By What (Whose) Standards Shall We Judge the Text? A Closer Look at Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon

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By What (Whose) Standards Shall We Judge the Text?
A Closer Look at Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon

Reviewed by Robert L. Millet

Melodie Moench Charles, in her article on Book of Mormon Christology, sets forth a "new" approach to the text of the Book of Mormon. In fact, there is nothing new about her approach or her conclusions at all, as is the case with each of the articles in Metcalfe's volume. These are basically old arguments in a new package. In this review I will consider a selection of Charles's arguments and respond to each of them.

I

Perhaps it would be well to start with the matter of what hermeneutical key we will utilize to unlock the text of the Book of Mormon. Charles insists that we must let the Book of Mormon text speak for itself (p. 100) and not superimpose our own twentieth-century belief system upon an ancient record. I know this concept is quite fashionable these days, that it is politically incorrect for a reader to do other than "let the text speak for itself." To me, the idea is absolutely meaningless. There is no such thing as letting a text speak for itself. A text means only what we bring to it; that is to say, what we bring to a text—our background, our breadth or depth, our point of view, etc.—greatly affects what the text says. Some things are probably figurative, others literal. How do we allow them to speak for themselves? It is often the case that an isolated principle or doctrine makes sense only when compared to, contrasted with, or explained by another passage. Though an inspired scriptural passage may convey many things to many different persons with varying concerns or questions in life, the original writer intended something by his words. Something specific. A group of
Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, and Roman Catholics might sit down at a table and ponder the meaning of a single scriptural passage, all the while seeking to let the text speak for itself. I do not expect that there would be a consensus on what the passage intends to convey, even though they all sought to put away their own theological predilections. Only a person with a blank slate for a mind could read a text and then provide an unbiased, unaffected interpretation. And so for me the issue is not whether we read things into a text or superimpose a predetermined meaning, but rather what things are read into a text, which doctrinal guides are used in our quest to understand what the ancients understood. Thirteen years ago Melodie Charles set forth her interpretive key: she expressed her views in an article entitled "The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament." She there expressed the view that Mormons tend to read the Old Testament with modern theological eyes, seek to read Mormonism and all that appertains to it into the Old Testament. It is that perspective that she now superimposes on her reading of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon.

That's certainly one approach. Another approach is simply to recognize that the Restoration consisted of a major revelation to Joseph the Seer concerning "things which are past" (Mosiah 8:17). It isn't necessary to move into the twentieth century to assign blame for such an approach to scripture. Let's put it right smack where it ought to be—in the lap of Joseph Smith the Prophet. Nothing is more central to his early teachings than Christ's eternal gospel—the singularly Latter-day Saint perspective that Christian prophets have declared Christian doctrine and administered Christian ordinances since the dawn of time. The Prophet taught repeatedly that "the gospel has always been the same; the ordinances to fulfill its requirements, the same, and the officers to officiate, the same." This isn't something Elders Talmage, McConkie, or Hinckley (referred to in this article) deduced; rather, the idea is a hallmark of Mormonism, one of the most important keys to unlocking scripture that God has delivered to a wandering world. If it is not permissible to read modern revelation into the ancient, to make doctrinal inferences about personalities and events in antiquity as a result of what we know in the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith Translation of the

2 TPJS, 264; see also 59–60, 168, 308.
Bible, the Doctrine and Covenants, the book of Abraham, as well as other uncanonized but noteworthy statements of Joseph Smith and his successors—if we cannot draw upon such data, then we have little or nothing to offer the world in regard to religious understanding. There need not have been a Restoration if in fact the Bible is sufficient in itself, needing no interpretation, clarification, additions, or correction, requiring only that its readers let the text speak for itself.

II

Melodie Charles contends that the Book of Mormon teachers and writers had a different view of Christ than we do in the latter-day Church. For example, she suggests that Abinadi presented a different view of God, inasmuch as his knowledge of Christ was incomplete (p. 81). Further, she quotes Moroni’s Title Page for support of her view that there are doctrinal “faults” in the text of the Book of Mormon (p. 82). Well, that’s one approach. We could conclude that the Nephite ancients just didn’t know as much about God and Christ as we do in this enlightened age. If we “let the text speak for itself”—which in this case means, I presume, reading Mosiah 15:1–4 just as it now stands with no clarifying and interpreting commentary—then we must, Charles avers, recognize the obvious, that Abinadi was deficient in his grasp of the Messiah, who, by the way, was the central figure in Abinadi’s preaching.

Moroni had no intention whatsoever of implying on the Title Page that the Nephite-Jaredite record is filled with theological flaws. In fact, when Moroni was discussing this in the text itself, he stated: “And if there be faults they be the faults of man. But behold,” he added in about A.D. 400, with practically the entire record before him, “we know no fault; nevertheless God knoweth all things; therefore, he that condemneth, let him be aware lest he shall be in danger of hell fire” (Mormon 8:17).

On the other hand, we could take the Prophet Joseph Smith’s word for it that the knowledge of God, Christ, and the plan of salvation was had from the beginning. In doing so we would assume that Abinadi’s message is not simplistic and trinitarian at all, but instead one of the deepest and most profound doctrinal pronouncements in all our literature, one requiring much pondering, reflection, and scriptural comparison. It is a correct statement of the Incarnation, of the condescension of
the Great God, a brief but far-reaching glimpse into how spirit and flesh, Father and Son, God and man— are blended wonderfully in one being, Jesus Christ. This statement by Abinadi has very little to do with the Godhead— specifically with Elohim and Jehovah. It has very much to do with the person and powers of Christ. It is a statement of how his divinity is melded with his humanity to make redemption of the human family available.

If letting the text speak for itself means no more than interpreting a passage according to a brief, superficial glance, acquiring a flash of insight as to the meaning— reading and interpreting the passage in an isolated context, independent of all other scripture or prophetic commentary— then I confess that there are very few doctrinal matters in all the standard works that have much to say to me. The greatest commentary on scripture is scripture. Joseph Smith meant what he said when he observed that "the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out." I presume that the nature of God and the ministry of his Only Begotten would fall into the category of "the things of God."

Having stated that "People in the Book of Mormon taught that during his earthly mission in Palestine Jesus would have a mortal body subject to temptation, pain, hunger, thirst, fatigue, sorrow, grief, suffering, and death," Charles then makes the following peculiar remark: "However, Book of Mormon people did not necessarily believe that this meant he actually was mortal during his ministry on earth" (p. 84). We learn, therefore, that the Book of Mormon people taught that Christ would be mortal. And yet they did not necessarily believe he was mortal! That Christ would minister in "great glory," that he would "come down with power," and that he was considered to be God (see scriptural references on pp. 84–85) in no way detract from the reality that Jesus would come to earth and take a "tabernacle of clay" (Mosiah 3:5), that he would be mortal. In order for one to die, he has to be mortal! In fact, and here is the irony of Charles's position— Abinadi's sermon in Mosiah 15:1–4 is simply a commentary on Mosiah 14 or Isaiah 53, how it was that the great Jehovah would leave his throne divine and become the suffering servant, subject to the throes and pulls of mortality.

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3 Ibid., 137.
Charles writes: "Book of Mormon people asserted that the Father and Christ (and the Holy Ghost) were one God" (p. 96). Further, "The Book of Mormon often makes no distinction between Christ and God the Father. . . . The Book of Mormon melds together the identity and function of Christ and God. Because Book of Mormon authors saw Christ and his Father as one God who manifested himself in different ways, it made no difference whether they called their God the Father of the Son" (pp. 98–99). Well, that's one approach. We can thus conclude, if we do accept the historicity of the text and the messages therein, that the Book of Mormon prophet-writers were lacking in understanding and thus yielded to the rule of parsimony and devised one grand God. Or, if we have trouble accepting the fact that these passages are indeed ancient, we might conclude, as some have, that Joseph Smith's own nineteenth-century trinitarian leanings are thus reflected in the God of the Book of Mormon.

There is another way. It is more complex and demands more mental effort. The Book of Mormon is a Christ-centered book. God the Eternal Father, the being Latter-day Saints know as Elohim or our Father in Heaven, was known to the Nephites (1 Nephi 10:4; Mosiah 2:34), prayed to (2 Nephi 32:9; 3 Nephi 18:19–20; Mormon 9:27), and worshiped in the name of the Son (2 Nephi 25:16; Jacob 4:4–5). It is hard to imagine when Nephi recorded that he heard the voice of the Father and then the voice of the Son and then the voice of the Father again (2 Nephi 31:11–12, 14–15) that he was trying to convey anything other than that the two Gods were separate and distinct. Just because Jesus is the main character of the story, we need not leap to interpretive extremes and conclude that the Nephites knew no God above Christ.

And yet, Jesus Christ takes center stage in the Book of Mormon. The book has been written to testify, not only of his Messiahship, but that he is the Eternal God (Title Page; 2 Nephi 26:12). Though there is a Being who is the Father of the Savior, it is Christ himself who is generally referred to as God in the Book of Mormon. Though it is true that Christ receives power from his Father (Mosiah 15:2–3; Helaman 5:10–11; Mormon 7:5), and that Christ's atonement reconciles us to the Father (2 Nephi 25:23; Alma 12:33–34; Moroni 7:22, 26–27), yet it is Christ who is God in the Book of Mormon.
Charles’s effort to focus attention on the number of times the Godhead is referred to in the singular (“the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, which is one God”—2 Nephi 31:21, emphasis added; see also Alma 11:44; Mormon 7:7) as an evidence of a “common trinitarian formula” (pp. 96–97) is misleading. It is true that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one in mind and power and glory. Indeed, they are infinitely more one than they are separate; they just happen to be separate personages. But the Book of Mormon is a Christ-centered volume, one bent on testifying of the majesty and the Godhood of Christ. Paul explained that “it pleased the Father that in [Christ] should all fulness dwell,” and that “in [Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 1:19; 2:9; emphasis added). That is to say, the members of the Godhead are one; the mind and power and glory of the Father and the Holy Ghost dwell in Christ, so that it is perfectly appropriate to say that the Master’s decisions, his judgments, his words are the decisions, judgments, and words of all members of the Godhead. And so it is that in some places in scripture the three members of the Godhead are referred to as “one God.” Alma 11:44 is an interesting case in point. Here Amulek speaks of the resurrection and judgment. We already know from other places in the Book of Mormon that Christ, the Holy One of Israel, is the judge (1 Nephi 22:21; 2 Nephi 9:15, 41; Mosiah 3:18; 3 Nephi 27:16). Amulek explains that men and women “shall be brought and be arraigned before the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God, to be judged according to their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil.” To say this another way, all men and women shall be arraigned before Christ, who shall render the judgment of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Similarly, the Risen Lord gave instructions to the Nephites to baptize in his name: “Whoso repenteth of his sins through your words, and desireth to be baptized in my name, on this wise shall ye baptize them—Behold, ye shall go down and stand in the water, and in my name shall ye baptize them.” And now note the words they were to speak as they performed the ordinance in Christ’s name: “Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen” (3 Nephi 11:23, 25). That is, to baptize in the name of Christ was to baptize in the name of the Godhead—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy...
Ghost. In writing of the Light of Christ, Parley P. Pratt observed: "Its inspiration constitutes instinct in animal life, reason in man, vision in the Prophets, and is continually flowing from the Godhead throughout all his creations."4

IV

Melodie Charles provides a chart which allows a comparison between a number of passages in the 1830 and 1837 editions of the Book of Mormon. She seeks to point up those times where Joseph Smith in the second edition (1837) sought to "remove the overlap and blending of the roles of God the Father, the God of humankind, and his Son, Jesus Christ, who atoned for humankind's sins" (p. 107). If in fact the Prophet did seek to make such changes in the second edition for the reason stated by Charles, she and her conclusions are the best example I can think of for doing so! The very fact that people would become confused on the matter would be reason enough to alter the text slightly without doing violence to the overriding principle that Jesus Christ is both God and Son of God.

For that matter, what Charles did not bother to point out was how the phrase "Son of God" is found in other places in 1 Nephi, as recorded in the first edition, passages unchanged by the Prophet. In chapter ten Nephi explained that his father Lehi had received power from God because of his "faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come" (1830 ed., p. 23, emphasis added; cf. 1 Nephi 10:17). "Blessed art thou Nephi," the Spirit later exulted, "because thou believest in the Son of the Most High God." The Spirit continued: "After thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of Heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after that ye have witnessed him, ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God" (1830 ed., p. 24, emphasis added; cf. 1 Nephi 11:6, 7). Also note: "And after that he had said these words, he said unto me, look! And I looked, and I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him" (1830 ed., p. 25, emphasis added; cf. 1 Nephi

The author appears to be operating under what I consider to be a flawed historical and theological assumption. She accepts fully (as many seem to do) that Joseph Smith’s pre-1835 teachings differ markedly from his teachings toward the end of his ministry. She offers two illustrations: Joseph Smith’s reference to the appearance of one personage only—“the Lord”—in his 1832 account of the First Vision, and the reference to only two personages in the Godhead in the Lectures on Faith. A careful reading of the 1832 account of the First Vision leads me to the conclusion that the thrust of this early account was not who appeared but rather the Lord’s message to him. In addition, it is worth noting that in his 1835 account one Personage appeared and then another followed. Though spoken many years after the First Vision, it is interesting to note the following statement from Elder John Taylor: “The Lord appeared unto Joseph Smith, both the Father and the Son.”

As to the nature of the Godhead in the Lectures on Faith, one needs only read a bit more carefully. Lecture 5 begins with the announcement that “There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing, and supreme power over all things. . . . They are the Father and the Son.” The Father and the Son are indeed the central members of the heavenly hierarchy, but as the lecture later points out, the Holy Spirit is also a vital part of this eternal presidency. Soon thereafter we read of Christ possessing “the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit, that bears record of the Father and the Son, and these three are one; or, in other words, these three constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things; by whom all things were created and made, and these three constitute the Godhead, and are one.”

It is true, as Charles and others have pointed out, that Lecture 5 does not refer to the Holy Spirit as a personage. I believe this is because the lecture sought to convey the fact that

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6 JD 21:65 (emphasis added).
7 Lectures on Faith 5:2 (emphasis added).
the two supreme members of the Godhead, the Father and the Son, are corporeal personages. One of the earliest references to the personage status of the Holy Spirit in the documents now available to us is from a sermon delivered by Joseph Smith in March of 1841. Other statements to this effect followed in April and June of 1843. The difficulty here is heightened by the fact that there is no effort in the lecture to distinguish between what we would call the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost. The lecture simply speaks of the powers or function (rather than the personage) of the Holy Spirit as the “mind of God,” the means by which the Father and Son are one in thought. “It is true,” stated President Charles W. Penrose, “that the Holy Spirit conveys the mind of God; that is, I am speaking now of this universal spirit which is the life and the light of all things, which is in and through and round about all things, and God says he made the world by the power of that spirit. That is his agent; but the personage, the Comforter, which Jesus Christ said he would send when he went away, that was a personage of the Trinity.”

Elder Bruce R. McConkie likewise wrote that the Savior “possesses the same mind with the Father, knowing and believing and speaking and doing as though he were the Father. This mind is theirs by the power of the Holy Ghost. That is, the Holy Ghost, who is a personage of spirit (a spirit man!), using the light of Christ, can give the same mind to all men, whether mortal or immortal.”

Though it is true that much of what we know as Latter-day Saints concerning the plan of salvation came in gradual, line-upon-line fashion, we need not surrender to a purely Hegelian or linear view of history, to the traditional idea that everything after 1835 represents a clearer, more well-defined presentation of a given principle or doctrine. The fact is, some things were known by Joseph Smith clearly in the early days of the Restoration. The

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8 I have dealt with this in detail in “The Supreme Power Over All Things,” in Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective (Provo: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1990), 221–40.
9 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comp., The Words of Joseph Smith (Provo: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1980), 64.
10 Ibid., 173, 214.
11 Conference Report, April 1921, 16.
12 Bruce R. McConkie, A New Witness for the Articles of Faith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 75.
Prophet knew of the coming of Elijah to reveal the sealing authority as early as 1823 (D&C 2). He knew of the principles of eternal and plural marriage as early as 1831, and seems to have been teaching selected Saints, such as W. W. Phelps, of the same as early as 1835. He understood from the Vision (D&C 76), given in February of 1832, that men and women could eventually become as God is, a doctrine about which he would discourse at great length at Nauvoo. And so on. It is not always the case that deeper and more profound ideas come later in time. Some things are known very early.

The fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith explained in 1844 that he had always taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three separate and distinct personages\(^\text{13}\) appears to be of no moment to Charles. In fact, she states: "While some take this as a statement of fact—that Smith never taught any doctrine than this—Mormon history does not support Smith's claim about what he taught earlier." Further, "Smith's 1844 statement does not accurately characterize his earlier teachings, but it is a good statement of what he believed and taught in 1844" (p. 104). In short, the Prophet lied. Or he didn't know the difference. I really think there's a better way to do things without assuming that the "choice seer" misrepresented the truth. How about the radical idea that Joseph Smith told the truth? What if, O wonder of wonders and marvel of marvels, we started from a presumption of his honesty and let that undergird our thinking and thus impact our conclusions regarding the meaning of his teachings? For that matter, it is not sufficient for Charles to point up Joseph Smith's prevarications. She goes on to state that such modern Church leaders as Elders James E. Talmage, Gordon B. Hinckley, and Bruce R. McConkie "misunderstand, misinterpret, and ignore the context of the scriptural texts they cite as support" (p. 110). I suppose we can only hope that the Lord will see fit to raise up people to set us straight, to put things in place, to provide the correct understanding and interpretation for what would surely otherwise remain mysterious to us.

\(^{13}\) TPJS, 370.
VI

Wilford Woodruff observed,

Brother Joseph used a great many methods of testing the integrity of men, and he taught a great many things which, in consequence of tradition, required prayer, faith, and a testimony from the Lord, before they could be believed by many of the Saints. His mind was opened by the visions of the Almighty, and the Lord taught him many things by vision and revelation that were never taught publicly in his days; for the people could not bear the flood of intelligence which God poured into his mind.¹⁴

We simply are unable to gauge how much the Prophet knew—how much God had revealed to him personally—using only the basis of what the Saints knew or reported. It would be a serious historical error to suppose because a particular member of the Church did not understand this or that specific theological point that Joseph the Prophet did not understand or that the doctrine had not been clearly set forth by the Prophet in some circles. Nor must we draw conclusions about what was known on the basis of what was written down, what historical documents are now available.

So it is in regard to the teachings of the Book of Mormon. How can we be so audacious as to suggest that we know what the Nephites did or did not understand, when in fact the writers indicated again and again that they were recording but "a hundredth part" of that which transpired or what God had indeed made known? (See Words of Mormon 1:5; 3 Nephi 5:8; Ether 15:33.) One wonders how many times such prophetic personalities as Nephi and Jacob and Abinadi and Alma sought to teach what they knew, only to have the Spirit "stop their utterance" (2 Nephi 32:7). It would seem to me that the pattern for this is found in Mormon's statement concerning the Savior's teachings to the Nephites: "And now there cannot be written in this book even a hundredth part of the things which Jesus did truly teach unto the people; but behold the plates of Nephi"—meaning here the large plates, the unabridged portion of the record—"do con-

¹⁴ JD 5:83–84.
tain the more part of the things which he taught the people. And these things have I written, which are a lesser part of the things which he taught the people.” It was not intended that our present Book of Mormon contain a record of all the Nephites knew and understood. The “lesser portion” is what is written, with the promise that “if it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them” (3 Nephi 26:6–9).

VII

I end on the same note with which I began—namely that Melodie Moench Charles has not really allowed the text of the Book of Mormon to speak for itself (not that it really can anyway), but rather has imposed her own view of scripture upon it. She states near the end of her article: “The use of the divine names Jehovah and Elohim in the Old Testament never supports the twentieth-century Mormon doctrine that Elohim is the Father of Jehovah, that Jehovah, not Elohim, is the God of the Old Testament, or that Jehovah is Jesus Christ” (p. 109). More than any other place in this article, this sentence capsulizes Charles’s orientation and provides the springboard for my critique of “Book of Mormon Christology.” As far as I am concerned, Charles is exactly backwards in her evaluation. She has chosen to evaluate Mormonism, Mormon doctrine, and the Book of Mormon from the standpoint of the Bible or a few tricks of the trade currently in vogue in biblical scholarship.

It seems that, from her perspective, if an idea is in the Bible, then it is permissible to have a Latter-day Saint teaching that mirrors or repeats it. If, on the other hand, a teaching in Latter-day Saint scripture is not to be found in the Bible, it is suspect. The fact is, we do not depend on the Bible or on traditional biblical interpretations for our theology. We do not know that the Book of Mormon is true or accurate from what we might find in the Bible. It is the other way around: the Book of Mormon has been given to prove the essential truthfulness of the Bible (D&C 20:11; see also 1 Nephi 13:39–40; Mormon 7:9). Our faith as well as our approaches to the study of the Bible or the Book of Mormon must not be held hostage by the latest trends and fads in biblical scholarship. Our testimony of historical events or of doctrinal matters must not be at the mercy of what we think we know and can read in sources external to the Book of Mormon.
or things beyond the pale of revealed truth. In short, the Bible is not, and was never intended to be, our sole guide, our template, our standard against which we measure what we teach or believe.

Whether Joseph Smith ever taught something directly that we now believe and accept—such as, that Jehovah was Jesus Christ (pp. 109–10; by the way, what do we make of D&C 110:3?)—is immaterial; his successors have, and it is that continual flow of revelation, not just the flood of truth that came from the first prophet, that makes of this Church a living and true and vital work. It matters precious little whether Lowell Bennion (p. 109) or Steven Epperson (pp. 110–11) or Melodie Charles feel otherwise; ultimately, doctrinal truth comes not through the explorations of scholars, but through the revelations of God to apostles and prophets. And if such a position be labeled narrow, parochial, or anti-intellectual, then so be it. I cast my lot with the prophets.