The Book of Mormon and Dialogic Revelation

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This article has been adapted from the author’s book *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*. The author discusses three common understandings of the term *revelation*: (1) revelation as doctrine, (2) revelation as history, and (3) revelation as inner experience. He suggests that the Book of Mormon introduces a fourth type: revelation as dialogue. This form of revelation allows individuals to have direct contact with God, rather than only through the scriptures, and can be applied to our lives just as it was to the lives of those living in Book of Mormon times.
Revelation in the fully personal sense characteristic of personal agents has been abandoned. —theologian William J. Abraham

The historical cases that one encounters in the Book of Mormon of God communicating directly with humans are striking in at least two respects.

In the first place, Christian divines, as William Abraham observes above, have increasingly defined revelation in ways that utterly conflict with the picture we get from the Nephite record, according to which God may choose to communicate information to his individual children in highly particularized ways and circumstances. Second, in spite of certain important parallels, the view of revelation laid out in the Book of Mormon differs markedly even from the kind of revelation depicted throughout the Old Testament. This article elaborates these two points in order to argue that the Book of Mormon presents us with a significantly new formulation of the concept of revelation that might properly be termed revelation as dialogue—or dialogic revelation.

Avery Dulles, in his important study of revelation, notes three models in the theology of revelation that have been significant in Christian history: (1) In “revelation as doctrine,” “revelation is generally identified with the Bible [which is] viewed as a collection of inspired and inerrant teachings.” (2) According to the view of “revelation as history,” the Bible bears witness to the primary revelation, which is the series of historical events wherein “God reveals himself . . . in his great deeds.” (3) By “revelation as inner experience,” the theologian means a “privileged interior experience of grace or communion with God,” such as the mystics have known.
The first two models have by and large been normative for Christians. John Baillie, for instance, refers to a “simple identification of revelation with the total content of Holy Scripture” that became a characteristic of both Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation. For fundamentalists, this first model—revelation as scriptural content—goes by the name of “propositional” revelation. As Clark Pinnock writes, propositional revelation is “the conceptual truth claim extractable from Holy Scripture.”

But the “revelation as history” definition has held equal sway. When Christians in general speak of “special revelation,” for instance, they often mean something like “the self-disclosure of God to man through the Bible, and supremely, in Christ.” This self-disclosure is clearly not to be understood as a personal communication of specific content to a particular individual. As Baillie writes,

No affirmation runs more broadly throughout recent writing on our subject [of revelation] than . . . that all revelation is given, not in the form of directly communicated knowledge, but through events occurring in the historical experience of mankind, events which are apprehended by faith as the “mighty acts” of God, and which therefore engender in the mind of man such reflective knowledge of God as it is given him to possess.

In his article on “καλύπτω” (to “cover” or “hide”) for Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Albrecht Oepke writes in a similar vein. In the Old Testament, “revelation is not the communication of supranatural knowledge. . . . The revelation can indeed give rise to knowledge . . . yet it does not itself consist in these things but is quite essentially the action of Yahweh, an unveiling of His essential hiddenness, His offering of Himself in fellowship.” In the New Testament, “revelation is likewise understood, not in the sense of a communication of supranatural knowledge, but in the sense of a self-disclosure of God.” In fact, Baillie writes, “the recovery of this fundamental insight is the first thing we notice as running broadly throughout all the recent discussions.” And John Knox agrees that “revelation essentially consists not in the communication of truths about God but in the self-revelation of the divine Personality.”

In other words, both of these models emphatically reject the notion that revelation consists of particular truths or information revealed to individuals outside of the channels of scripture itself or God’s historically significant activity.

Dulles’s third model of revelation, “revelation as inner experience,” holds out the promise of a paradigm in which God communicates particular truths to the individual, but this model is fraught with more qualifiers and limitations than the name suggests. Beginning, as most definitions do, with the premise that God is transcendent and that he has no phenomenal existence, the characterization of any revelation as “interior” becomes problematic. For as Emmanuel Levinas asks, “How can we make sense of the ‘exteriority’ of the truths and signs of the Revelation which strike the human faculty known as reason? . . . [H]ow can these truths and signs strike our reason if they are not even of this world?” Particularized manifestations and communications are illogical if God is utterly transcendent and therefore entirely outside the physical realm. And they are redundant if God is perfectly immanent and therefore already present within the human spirit and all creation. Accordingly, even within this third model, George Tyrrell writes that there can be no revealed statements or doctrines. Auguste Sabatier insists that “the object of the revelation of God can only be God,” and William Ernest Hocking holds that even the mystic, “as he is a mystic pure and simple[,] knows nothing else than God.”

Eventually, the game is up when Dulles says that for the theologians of this third model, “the experience of God . . . may be called grace, and grace, insofar as it brings about a new awareness of the divine, is revelation.” In other words, this model seems little more than recognition of the obvious fact that the reality of God and his great acts, however objective and universally valid (as the first two models emphasize), must be personally experienced to be operative in human life. But when Tyrrell calls this experience “a passive impression,” we seem to have in this model a distinction from the others without a clear difference.

William Abraham notes that in spite of the obvious and emphatic historical dilution of the concept of divine speaking (which would entail both interpersonal exchange and communicated content), traces of a more literal definition stubbornly persist. He points out, for example, that The Catholic Encyclopedia defines revelation as “the communication of some truth...
by God to a rational creature through means which are beyond the ordinary course of nature.” And, as Abraham notes, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “the disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency.” But the movement away from this theory of revelation, or what Abraham calls theology’s “vehement reaction against” it, has been pronounced since the 19th century.13

The equivocal and limiting definitions of “revelation as inner experience” are undoubtedly tied to the many theological dragons that lurk in the domain of experiential religion. But the threat—and historical experience—of heresy, schism, and sectarianism is not the only reason for preferring historical or textual definitions of revelation to subjective ones. Hostility to a model of experiential revelation has been grounded in a variety of other reasons as well, including fear of irrationalism, the perceived sufficiency of the canon, the concern to preserve the integrity of individual agency, and, perhaps most emphatically, theological resistance to anything tending toward anthropomorphism.

Christian rhetoric of prayer often reveals—or at least facilitates—this movement away from a literal understanding of revelation as divine discourse. To speak, for example, of an answer to prayer is usually already to speak in a manner inconsistent with models of human communication. When one person “asks” another and is “answered,” we can be fairly certain that a request was framed and a rejoinder expressed in a way that was meaningful, decipherable, and understood as a response to the question. The final condition seems in fact the most essential. Utterance that is meaningful or useful but not responsive to a question is not an answer. Neither is action that is responsive to a question. Handing me a pencil can properly be said to be an “answer” to the query “Do you have a pencil?” only in the same nonliteral sense in which falling rain “answers” the question “Will it rain today?”

In the case of prayer, however, the latter example is precisely the model that has characterized a very long conversation on the subject. “But perhaps you ask, How may I know whether my prayers have been answered or not?” writes Joseph Smith’s contemporary Edward Bickersteth in his popular Treatise on Prayer. “Sometimes the case is so obvious that it cannot be mistaken: Jehoshaphat prays, and he is delivered from his enemies; Hezekiah prays, and he is delivered from sickness.... At other times prayers are answered rather in the increase of grace to bear the affliction, than in its removal, as in the case of Paul’s thorn in the flesh.”14

In other words, we may choose to ascribe to prayer the motive force behind an event that follows our request (e.g., healing or escape), or in the absence of a hoped-for eventuality, we posit a consequence that we may not discern (e.g., grace). This kind of faithful prayer operates in the context of a presumption that petitionary acts call forth divine activity. But a decision must be made to interpret something—or a lack of something—as a response to a
question, and that gesture of interpretation is itself the faithful act that constitutes the “answer.”

“There are,” says Edward Gee in his Treatise on Prayer, “four ways of God’s answering prayers. By giving the things prayed for presently . . . or by suspending the answer for a time, and giving it afterwards . . . or by withholding from you that mercy which you ask, and giving you a much better mercy in the room of it . . . or lastly, by giving you patience to bear the loss or want of it.” In petitionary prayer so conceived, then, any “answer” is once again a product of a preimposed interpretive model. If fulfillment of one’s desire is an answer, but deafening silence or continuation of the status quo is likewise read as a response, the process of prayer begins with a cry into the abyss and comes to completion with a faith-backed gesture that, once again, prejudges each and every subsequent development as an answer. Such a model entirely exempts God from the responsibility to speak. “Thou art silent,” says Manfred to the phantom of his lover Astarte. “And in that silence, I am more than answer’d.” Or as Bickersteth writes in a preemptive blow against petitionary failure, “The answer of prayer may be approaching, though we discern not its coming.”

Emerson may not be typical of Protestantism when he pointedly calls prayer “the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul,” and his formula causes one 19th-century preacher to object that “prayer . . . is not ‘soliloquy,’ but dialogue.” But that same preacher goes on to define prayerful “dialogue” in a rather more Emersonian fashion than he intends:

Now, in order to have a real energy of spiritual life, we must have actual intercourse with God himself. . . . And to commune with him, we must have something to say to him. . . . Therefore, God, in order that men may come into real communion with him and so receive real vital energy,—faith, love, peace, joy,—has ordered it so that we may speak to him of our real wants.

Strange “intercourse” this, where only man must have something to say and in consequence of which he receives not an answer but “vital energy” (which may, in any case, be more a product of the act of petition itself than of any “response”).

Retreating into metaphor, confusing “monologue” for “dialogue,” reading heavenly silence or quotidian events as “answer”—all these strategies cannot belie the fact that, as Rodney Stark reminds us in his quest for more terminological rigor, “a revelation is not an insight or an inspiration. A revelation is a communication. . . . A revelation presupposes a divine being capable of wishes and intentions.”

Obviously, it would be reductive and inaccurate to characterize all prayer in the Christian tradition as a kind of vague projection into the void, operating with such blithe openness to the outcome that it begs the very question of prayer’s efficacy. But the kind of prayer that is an asking rather than an asking for, and that anticipates a personal response, a discernible moment of dialogue or communicated content, would be a distinctive kind of prayer, one that falls outside the models of revelation that we have seen, relegating as they do God’s operations to historical events, canonized texts, or the infusion of “vital energy.” The response this type of prayer envisions, the experience of “revelation” that follows from a literal conception of divine discourse, is one that William James, for example, characterizes as distinctive and associates with Catholic saints, George Fox, the Old Testament prophets—and Joseph Smith. Here he quotes W. Sanday: “There is something sharp and sudden about it. He can lay his finger so to speak, on the moment when it came.” However, in the case of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, even James’s distinction is insufficient. One finds in the Book of Mormon a version of revelation that falls well outside the parameters Dulles charted, and something far beyond a forceful spiritual intimation or the abrupt insight mentioned by Sanday. In the Book of Mormon, prayer frequently—and dramatically—evokes an answer that is impossible to mistake as anything other than an individualized, dialogic response to a highly particularized question.
Nowhere is the concentration of heavenly utterances in the Book of Mormon more intense than in 1 Nephi. (Considering that he labels his own account the record of “sacred” things as opposed to political history [see 1 Nephi 9:19:6], this is not surprising.) In the first 50 pages alone, we read of eight visions, various angelic visitations, and several occasions on which Nephi is “visited” by the Lord, “constrained by the Spirit,” “led by the Spirit,” “commanded” by the Lord, and so forth. But more to the point, Nephi and his father describe several occasions that cannot be interpreted as mere dreams, spiritual promptings, or heaven-sent impressions. When, in response to his pleadings on behalf of his wicked brothers, Nephi records, “The Lord spake unto me,” he could be speaking figuratively. But subsequently he records that “the Lord spake unto” his father, Lehi, telling him to procure wives for his sons for the journey to the promised land. Later, the “voice of the Lord came unto [Lehi]” and “chastened” him for his murmuring; then “the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words” to the rebellious Laman. Preparatory to Nephi’s building a ship for the journey, “the voice of the Lord came unto” Nephi and the “Lord spake” to him about the ship, “showed” him how to construct it, and “told” him where to find ore with which to forge tools. Nephi records that when the time came to depart, “the voice of the Lord came unto my father, that we should arise and go down into the ship” (see 1 Nephi 2:19; 7:1; 16:25; 16:39; 17:7–10; 18:5).

In fact, Nephi recounts how “the voice of the Lord came” to him, to his father, and to Laman and Lemuel, so often that it becomes a refrain almost as pervasive as the numbingly common “and it came to pass.” The precise expression occurs more than two dozen times—and variations of it, including the voice of the Spirit or of angels, occur dozens more. No shadowy spiritual intimations these, no merely intuited guidance or inspiration, but direct divine discourse that frequently rises to the level of genuine dialogic exchange. Most dramatic in this regard are Nephi’s persuasion by the Spirit to kill Laban (depicted as revelatory argument), Enos’s wrestle with the Lord for his own and then his enemies’ salvation (an actual linguistic exchange rather than mere impressions), and the brother of Jared’s progress from general pleading to specific, concrete petition, culminating in glorious epiphany.

At first glance, some of these experiences may suggest the pattern of Old Testament prophets, and, as we saw, William James for one likened Joseph Smith himself to such ancient patriarchs. Indeed, it is true that “the Lord spake” to Moses dozens of times, engaged in a protracted negotiation with Abraham over the fate of Sodom, and obviously revealed his mind and will to a canon of major and minor prophets. So to some extent, one could consider that Joseph’s personal ministry, as well as the Book of Mormon record, reenacts an Old Testament paradigm. But on closer inspection, the Book of Mormon model of revelation diverges in at least one crucial way. In the Bible, outside of prophets acting in the role of national leadership, personal revelation is almost unheard of. Prophets and prophecy are not just linguistically but textually synonymous. Or to state the matter as principle: “[Prophecy] was pre-eminently the privilege of the prophets.” And the concern of these prophets is with the fate of kings and nations and tribes, with the workings and purposes of God in history, with the spiritual destinies of covenant peoples and fledgling churches. Even more grandly, as the great Abraham Heschel writes, “prophecy . . . may be described as exegesis of existence from a divine perspective.”

The Book of Mormon here becomes a study in contrast. Through chiastic form, thematic structure, numerous textual examples, and a final, concluding instance of readerly invitation, the scripture hammers home the insistent message that revelation is the province of everyman. As a consequence, in the world of the Book of Mormon, concepts like revelation, prayer, inspiration, and mystery will find powerful and substantive redefinition. That may well be the Book of Mormon’s most significant and revolutionary—as well as controversial—contribution to
The Book of Mormon . . . hammers home the insistent message that revelation is the province of everyman. . . . That may well be the Book of Mormon’s most significant and revolutionary—as well as controversial—contribution to religious thinking. The particularity and specificity, the vividness, the concreteness, and the accessibility of revelatory experience—those realities both underlie and overshadow the narrated history and doctrine that constitute the record.

Nephi, as chronicler of the record that bears his name, postpones until chapter 10 (chapter 3 in the 1830 edition) an account of his own “proceedings and reign and ministry,” having spent the previous sections emphasizing those of his father, Lehi. But this is more than a gesture of filial respect, because now when Nephi records his own spiritual epiphany, it is within a context that gives the principle of revelation its first, radically new contours in the Book of Mormon. Following a number of briefly narrated revelations and dreams, Lehi receives an expansive vision of the “Tree of Life,” which he relates to his family. After hearing his father’s account, Nephi writes that he is “desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him” (1 Nephi 10:17).

Believing that “the Lord [is] able to make [those things] known unto [him],” Nephi, after much pondering in his heart, is “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord” to a place where he immediately engages that Spirit in conversation. When Nephi expresses his desire “to behold the things which [his] father saw,” the Spirit responds, “Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?” At this critical juncture, two points are highly important. First, Lehi, not Nephi, is still functioning as the unquestioned prophetic figure in the story. Not only has Lehi already been situated as one of “many prophets prophesying unto the people” (1 Nephi 1:4), but Nephi will shortly go out of his way to acknowledge the continuing patriarchal and spiritual leadership of his father, by pointedly asking him for guidance even in the midst of his father’s recent murmurings. (Afflicted by hunger and the loss of weapons while in the Old World wilderness, Lehi “murmur[s] against the Lord.” Nephi takes the initiative to fashion new arms and asks his father, “Whither shall I go to obtain food?” after which Lehi humbles himself and successfully inquires of the Lord [see 1 Nephi 16].) In the divine economy of the Old Testament, Nephi’s inquiry of the Spirit would thus seem to be faithless at worst and redundant at best. The Spirit’s response, worded as it is, might even have been construed as implicit criticism. Even so, Nephi answers unhesitatingly, “Yea, thou knowest I believe all the words of my father.”

Second, as John W. Welch has pointed out, this query occurs at the moment of the book’s most extreme narrative tension, as the culmination of an expansive chiastic structure that organizes all of 1 Nephi.24 Framed by symmetrical prophetic modes, quest elements, characters, and motifs, Nephi’s interview is the fulcrum on which the entire, complexly organized account of 1 Nephi balances. The angel’s reply to Nephi’s answer is therefore fraught
with special significance. And that answer comes as heavenly exultation: “Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired” (1 Nephi 11:1–6).

Nephi is commended, not reproved, for seeking access to the mysteries of heaven for personal, rather than public, edification. To forestall any misperception that his prerogative is related to some special spiritual status (or his eventual inheritance of the prophetic role), his brothers are explicitly associated with such a misguided perspective and harshly condemned as a result. Confused by Lehi’s account of his vision, Laman and Lemuel complain to Nephi that “we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken” (1 Nephi 15:7). The exchange that follows, together with the closing chapters of Moroni, anticipates and frames the entire 1,000-year history of righteousness and apostasy that constitutes the body of the Book of Mormon record. The warning these verses carry will be grimly fulfilled by the end of the book and will be echoed by the last guardian of the records as he directs himself, more hopefully, to a different audience.

And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord? And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us [“because we are not prophets,” in other words]. Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts? Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said? —If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you. (1 Nephi 15:8–11)

The brothers do not heed the message, and they and their posterity are spiritually blighted as a result. Nephi’s belief in revelatory experience outside official channels and his brothers’ disbelief in the same principle seem clearly calculated to establish the pivotal importance of the principle that divides them.

Because the Book of Mormon is compiled largely by Nephite prophets, we get few portraits of religious life at the level of common individuals. But in addition to Nephi’s experience, we have instances wherein other individuals—acting outside any prophetic role—are privy to revelations and the mysteries of God. Mosiah fears for his sons’ lives when they plan to preach in hostile territory. We read that he “inquired of the Lord if he should let his sons go up among the Lamanites to preach the word. And the Lord said unto Mosiah: Let them go up” (Mosiah 28:6–7). Similarly, the missionary Ammon watches helplessly as thousands of his converts, now pacifist, suffer death rather than retaliate or defend themselves. He proposes a migration to the Nephite lands, but they are reluctant. “And Ammon said: I will go and inquire of the Lord, and if he say unto us, go down unto our brethren, will ye go?” They give their consent. “And it came to pass that Ammon went and inquired of the Lord, and he said unto him: Get this people out of this land” (Alma 27:7, 11–12).

So it is abundantly clear that, in the Book of Mormon, prophecy is not “preeminently the privilege of the prophets.” Equally clearly, the matter of revelation is not confined to the “exegesis of existence” or matters of “ultimate concern.” Questions that prompt divine replies are in turn quotidian, pragmatic, and at times almost banal in their mundane specificity. While still in the wilderness on their way to the promised land, Nephi and his brothers lose their weapons and their people suffer hunger and discouragement. Lehi “inquire[s] of the Lord” where to hunt, and he is directed (see 1 Nephi 16:24–31). Later in the record, on two occasions, military plans are informed by divine revelation (see Alma 16:5–6; 42:23).

Queries can also be of a strictly doctrinal nature. Alma is curious about the space of time between physical death and resurrection. He “inquire[d] diligently of the Lord to know” and receives by angelic intermediary a detailed account that he then imparts to his son Corianton (Alma 40:9). Mormon, troubled by reports of infant baptism, and apparently unsure of its merits, appeals to the Lord for guidance. “And the word of the Lord came unto me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying: Listen to the words of Christ. . . . Little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin; . . . wherefore . . . I know that it is solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children” (Moroni 8:7–9). When Mormon inquires of the Lord in another context, it seems to be only slightly more than pious curiosity that prompts him. Pondering the fate of three Nephite disciples, he
inquires of the Lord, who makes it “manifest unto [him] that there must needs be a change wrought upon their bodies, or else it needs be that they must taste of death” (3 Nephi 28:37). Thus is their immortality confirmed to Mormon.

In at least one instance, prayer about a difficult political problem elicits an answer. Unsuccessful in his effort to transfer jurisdiction over zealous apostates to the king, Alma takes his dilemma to the Lord in prayer. “And it came to pass that after he had poured out his whole soul to God, the voice of the Lord came to him,” saying essentially that ecclesiastical dilemmas require ecclesiastical solutions (Mosiah 26:14).

We may contrast these examples with Shlomo Biderman’s assertion that “Christianity is centered on revelation, which contains within it a message (‘good news’) meant for the believer. Given this message, what is important is the content of revelation.” In the Book of Mormon, what is important is not one ultimate “Truth” it embodies, but rather the ever present reality of revelation it depicts, a kind of egalitarian access to truths that range from the sublime to the mundane, from principles of salvation to advice on prime hunting grounds.

The redemptive role of Jesus Christ is the central tenet of which the Book of Mormon testifies. But conditioned as that knowledge is on spiritual channels, the Book of Mormon gives at least as much attention to the mode as to the object of revelation. When Amaleki winds up the record known as the small plates of Nephi, his closing words, spoken both as summation of past experience and admonition to posterity, are an exhortation to “believe in prophesying, and in revelations,” and in other spiritual gifts (Omni 1:25).

Alma, a few years later, will testify to his sons of his own experience with revealed knowledge: “Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that these things are true.” And again, “I would not that ye should think that I know these things of myself, but it is the Spirit of God which is in me which maketh these things known unto me” (Alma 5:46; 38:6). Nephi, the son of Helaman, will continue the theme, writing, “Behold now, I do not say that these things shall be, of myself, because it is not of myself that I know these things; but behold, I know that these things are true because the Lord God has made them known unto me” (Helaman 7:29).

In spite of the recurrent testimonies of the Nephite prophets who affirm the principle of personal revelation, the majority of Nephite history, like the Old Testament counterpart, is one of spiritual blindness and apostasy. But in this case the reader is invited to locate a different culprit than the idolatry of Baal. Moroni, final prophet and editor of the record, proclaims his intention of writing a history of particular relevance to futurity (“Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing” [Mormon 8:35]). Writing with particular poignancy in the aftermath of his entire people’s destruction, Moroni predicts that the same truth lost on Laman and Lemuel may well be lost on generations yet to come, and he repeats the same condemnation. “And again I speak unto you who deny the revelations of God, and say that they are done away, that there are no revelations, nor prophecies, nor gifts. . . . Behold I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ” (Mormon 9:7–8). And yet, in concluding his record, Moroni turns from lament to hopefulness. In his apostrophe to futurity (the most often invoked verse in the Book of Mormon), Moroni renews Nephi’s testimony, presumably with the intention of shaping a more successful history than the one he has just witnessed: “I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things [contained in the Book of Mormon] are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4–5).

Judging from the near perfect symmetry of Nephi’s testimony/rebuke directed at his brothers earlier in the days preceding their first settlement and Moroni’s rebuke/testimony at the twilight of his people’s history, and given the unrelenting affirmations of numerous writers throughout the record, the moral of this sprawling epic seems to be the indispensability of personal revelation as a key to spiritual survival—of the individual as well as the nation.

But Moroni, as prophet but also (though to a lesser extent than Mormon) editor and spokesman to future generations, has done more than derive a moral from a millennium of record keeping. He serves to link the principle of personal revelation witnessed within the text to its enactment in regards to the text. His expression of the principle thus echoes this theme but also transposes the text from a record that provides a unified treatment of the principle as enacted by the various prophets into something else (from
Nephi onward, we do not hear sermons about revelation, we observe the transformation of their lives and the catalyst behind their ministries as tangible products of such revelation.

Moroni’s editorial position outside the text allows him to objectify it as the proving ground for contemporary readers to have their own experience of spiritual validation. In other words, our knowing that the particulars of Moroni’s history are true (like Laman’s and Lemuel’s understanding the allegory of Lehi’s vision) is clearly not the point of his challenge. Knowing they are knowable is. In effect, Moroni has transformed the Book of Mormon’s status from carrier of meaning to pointer to meaning; its ability to emphatically call into play the validating power of the Spirit becomes more important than the particulars of its history or its doctrine.

In the context of the theologies of Christian revelation we have surveyed, Joseph Smith’s “golden bible” was radically distinctive. The Book of Mormon patterned a variety of revelation that emphatically affirmed revelation’s dialogic nature—a paradigm mostly at odds with historical conceptions of revelation, though not without some parallels and antecedents in 19th-century American frontier religion. In addition, the Book of Mormon was itself a locus of special revelatory activity that swirled around the Prophet. Finally, the Book of Mormon served to initiate susceptible readers into a new paradigm of personal revelation, appealing in a highly successful way to a spirit of religious individualism.

Historians have successfully argued for contemporary Protestant parallels to Mormonism’s revelatory appeal. Thomas Alexander has found comparisons to “primitive Christian or affirmative mysticism” useful. Ronald Walker has written that “the New England folk culture . . . strongly embraced the idea of personal revelation and the ministry of spirits.” Historian Timothy Smith has likewise emphasized that this “witness of the Spirit,” as the Methodists called it, was a coveted goal “in all evangelical witness.” Dan Vogel writes that “seekers” and other religious volunteers of the day were looking for just that paradigm held out by Mormonism—“direct revelations from God,” and Gordon Wood finds that “visions, dreams, prophesying, and new emotion-soaked religious seekings acquired a validity they had not earlier possessed.” Others could be cited as well. Such situating of Mormonism in the context of related religious movements and developments of the 19th century has become an increasingly popular enterprise for historians. When considering the setting of Mormon origins, however, it is important to remember that the quest for cultural consistencies can undermine the very project of historical inquiry that attempts to assess the particularity of a given phenomenon. As religious historian John Gager has warned:

If early Mormonism or early Christianity are merely warmed-over versions of mid-nineteenth or mid-third century culture, then we are at a loss to explain why these particular movements, and not their many contemporary competitors, not only survived but also flourished in such a remarkable fashion. In other words, the more we are able to demonstrate fundamental similarities between these movements and their surrounding cultures and the more we must dismiss their own self-understanding in relation to their cultural environment, the more we find ourselves unable to explain their success.

In response to this warning, it may be useful to consider that, like many religions of its day and before, Mormonism relied upon “the voluntary acceptance of revealed truth and thus on personal mystical confirmation.” On the other hand, unlike other religions of its day, Mormonism had a book of scripture that provided an unprecedented model for such confirmatory experience. And one should not be too quick to assume that Mormon emphasis on personal revelation alone made it indistinguishable in that regard from contemporary movements that emphasized spiritual manifestations. For example, it may be true, as Adolph Koch has suggested, that “the Great Awakening, the first movement to unite the American colonies from Maine to Georgia in a common experience, opened the doors of salvation to all classes on the same terms.” But some versions of the democratic impulse in American religion could work more to undermine elitism than to promote spiritual populism, to reduce all religious experience to a common denominator rather than empower individuals with new spiritual power. As the Theophilanthropist of 1810 ranted, “The teachers of religion of all denominations assume an arrogant, dictatorial style, in order to convince their followers that they are in possession of the secrets of Heaven.” But, as another issue asks, “What can a Doctor of Divinity . . . know of his maker, which is not known to the illiterate ploughman?” Of course, such spiritual egalitarianism does not necessarily
make of everyone a prophet. In this instance, the writer suggests, the spiritual equality that is invoked is an equality of limitations: “The ploughman knows that there is a God, that he is just and good. What more is necessary?“35

The prominent preacher Alexander Campbell, who accused Joseph Smith of plagiarizing most of his restoration principles, parted company sharply on the principle of revelation. Realizing the unmistakable centrality of dialogic revelation in the Book of Mormon, he saw it not as typical of the age or primitive Christianity, but as ludicrous and downright unscriptural:

I would ask [Book of Mormon witnesses Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris] how they knew that it was God’s voice which they heard—but they would tell me to ask God in faith. That is, I must believe it first, and then ask God if it be true! . . . If there was anything plausible about Smith, I would say to those who believe him to be a prophet, hear the question which Moses put into the mouth of the Jews, and his answer to it—“And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken?”—Does he answer, “Ask the Lord and he will tell you?” . . . Nay, indeed.36

Similarly, Gilbert Wardlaw, an Edinburgh minister, admonished his American audience in 1830 in words uncannily pertinent to the Mormon example:

I am aware that prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has been, and may be recommended in terms which Scripture sobriety does not justify. Some have spoken of this divine gift as if they expected something actually miraculous, something altogether new to the church in the present day, conferred independently of the word, and in a manner almost perceptible to the senses.37

This effort to restrain revelatory anarchy is clear in the editor’s introduction to Wardlaw’s treatise. Believing the minister’s message was especially apropos of the “Revivals of Religion” sweeping America, he betrays obvious alarm at a society in which prophets and revelators were popping up everywhere.38 Wardlaw goes on to ask “whether we have not misunderstood, and interpreted too largely, the ample assurances which God has given with regard to the answering of prayer.” True, he admits, both biblical testaments affirm that “among the various operations of the Spirit of God . . . were those which communicated miraculous powers of different kinds.” But it is to the “more common, and still more precious influences in the souls of all whom he renews” that we should look for our own answers.39

Wardlaw here echoes John Wesley, who distinguished between what he called “the ‘extraordinary’ gifts of the Spirit—languages and their interpretation, healing and other miracles—and the ‘ordinary’ one of hallowing, or sanctifying grace . . . available to all Christians.” But who was susceptible to such outpourings, and to what degree and in what form, was clearly a subject of profound renegotiation during the religious ferment of the early 19th century. Caught in the center of these shifting theological winds, the Book of Mormon was alternately repellant and welcome, and both responsive to and a catalyst behind changing spiritual sensibilities. Historian Timothy Smith, for example, believes that after 1830, and reflecting the “constant appeal by Mormon apologists to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their community,” attempts like Wesley’s to confine and limit the operations of the Spirit diminished among evangelicals.40

A modern evangelical, in articulating just where Mormonism pushes the envelope of orthodoxy too far, finds danger precisely where Campbell and Wardlaw did more than a century and a half earlier: “Without some external checks and balances, it is simply too easy to misinterpret God’s answer when we try to apply a test like that of Moroni 10:4–5 and ask him to reveal through his Spirit the truth or falsity of the Book of Mormon.”41 Similarly, scholar of
early Christianity W. D. Davies wonders if Mormonism’s error is in taking “conventional modes of revelation found in the OT . . . so literally . . . as to give a facticity to what was intended as symbolic.” After all, he writes, “the revelation to Moses as recorded in the OT can hardly be taken literally as an event in which the Divine handed over or dictated to Moses Ten Commandments.”

But of course, this tenacious embrace of revelatory literalism is neither an arbitrary biblical fundamentalism nor a Book of Mormon innovation. It is in fact rooted in Joseph Smith’s own, firsthand experience with revelation, a dialogic encounter with Deity that gave indelible redefinition to the promise of James the Apostle by simply taking it at face value, thereby setting both Joseph and the church he would found on a collision course with orthodoxy. In Joseph’s personal history, his concluding sentence about the glorious theophany in which he participated as a 14-year-old boy was an unadorned affirmation striking for its matter-of-fact simplicity: “I had found the testimony of James to be true—that a man who lacked wisdom might ask of God, and obtain, and not be upbraided” (Joseph Smith—History 1:26, citing James 1:5). Subsequent Mormons would find in that theophany the basis for a radical conception of God’s corporeality, one that abruptly and decisively shattered the Trinity of traditional Christendom.

God may choose to answer with articulate, discernible, unmistakably human words. “I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right . . . and which I should join. I was answered that I must join none of them” (Joseph Smith—History 1:18–19).

Whether or not Mormonism’s model was the first to appeal to radically individualistic cravings for spiritual experience by means of a literalized understanding of divine discourse, the Book of Mormon was apparently the most effective vehicle of the age for eliciting, condoning, and affirming such personal encounters with divine powers. Martin Marty has remarked that “historians cannot prove that the Book of Mormon was translated from golden plates and have not proven that it was simply a fiction of Joseph Smith. Instead they seek to understand its revelatory appeal, the claims it makes, and why it discloses modes of being and of believing that millions of Saints would otherwise not entertain.” But secular scholars and church members alike have yet to fathom fully the power and extent of this revelatory appeal.

John Greenleaf Whittier was one of the first to grasp this key to the Book of Mormon’s historical and spiritual significance. The Book of Mormon, the poet wrote, spoke “a language of hope and promise to weak, weary hearts, tossed and troubled, who have wandered from sect to sect, seeking in vain for the primal manifestations of the divine power.” For millions of believers, the Book of Mormon has been the vehicle through which they could find their own sacred grove and reenact on a personal scale the epiphany that ushered in a new dispensation.
ENDNOTES


12. Ibid., 73. Dulles himself as much as agrees, claiming weakly that since the two prior models are grounded in historically circumscribed events, this model, “in its acceptance of continuing revelation, . . . contrasts with the two preceding models.”


21. Rebekah is one notable exception. Bewildered by the twins struggling in her womb, “she went to enquire of the Lord. And the Lord said unto her . . .” (Genesis 25:22–23).


29. Dan Vogel, Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 90. Vogel has been criticized for reifying the generic "seekers"—"spiritual nomads of any age"—into a sect or movement of Joseph Smith's day (see Grant Underwood, book review of Vogel, Religious Seekers, BYU Studies 30 [Winter 1990]: 120).


31. This search for a more democratic religion increasingly took the particular form of "insisting on direct, individual encounters with divinity," writes AJan Taylor, in "Rediscovering the Context of Joseph Smith's Treasure Seeking," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 19 (Winter 1986): 22. "There was a confessed likeness between the spiritualists and the primitive Quakers, who also believed in manifestations through outward voices and appearances, through dreams, and through inward spiritual impressions," wrote I. Woodbridge Riley in 1903 (The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith, Jr. [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903], 338). Finally, A. S. Hayden has pointed out that the appeal to personal revelation was perilously close to Disciple teachings (see Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio [Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1876], 197, 209–18).


37. Gilbert Wardlaw, The Testimony of Scripture to the Obligations and Efficacy of Prayer (Boston: Prince and Williams, 1830), 97 n.

38. Ibid., n–vi.


