalization." It describes "how . . . an imperfect text . . . [like the Book of Mormon] speak[s] to readers with the power of scripture." Welch explains Moroni's "*reader-centered theology*" this way: "a text becomes scripture in the hands of humble, receptive readers who are moved upon by the Lord or his Spirit." For the promise is that "weak things [will] become strong *unto them*." Moroni's imperfect text requires, according to one scholar Welch cites, "a new type of reading characterized by faith and charity." She terms the process of receiving a human-produced text in a fully realized scriptural way the reader's "transformation [of the text]." This transformation occurs "in the moment of sincere encounter." Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 40, 72–77. Both Welch and I argue that Moroni in Ether 12 represents charity as an exegetical principle. Our projects overlap as far as that detail goes. Again, my own emphasis in this part of my analysis is how we might understand Moroni 7 and 10 as a continuation of the exegetical logic of Ether 12.

42. Grant Hardy suggests that Moroni attempts a conclusion at least three times: Mormon 8–9, Ether 12, and Moroni 10. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 249. This seems hard to disagree with. I would add that we might consider including Moroni 7 on the list, since it and Moroni 10 go together. So what do these chapters treat? Interestingly, three of these four chapters deal with faith, hope, and charity. Moroni, who uses his father's words, apparently believes that these principles will have the greatest impact on the record's ultimate positive reception. He wishes to give his readers the principles for understanding the record.

endings, he touches on faith, hope, and charity.⁴³ What follows Ether 12 is a description of the fall of the Jaredites. Ether 12 represents a reflective sermon on the three virtues woven together with Ether's "great and marvelous" predictions concerning the "house of Joseph," "they who are numbered among the seed of Joseph," and the "inhabitants" of the "Jerusalem of old" (Ether 13:1–13). This reference to the house of Joseph is not out of place because, as Grant Hardy indicates, Moroni consciously interacts with Joseph of Egypt's prophecies recorded in 2 Nephi 3 as he first concludes the Nephite record in Mormon 8 and 9.⁴⁴ In Ether 12's sermon, one that in part resembles the pattern of Hebrews 11, Moroni, the final narrator and editor of the record, radically adapts Ether's comprehensive teachings, applying them to the record for which he has charge. Ether's writings were comprehensive, "for he truly told them [his people] of all things, from the beginning of man" to the end of man, but Moroni was "forbidden" by the Lord to write them all (Ether 13:2, 13). Accordingly, Moroni anticipates the Nephite record's miraculous emergence and cold Gentile reception when he writes:

And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat [unto the Gentiles] concerning these things [concerning the record I prepare and the tendency among you to disbelieve what cannot be empirically verified]; I would show unto the world that faith is [exercised in] things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not [this record's veracity when it comes forth] because ye see not [how it possibly could have been revealed], for ye [Gentiles] receive no witness [of its truthfulness] until after the trial of your faith [see also 2 Ne. 27:7–8, 10–11, 21–22; 3 Ne. 26:8–11; and Ether 4:8–19].

For it was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead; . . . wherefore, it must needs be that some [before his coming to them] had faith in him. . . .

43. What is remarkable—given the disparity between Augustine, Milton, Nephi, and Moroni—is that all of them end their major written works this way. Augustine writes near the end of his intellectual autobiography, "The able reader can grasp your apostle's meaning when he is saying that 'love is diffused in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us' (Rom. 5:5). Teaching us concerning the things of the Spirit, he demonstrates that the way of charity [notice that love as a gift of the Spirit is a means to apprehending what the apostle says about love] is 'supereminent' (1 Cor. 12:1)." Augustine further says that while love lifts us up to divine understanding and intellectual or spiritual encounters, "the weight of cupidity pull[s] us downwards." Cupidity is defined at this point in Augustine's work as the "love of [worldly] anxieties." Augustine, *Confessions*, 276–77; see also Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12.574–605, 707–8. The Nephites also speak of anxiety as a hindrance but also as a result of love (Jacob 1:5; 4:18). Their anxiety was primarily born out of a love for God and their people.

44. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 249–52.

But because of the faith of men [faith of the covenant fathers] he has shown himself unto the world [in time's meridian], and glorified the name of the Father [performing the Atonement], and prepared a way that thereby others [besides those who lived where and when he ministered] might be partakers of the heavenly gift [of eternal life], that they [those who came before him and those who would come after him] might [also] hope for those things [redemption through Christ] which they have not seen [for themselves].

Wherefore, ye [Gentiles] may also have hope, and be partakers of the gift [of eternal life], if ye will but have faith [in Christ when you receive these things in this Nephite record]. . . .

For if there be no faith among the children of men God can do no miracle [he cannot bring forth this record] among them; wherefore [similarly, or for that reason], he showed not himself [to the Lehtes in Bountiful] until after their faith. (Ether 12:6–9, 12)

That Moroni is selectively cataloging all those things that are fulfilled by faith—for “by faith all things are fulfilled” (Ether 12:3)—to primarily make plausible the predicted emergence of the record that he and his fathers have faithfully labored and prayed to bring forth is made clear later in the same chapter when he begins to lean into his concerns about making the record for the learned and empirically minded Gentiles: “And it is by faith [Moroni continues] that my fathers have obtained the promise that these things [the record I prepare according to the prophecies] should come unto their brethren [the Lehtes] through the Gentiles; therefore the Lord hath commanded me [to write these things], yea, even Jesus Christ” (Ether 12:22).

At this point, Moroni sounds like Nephi,⁴⁵ who was commanded to write the Lord's words for future generations, “notwithstanding [his] weakness” (2 Ne. 33:11).⁴⁶ The rest of Ether 12 famously recounts

45. Jacob was also commanded to write the Lord's words, and he was the one who hoped that their writings would not be “contempt[uous]” to their children (Jacob 4:3).

46. One can see an interesting application of Augustinian reading theory upon the death of Monica, Augustine's pious mother. He describes his weeping for her in textual terms. He says that God might interpret his weeping one way, while a “human critic” might put a more “proud interpretation” upon the inordinate event. The reception of the weeping of this man for him had to do with the charity of the viewer or receiver. One person might “find . . . fault” or “mock,” but another, more godly in nature, might weep with him as if in sympathy with him (see note 13). Augustine, *Confessions*, 176. This is the sense in which God receives him who is in error. The open heart is fundamental to understanding others when they are not at their best as communicators. (Job's friends may have understood him better if they had loved him enough to hear his words and not make assumptions about his worthiness based on the externals of the

Moroni's dialogue with the Lord about the Nephite record's anticipated reception (Ether 12:23–37). Moroni expresses his serious reservations (Ether 12:23–25). The Lord comforts and instructs him as to the record's destiny (Ether 12:26–28). One can hear Nephi's voice in this familiar verse that is best understood as a verse treating the general reception of the Book of Mormon: "And if men come unto me [through these writings which have been prepared] I will show unto them their weakness.⁴⁷ I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me [on receipt of this record]; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me [when they receive this record], then will I make weak things [in them and in the imperfect record] become strong [powerful and persuasive] unto them" (Ether 12:27; see also 2 Ne. 3:20–21).

Ether 12 concludes with the Lord explaining that these three virtues, the same that Augustine had co-opted for interpretive purposes, will bring the Gentiles unto Christ, who is the "fountain of all righteousness" (Ether 12:28). They are the principles by which one receives all that the Lord has in store. Moroni emphasizes charity (or being slow to condemn or judge) almost every time he writes a conclusion to the record (Morm. 8:22, 26; Morm. 9:30–31; Ether 4:8–12; Ether 12:28–37; and Moro. 10:20–21). He goes as far as to pray for the Gentile portion of his audience that they might have charity enough to receive his record (Ether 12:36). Moroni understands that unless they have these virtues, "they cannot inherit" the kingdom of God (Ether 12:34). Moroni's farewell testimony precedes his exhortation: "And now I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written [or, in other words, I would commend you, Gentiles (and all ye ends of the earth), to seek this Jesus who speaks in and through this record. For the same Jesus was spoken of in Old Testament prophecy and by the Apostles of the Lamb]" (Ether 12:41). Thus, like Nephi (2 Ne. 33:14), Moroni ends his second attempted conclusion by directing his reader to the *prophets* and *apostles* and the other words that confirm his and his fathers' epic project. From

lamentable situation he in his own suffering faced.) Moroni in Ether 12 is concerned that the Gentiles will in a similar way render a "proud interpretation" of his best efforts to write since his crooked words will not be all they might be because of his weakness in writing.

47. The Book of Mormon identifies many of the Gentiles' sins. Their weaknesses are fully cataloged. Their spiritual weaknesses include pride, envy, blindness, unbelief, immorality, contention, and many other problems. See 3 Nephi 30:2 for an example of one of these catalogs.

Moroni's perspective, the springing forth of the Book of Mormon is unto the fulfillment of the prophets from the beginning. He will return to this theme in the last chapter of the Book of Mormon (Moro. 10:28).

After several years, Moroni yet again attempts to conclude his record (see Moro. 7). However, this time, instead of adapting Ether's writings, he creatively deploys a sermon from his father's ministry (many years before) to ground his written remarks sometime before his death. I infer that Moroni 7 acts as another potential conclusion to the Nephite record because of its location near the end of the record (between Ether 12 and Moroni 10) and the nature of its content. Moroni 7 seems to be yet another attempt to end the record for the following reasons. It initially has much to say about how to judge so that one does not unwittingly condemn that which is "good" and of "Christ" (7:12–19). Indeed, the reader of Moroni 7 is warned in this manner: "Take heed . . . that ye do not judge . . . that which is good and of God to be of the devil" (7:14). Again, Moroni, channeling his father's earlier words, commands his reader: "See that ye do not judge wrongfully" (7:18). These exhortations, as Moroni employs them, appear to refer to receiving the Nephite record, something that Moroni has worried about since at least Mormon 8:17–20. This lesson understandably appears late in the overall record so as to assist the reader in laying hold of the goodness of the Book of Mormon. What follows in the same chapter treats how God has historically revealed his "every word" using "divers ways" (7:24–25). In this broadening context, the reader is invited to consider certain questions. (Here it is hard to know whether Moroni channels his father still or if he temporally steps out from behind his father's original words to ask his own audience many pointed questions that amount to really one question: If Christ revealed himself before his coming to earth by sending "angels to . . . the children of men (and by other means), why would such miracles cease after Christ (7:22, 29–32)? Moroni 7 characteristically concludes with a reference to the Lord's intention to fulfill his covenants (7:32) and an exhortation to repent and believe (7:34). It is here that Moroni (it seems unlikely that Mormon would have spoken these words) concludes the record in the stock way (7:35) before more obviously borrowing from his father to again underscore the principle of charity.

Additionally, in Moroni 7, Moroni appropriates his father's discourse. It is a discourse on faith, hope, and charity that Mormon gave much earlier when his people were more peaceful (see Moro. 7). Significantly, Moroni adapts Mormon's sermon to his own rhetorical purpose, which, as indicated, is to provide doctrines, warnings, and teachings with

exegetical implications.⁴⁸ Going forward, I wish to make it clear that the standard approach to Moroni 7 is to assume that all of it is directly borrowed and that none of it is attributable to Moroni, its abridger/editor. However, I wish to suggest that parts of it may in fact allow Moroni to speak to his latter-day audience more directly than supposed. In what follows, I assume that the material referring to faith, hope, and charity may all be attributed to Mormon (7:1) but that the plying of those virtues to the reception of the Nephite record (and other details not so specified in 7:1) may reasonably be associated with Moroni himself. What is clear is that in Moroni 7, Moroni borrows heavily from his father, except insofar as it might enable him to point his readers to the reception of the record that he and his father have such a stake in bringing to light.

Moroni had referred to the restoration of the Nephite record (and to its latter-day translator) as early as Mormon 8 and 9, where he first ventured to construct a conclusion to the overall record. (Mormon 9 is recognizably reminiscent of Moroni 10, the record's actual ending.) Ether 4 (which corresponds to Mormon 8 and 9), however, concisely gets at similar concepts to those found in Moroni 10's other clear companion, Moroni 7:

And at my [the Lord's] command the heavens are opened and are shut; . . .

And he that believeth not my words [in this record] believeth not my disciples [the record of the twelve Apostles]; and if it so be that I do not speak [through this record], judge ye; for ye shall know that it is I that speaketh, at the last day [see Isa. 52:6].

But he that believeth these things which I have spoken [in this record], him will I visit with the manifestations of my Spirit [power of the Holy Ghost (see Moro. 10:4–5; D&C 5:16)], and he shall know and bear record. For because of my Spirit he shall know that these things are true; for it [this record] persuadeth men to do good [see 2 Ne. 33:4, 10].

And whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do good is of me; for good cometh of none save it be of me. I am the same that leadeth men to all good. (Ether 4:9–12)

This early attempt by Moroni (who records the Lord's words while abridging Ether's writings) to work out these reception ideas, some of which are also intimated in 2 Nephi 33 by Nephi, is more developed in Moroni 7 than anywhere else: "Wherefore, [Moroni says, borrowing from

48. Welch argues that "Moroni's mind is always present in the text" when he abridges Ether, and that is equally true when he writes the book of Moroni. Welch, *Ether*, 20.

Mormon,] all things which are good cometh of God; and that which is evil cometh of the devil; for the devil is an enemy unto God, and fighteth against him continually, and inviteth and enticeth to sin, and to do that which is evil continually. But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God” (Moro. 7:12–13).

Much as Nephi does, in this first part of Moroni 7 the last Nephite record keeper, as mentioned, admonishes his sophisticated modern reader to not “judge wrongfully” the record in the spirit of self-righteousness, contempt, or hostility (Moro. 7:18; see also Morm. 8:17–20; Moro. 7:14). And how can one know if this record—itsself a good thing—is from God? Moroni, drawing on his father, explains, “The Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil [see Ether 4:11]; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge [and, by implication, read for understanding]; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ. . . . But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God . . . is of the devil” (Moro. 7:16–17; see also 2 Ne. 33:4). It is unclear under what circumstance Mormon originally taught these principles of evaluation. However, Moroni appears to use them as a way to guide his reader toward receiving the Nephite record he will hide up for future generations.

Mormon’s Christocentric exegetical formula, given how it intersects with the previous material, is also Moroni’s explanation (an explanation he works out again and again) of how his reader is to confirm the veracity of the record he seals up. The most telling detail in the foregoing is that whatsoever convinces or persuades men to “believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ” (Moro. 7:16). This hermeneutic is also Augustine’s. For him, the end of discovery was, as indicated, the wisdom and truth of Christ. Moreover, from Nephi on, the Book of Mormon’s central invitation is to “believe in Christ” (2 Ne. 26:12–13; 30:2, 7; 33:10–11). Nephi underscores this theme as he concludes. Further, Moroni, using Mormon, admonishes his reader to “search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not,” he promises, “ye certainly will be a child of Christ” (Moro. 7:19). Thus, the full introduction to Moroni 7 (Moro. 7:1–19) ends where the chapter ends: focusing on the “true followers of Christ,” who may in time, if they practice charity, “become the sons [and daughters] of God” (Moro.

7:48). Charity, therefore, is not only an *end* but a *means* to an end and an exegetical principle.

The second half of Moroni 7 (vv. 20–48) is framed by an important question probably first posed by Mormon (although in what follows I will place it in Moroni’s mouth): “And now, my brethren, how is it possible that ye can lay hold upon [understand and internalize] every good thing?” (Moro. 7:20). The lesson for the remainder of the chapter is that faith, hope, and charity are the principles whereby disciples may lay hold of every good thing, not just some good things, but *all good things* offered by Christ, howsoever they come (Moro. 7:24–25). After acknowledging the good that would come in and through Christ by angels appearing to prophets before Christ, Moroni reminds his readers that “there were [before Christ] divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men, which were good; and all things which are good [howsoever manifest] cometh of Christ” (Moro. 7:24).⁴⁹ Moroni then adds this intermediate, inclusive, and summative conclusion: “Wherefore, by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing; and thus it was until the coming of Christ” (Moro. 7:25). At this point, the logic advances with chronological time. Having spoken of faith as a principle of acquisition *before* Christ, Moroni now asserts that even *after* Christ people were “saved by faith” and were thereby enabled to “become the [children] of God” (Moro. 7:26). It becomes clear in the second half of Moroni 7 that Moroni’s larger point is that if God worked in “divers ways” before Christ, operating by angels and prophets and other diverse means, it is reasonable to believe that he has not ceased to be a God of miracles (and spiritual conversion) unto those who believe in Christ through this miraculous record (2 Ne. 27:23; Morm. 8:16, 24–26; 9). In fact, Moroni says, “they who have faith in him will [yet] cleave unto every good thing” (Moro. 7:28). But what exactly is Moroni talking about?

To get at what is specifically involved, I cite the second half of Moroni 7 at some length. Recall that Moroni is nearing the end of his record. As mentioned above, he has attempted to end it on possibly three or four

49. Here Moroni appears to reason with his audience that if God in ancient times used a diversity of means to make known his truths to his children on earth, why is it so strange that he would use a record from the earth again in a latter day to reveal his mind and will? The prophetic logic is hard to refute. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, after all.

other occasions. Each time he has made the attempt, he has commented on the record and its reception in a restoration context. Further, Moroni has just set his discussion in a particular Nephite context: “And as surely as Christ liveth he spake these words unto our fathers, saying: Whatsoever thing ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is good, in faith believing that ye shall receive, behold, it shall be done unto you” (Moro. 7:26). And what good and miraculous thing is it that his fathers from the earliest of times desired? To a person, they desired the coming forth of their record unto a later generation (see Enos 1:15–18). Here are the most relevant verses to suggest what the prophet Moroni is apparently saying when he adapts his father’s much earlier sermon:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, have miracles ceased [like the miracle of a record suddenly springing forth from the earth] because Christ hath ascended into heaven? . . .

For he hath answered the ends of the law [Christ performed the infinite Atonement in fulfillment of the law of Moses and ascended into heaven]. . . .

And because he hath done this, . . . have miracles ceased? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men [this seems to generally foreshadow the latter-day Restoration through angelic ministration].

For behold, they are subject unto him [Christ (Moro. 7:24)], to minister according to the word of his command, showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness [this is suggestive of the prophet of the Restoration and his associates].

And the office of their [angels’] ministry is to call [certain] men unto repentance, and to fulfill and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, . . . to prepare the way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him [again, this is suggestive of the experience of the prophet of the Restoration and his associates, particularly as it relates to bringing forth the record Moroni concludes].

And by so doing [by making available the word of God and by bearing witness of it], the Lord God prepareth a way that the residue of men [all the remainder of God’s children] may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts, according to the power thereof [spiritual conversion]; and after this manner bringeth to pass the Father [in the last days], the covenants which he hath made unto the children of men. (Moro. 7:27–32; see also Ether 12:8–9, 22)

This passage is focused on the miracle of the “word of Christ” coming to the “chosen vessels of the Lord” for the world’s benefit in a day

subsequent to the fulfillment of the law of Moses, and what follows is especially characteristic of the emergence of the Book of Mormon and the promise of spiritual “power” to those who would honestly consider it (Moro. 7:31–32). Indeed, we are told in Moroni 10:24 that Moroni, like Nephi (2 Ne. 33:10), prophesies of these things going “unto all the ends of the earth.” “God will show unto you [ye nations of the earth who receive this Nephite record], with power and great glory at the last day, that they [our words in this record] are true, and if they are true, has the day of miracles ceased?” (Moro. 7:35). Anyone acquainted with the closing speeches of the record’s writers knows that this penultimate word from Moroni is typical of the farewell testimony each prophetic narrator bears as he finishes his portion of the record.⁵⁰ That is why I suggest that Moroni’s own words may interfuse his use of his father’s original sermon.

However, Moroni appears to resume using his father’s words around Moroni 7:39 (“I judge better things of you” is Mormon’s assessment of his original audience), yet they are no longer meant for his contemporaries but for those he addresses. Moroni 7 closes with an explanation of hope (briefly) and charity. Charity by this point has taken on an exegetical patina in connection with receiving the promised sacred record. In Moroni 7:44, 47, the writer appears to refer to Moroni 7:31–32 (and Ether 12:34–35) when he suggests that anyone who has partaken of the “power of the Holy Ghost” while reading the miraculous record must needs have enjoyed already the gift of charity, which is the “pure love of Christ.” Although the record may be variously understood and taught in many ways for faithful purposes, it has no greater purpose and meaning than convincing its reader to believe in Christ, love him, and “come unto [him];” thereby entering the covenant he makes anew with the inhabitants of the earth (Moro. 7:32–34). If readers have not charity, Moroni intimates, they will be in danger of thinking nothing of the record, though it is of “great worth” unto the children of men. They will, in effect, “trample

50. For example, at the end of his record, Nephi writes, “And if they [Nephi’s words on the small plates] are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness” (2 Ne. 33:11). Jacob’s words are similar: “Know ye not that if ye will do these things [reject these words that have come forth according to the written and spoken prophecies], that the power of the redemption and the resurrection, which is in Christ, will bring you to stand with shame and awful guilt before the bar of God? . . . Finally, I bid you farewell, until I shall meet you before the pleasing bar of God” (Jacob 6:9, 13).

[it] under their feet” or “set [it] at naught,” as Nephi said (1 Ne. 19:6–7). If so, they, whether hostile or just neglectful and light-minded, will sadly have missed the mark for one of two reasons: (1) the record’s nearly unbelievable, miraculous story of origin (an authentic *miracle* out of the ground in a day of emerging science and rationalism) or (2) the record’s contradictions, borrowings, grammatical imperfections, anachronisms, and redundant oddness among other objectionable characteristics.

According to Moroni’s cumulative logic, to best access the record’s covenant-centered, Christological message, one must believe in Christ, hope in Christ’s Atonement and the power of his Resurrection (major themes of the record), and be “meek, and lowly of heart” (Moro. 7:43).⁵¹ These virtues, virtues not far from Augustine’s own spiritual priorities, will unleash the power of the record if one also has charity for its preparers. Think of these familiar words normally associated with Paul’s, Augustine’s, and Moroni’s descriptions of charity in exegetical terms as they may relate to receiving the strange, imperfect, and seemingly anachronistic text of the Book of Mormon in a day that Nephi and Moroni generally describe as brimming with rationalistic high-mindedness and Gentile pride, opposition, disbelief, contemptuous scorn, and wickedness. In the following passage, directed in love to the modern reader, Moroni describes charity (these certainly were Mormon’s words before his son quoted them in their new rhetorical context). This charity may be understood as descriptive of the book’s ideal reader:

And charity . . . is not puffed up [it is meek and lowly of heart], . . . is not easily provoked [to rage and anger (2 Ne. 28:20, 28)], thinketh no evil [is not rash in judgment and does not condemn], and . . . rejoiceth in the truth [of God], beareth all things [including imperfections, anachronisms, oddities, simplicity, and signs of human weaknesses, willingly],

51. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 38–40. Since in Augustine’s theory of hermeneutics, pride is that which hinders one from understanding wisdom, he naturally emphasizes “meekness of piety” as a means to comprehension. As does Moroni in Moro. 7, Augustine mingles his discussion of love and seeing God clearly with other principles such as hope and meekness. Indeed, Augustine’s theory of interpretation and understanding combines three familiar passages of scripture that contain Christian attributes and qualities. He weaves together into a hermeneutics of intellectual ascension the writer of Proverbs (“fear” culminates in “knowledge,” Prov. 1:7), Peter (“faith” culminates in “charity” and “knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ,” 2 Pet. 1:5–8), Paul (“faith” culminates in “charity,” 1 Cor. 13), and Matthew’s Jesus (“meek[ness]” and “hunger and thirst” culminate in the cleansing of the eye of the “heart” that we might see, Matt. 5:5–8). See Moro. 7:48.

believeth all things [every good thing, wheresoever it comes from and howsoever it manifests], hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing [this Christocentric record will profit you nothing (Moro. 7:6, 9)], for charity [as a way or means to Christ] never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity [earlier, in Moroni 7:28, the formulation was “they who have faith in him will cleave unto every good thing”]. . . .

Wherefore, my beloved brethren [as I have said repeatedly so far in attempting to close this record], pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love [and thereby come to know that this record is true], which [love] he hath bestowed [and will yet bestow] upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ [not just Church members]; that ye [also] may become [through charity and the receipt of saving ordinances such as baptism (Moro. 7:33–34)] the sons [and daughters] of God; . . . that we [you and I and as many as will come unto Christ and believe in him through this record] may be purified even as he is pure. Amen. (Moro. 7:45–48)

Augustine had Paul’s version of this same passage in mind as he contemplated reading the Bible in profitable ways. For him, reading for the wisdom of Christ meant that one was maturing from child to man or woman in Christ. All profitable readings were to point his fellow believers to Christ and his law of love. They were to edify believers in faith and truth. As indicated, I do not wish to push the comparisons too far, since Augustine reads allegorically and Latter-day Saints tend to read the scriptures more literally. In contrast to Latter-day Saints, Augustine and those before and after him sought the mystical meanings inside scripture (and secular literature) to find Christ in less-than-obvious places. All scripture points us to Christ. Latter-day Saint exegetical practices are more literal than Augustine’s creative negotiations of scripture. We delight in plainness, but plainness is relative. Where there is no plainness, we defer to the passage of time and the will of the Lord to make the text more fully understood. However, like Augustine, and many before and after him, we are also seekers. We are also taught to ask, seek, and knock.⁵² For Augustine, praying, reading, and contemplating carefully and intensely was, in essence, to ask, seek, and knock. The promise was sure that all those who sought knowledge would come to an understanding that would magnify Christ and his laws. To that degree, Nephi and Moroni are in some agreement with Augustine, but not much further than that.

52. Augustine, *Confessions*, 305.

Conclusion

As does Augustine's *Confessions* (304–5), 2 Nephi 32:4 and Mormon 9:21–28 end with an exhortation to the reader to ask, seek, and knock. Moroni picks up there too (Moro. 10:3–4). His exhortation is famous and can be summarized by Latter-day Saints familiar with the Book of Mormon. He provides an exhortation and promise; a passage on the power and good gifts of God, especially the gifts of faith, hope, and charity (Moro. 10:6–23); and a complex closing that homes in on the record's role in fulfilling the prophets and covenant by inviting all to “come unto Christ” and “love God with all your might, mind, and strength” (Moro. 10:28–32). Along with 2 Nephi 33 and Moroni 7, Moroni 10 falls into the category of metacommentary (as discussed at the beginning of this article). Moroni, in the closing chapter of the Book of Mormon, focuses his readers' attention squarely on the record itself: “And wo unto them who shall do these things away [reject these things] and die,” and again, “I declare these things [the coming forth of this record] unto the fulfilling of the prophecies” as the voice of Christ to this generation: for he (Moroni) affirms, “[these things] shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God” (Moro. 10:26–28). Anticipating the objections to the record's sudden emergence in a future rationalistic generation, Moroni confirms again that “nothing that is good denieth the Christ,” and that “every good gift cometh of Christ,” including this one (Moro. 10:6, 18). I believe Moroni alludes again to Joseph Smith and his associates in a Restoration context (Moro. 10:24–26). His final exhortations include this familiar invitation: “And again [and yet again] I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift,” especially this miraculous record (Moro. 10:30; see also 2 Ne. 27:20–26; Ether 12:7–22; Moro. 7:27–38).⁵³

In Moroni's final promise, God's mercy is to be pondered as much as or more than the record itself. The Nephite record is yet another

53. In their writings, as indicated, both Nephi and Moroni refer to the Nephite record's emergence as a miracle brought forth by the power of God. However, that does not mean that the Nephite text is not also described elsewhere in scripture as weak and simple (see 2 Ne. 3:18–21). Both descriptions of the sacred text are true. Thus the record's words can be made strong unto the humble (see 2 Ne. 33:4; Ether 12:27). The Nephite record comes forth as an imperfect document, but it is also a divine miracle that comes as a result of the faith, prayers, and efforts of many righteous and loving people. The power of the record descends upon the reader of it when the faith and love of the producers of the record encounter the faith and love of the recipients of it.

merciful manifestation of God's providence, a manifestation that, if pondered in context with all sacred history, will prepare a person to pray to the Father for an answer to the question, "Is this record yet another true manifestation of the mercy that God has shown in all ages of the world?" If God is the same and has been a merciful God in all ages, then even this miracle—this marvelous work and wonder—is just another gift of grace in the march of history, a final stretching out of his hand as before, but this time in the closing moments of salvation history. Finally, becoming a charitable reader of sacred texts does not mean sweeping a multitude of seeming errors and potential problems under the rug. It means seeing multiplicity in supposed errors or issues, a multiplicity anticipated by Providence. It means that, though readers are to judge the text—"judge ye" (2 Ne. 33:11; Ether 4:10; 5:6; Moro. 7:18; see also Morm. 8:17–22 and 3 Ne. 14:2)—they are to do so with a generous and sympathetic spirit and with intellectual meekness and charity or love of God and of all men, including those who have labored to bring it forth. This empathetic love will allow serious readers to entertain more than one honest interpretation, so long as they edify and more or less conform to doctrine that is known and accepted, or at least plausible. Some readings will be stronger; others weaker; but all will need adjustment or further revision due to our propensity to err or misread. As I have noted, the Book of Mormon itself cautions its interlockers about rushing to judgment, lest they, like Portia's inadequate suitors in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, lose their soul's reward. The stakes are high.

What are the consequences of fussing too much about the imperfections, tangential issues, awkwardness, or anachronisms of the Nephite text, or of just honestly misreading it? Though encyclopedic like other epics, the Nephite record is not primarily a montage of intellectual and cultural inroads. It is not primarily a way to understand geography or military history, though those readings are profitable to a degree if one has a specific question or interest. The text is primarily a convincing witness of its central figure, Jesus Christ, and constitutes the renewal of the everlasting covenant according to the prophets and promises. This witness of Christ and the new covenant is what the Book of Mormon fundamentally is. Any commendable reading of the record—and there are as many of those as there are fish in the waters—will inspire faith, hope, and charity, all of which center in Christ and his gospel. Reading with charity will enable what is weak in the record's style, delivery, and manner to become strong and life changing unto the loving reader. The most charitable will perhaps provide the strongest readings. Approaching the

text with a pure love of Christ and his gospel covenants will shed, I suppose, the most light on it. It will assure that the faith, effort, and love that went into the composing of the text have an equally ready listener and receiver of its abrupt turns, logical nuances, and less-than-plain passages. To read with charity is to search the text so sincerely, so generously, and so regularly that one comprehends its possibilities and, understanding them, is “converted to the Lord” (Alma 23:6). Such a reading attunes the reader’s heart to the wisdom of Christ, the very voice of Christ, which, I take it, is the ultimate goal of faithful exegesis.

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