Women in the Book of Mormon

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Title  Women in the Book of Mormon: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Interpretation

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Abstract  Feminist readers, particularly, have argued that biblical writing is sexist because the majority of the text was written by men who seem to place little significance on the role of women. This observation has become a serious concern among some because it calls into question the nature of God: does this supposedly perfect being love men and women equally? This study delves into the text of the Book of Mormon and its female characters to suggest that women were not considered lower than men in Book of Mormon times; likewise, women are not considered lower than men in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today.
All interpretations of scripture are, in some sense, a dialogue with the text, or, as Old Testament scholar Phyllis Bird notes, “an exercise in cross-cultural understanding.” This exercise may be aided by knowing the writers’ and compilers’ world-views and by avoiding interpretations that “distort the ancient writer’s understanding or intention, whether to a ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ effect.”1 Our understanding of scriptural texts, as with other “dialogues,” is affected by our expectations, experiences, and purposes for reading those texts.

In reference to the Bible, Sharon Ringe cautions:

Although the careful reader attempts to distinguish between the voice of the ancient author and his or her own concerns as a modern interpreter, this distinction is never absolute. The place in history, culture, and society occupied by the reader inevitably influences what she or he can perceive in any text and what questions seem important to ask about the text and its context.2

During the past 30 years, the most important questions for some readers have been what Katharine Bartlett calls “the woman question,” actually a set of questions about the status and treatment of women in law and in cultural practices.3 As a result of interdisciplinary interest in women’s issues, the amount of research about women in biblical times and texts has grown exponentially. During this same period of time, the amount of published research on the text and cultures of the Book of Mormon has increased significantly, although few feminist explorations of Latter-day Saint texts have been published.

A common assumption among some contemporary readers is that most women’s stories have been excluded from scripture, that women have been “silenced” by male scribes, editors, and commentators.4 So far as we know, virtually all of the texts we have “about the lives of women in the ancient world . . . have been written by men.”5 Ruth and Esther are the only book-length narratives in the Bible focusing on females. “No other female characters in the Hebrew canon dominate the narrative scene for more than one chapter, not even the extraordinary character of Deborah.”6 The stories that have been included are frequently interpreted “as a primary source and legitimator of patriarchal religion.” Feminist biblical scholars have extended this view to every branch of their theology but consider it to have “particular bearing on the question of biblical authority,” or the truth of the scriptural testimony concerning the nature of humanity and the nature of God.7

“Modern feminist critique of the Bible as male-centered and male-dominated has elicited widely differing historiographical and hermeneutical responses, ranging from denial of the fact or intent of female subordination to rejection of the authority of the Scriptures as fundamentally and irredeemably sexist.”8 The relative absence of women and women’s voices in scriptural texts, including the Book of Mormon, has raised questions for some LDS readers about issues of equality and the meaning and authority that these texts can or should have for us today.

Questions about women’s status in scripture are not trivial and cannot be answered by recommending that we focus instead on the “big questions,” such as the nature of God, the problem of evil, or the meaning of life.9 For a significant number of readers, questions about the treatment of women anciently and currently are the “big questions.”10 The answers or lack thereof will be predictive of the value some readers place on the scripture text and, to some extent, on the religious institutions that consider those texts canonical. Because these questions matter to so many, we ought to seriously consider them. That is the purpose of this paper. Asking questions about women’s roles, ancient and modern, as we read the scriptures can bring new insights, even when the texts are incomplete and women’s stories abbreviated. In addition, an examination of the Book of Mormon in light of its stated purpose and provenance suggests that the presence or absence of women in the text is not determinative of its authority as a witness of Jesus Christ nor, therefore, of its relevance to women as well as to men.

The Context of the Contemporary “Woman Question”

While significant interest in women’s issues now permeates our society as a whole, spanning the political and social spectrum, it is an overtly feminist11 approach to the Bible that has had perhaps the most impact in the academy and in publishing about women in scripture.12 Women have not always been “self-conscious about reading [the Bible] as women,” but many now consider it important to do so.13 Some scholars have argued that the Bible “might be patriarchal and androcentric without necessarily being misogynistic.”14 But for religiously committed feminists, there is a persistent tension between their
belief that the Bible is the word of God, and therefore must support the equality of male and female, and their view that the Bible is a primary source and sanction of women’s oppression and cannot, therefore, be divine revelation—or worse, that it reveals a God unworthy of reverence. Some women have jettisoned much of the religious traditions in which they were reared and are seeking religious forms they feel honor women and the experiences of women.

Latter-day Saint feminist commentaries are, by comparison, few and generally less caustic. LDS doctrines and the statements of prophets affirming the worth of women as individuals and in their various roles in the family, church, and community have also consistently stressed the value of women and have turned aside some harsh interpretations of women in scripture, most notably that of Eve and the treatment of Lot’s daughters.

However, LDS women have challenges that some of their sisters of other faiths do not have. In addition to the problems presented by biblical texts, latter-day scripture contains far fewer stories of individual women than those in either the Old or the New Testament. Carol Lynn Pearson argues that the dearth of women mentioned in the Book of Mormon is a “strong anti-female statement made by Nephite society,” in whose record we see a few “spiritually dependent [women]” and a plethora of faceless, nameless women listed as part of their husband’s possessions. Francine Bennion has attributed to Nephite culture what might be seen as a fairly common set of assumed characteristics about ancient societies: The power of men over women in Book of Mormon societies produced abuses, as does any hierarchy not based on virtue alone. Even when good men did not abuse their power but protected women and were tender with them, men did have the power. Men made the decisions. Men did the ruling, the judging, and the prophesying. Men did the preaching, and addressed it to “my brethren.” Men defined the history and recorded it.

Women were primarily accessories to men, dependent upon them not only for survival but also for identity, which is presented as a matter of relationship to a man, usefulness to a man, or use by men.

When the harshest of LDS commentaries criticize the Book of Mormon’s treatment of women, they do so from a perspective that might be called the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” wherein there is an adversarial or distrustful approach to a text coupled with an examination less of the text’s content per se than of the author’s presumed self-interest. A few writers are engaged in reconstructing LDS theology in ways they believe are more amenable to feminist principles of equality. Most of current Book of Mormon commentary targeting an LDS audience reflects what might be called the hermeneutic of charity or consent, in which Book of Mormon stories, for the most part, are universalized to include females in one way or another in an interpretation intended to conform to church teachings. Unfortunately, this truce may not last. Marie Cornwall has predicted that “the next generation of [LDS] readers will find the scriptures’ lack of attention to women, particularly in the Book of Mormon, to be disquieting.”

Of course, Book of Mormon scholarship has challenges that differ from those in biblical studies: we have a relatively short history of research on the Book of Mormon, there are few scholars focused on Book of Mormon research, no ancient texts of the Book of Mormon are available to us for textual criticism, and the Book of Mormon text abridges the spiritual histories of peoples across a span of more than a thousand years, with the linguistic, sociological, and archaeological evidence of those peoples considered sparse at best. Further, those with a particular interest in the history of women appear to have even less to work with, given the small number of individual women named in the Book of Mormon.

Probing the Portrayal of Women in the Book of Mormon

A consideration of the portrayal of women in the Book of Mormon text would likely include these questions: Why are there so few women in the Book of Mormon? How many women should we expect to find in an ancient text, and what should we expect them to be doing? Why are there so few individual women named in the text? Why aren’t women more prominent in the Book of Mormon narratives? Why didn’t God command the prophets to include more women in the record? Why were specific stories included in the Book of Mormon and others apparently excluded? Is a writer advancing his own self-interest by excluding stories about women?
Obviously that list is not exhaustive, and neither are the proposed answers that follow. But asking such questions invites discussion that may help us better understand the text as well as ourselves.

Why are there so few women in the Book of Mormon?

The short answer is we don’t know. This question may reflect a reader’s honest concern, or it may be a polite way of asserting that women do not have enough power, visibility, or prestige in the church today—an issue unlikely to be resolved by examining ancient cultures and their texts. The question may also reflect concern for children: can our youth, most of whom are aware of disparities between the sexes, find Christ in the Book of Mormon if they cannot find women there? Obviously, it is not counting the number of women, nor assessing their prominence in the text that is our real task; rather, we must decide how we are to interpret the apparent absence of women in the Book of Mormon. For some readers, merely stating that there are few women in the Book of Mormon is a way of concluding that women were unimportant to the writers of the book or even that women are unimportant in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today.

But are such questions that are ultimately grounded in the feminism of our own day truly legitimate when voiced as though their assumptions and unchallenged presuppositions were a valid basis for a substantive criticism of the text? “If [the woman questions] are not the agenda of the authors or even of their principal audiences, should—or even can—they be pursued?” asks Sharon Ringe in reference to biblical texts. As with many ideological approaches, Pearson’s feminist approach is predictive of her conclusion: “The valuable things I have gleaned from the Book of Mormon have been bought at the expense of putting my femaleness aside and ignoring what is said of it. And while I am more than my femaleness, my femaleness is a profound and highly valued part of me, and to have to put it away when I pick up the book violates my spirit.”

To experience scripture as demeaning to women is an unhappy outcome, to say the least. If we are as skillful at questioning ourselves as we think we are at questioning a text, or at least as able to recognize our own biases as we are able to recognize the potential biases of the authors, our reading of ancient scripture will be less distorted than it might otherwise be. In other words, if we are to engage in a dialogue with the text, “reader bias” must be examined as closely as is “writer bias.” Kevin and Shauna Christensen argue that paying attention to narrator perspective and cultural context, and incorporating recent research about text and context, allows a more satisfactory reading than Pearson’s, for it reveals “that women play a broader role in the Book of Mormon narratives than appears to the casual reader.” With these considerations and caveats in mind, we may proceed to question the text, and to question ourselves as we read the Book of Mormon.

Reader Expectations and Observations

What do we expect to find?

We likely have at least two sets of expectations. One set is related to the structure or genre(s) of the text: we don’t look for poetry in a phone book, nor do we expect that spiritual insights will readily flow from census records. The standard works include the following genres: historical accounts, genealogies, dialogue, narratives or stories (about individuals, tribes, and nations), sermons and expositions of doctrine, letters, accounts of visions, poetry, parables, prayers, and songs.” These types of texts may conform to certain literary or other conventions, some of which may initially be unfamiliar to us. In addition, the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants contain sections outlining religious practices and ordinances or describing the organization and administration of the church.

Coupled with our expectations about the form of the text, we have expectations about content. The title page of the Book of Mormon leads us to anticipate an abridged record about a remnant of the house of Israel and an abridged record from the people of Ether. The abridgments were written to a specific audience of Lamanites, Jews, and Gentiles for purposes specific to each subset of readers: to show the remnant what God did for their fathers and to disclose the covenants that prevent them from being cast off forever, and to convince both Jews and Gentiles that Jesus is the Christ of all nations. The nature of the book’s stated audience and purpose suggests that what is included was chosen to meet those criteria, rather than to give, for example, a detailed account of the history, economy, or
family life of those ancient inhabitants, as interesting as those topics might be.

In addition to expectations about the form and content of a text, our culture has expectations about gender relations. Equal treatment for women is a contemporary cultural value, and we are suspicious of arrangements that smack of a “separate but equal” justification. Equality is usually measured not only in terms of educational and economic opportunities but also in terms of participation, representation, power, and prestige. The asymmetrical relations in the family and in society that we see in so many scripture texts looks not only foreign but frequently offensive to our contemporary taste.

We should acknowledge at the outset that every age has its issues, concerns, and fads that may be brought to the scripture texts as the expectations of successive generations. Paula Fredriksen argues that when we read accounts of Christ’s life, for example, though we tend to invoke the historical Jesus, we too often see a “(thinly disguised) version of ourselves. . . . The Jesus of the 1960s was a freedom fighter. And the most recent Jesus of the modern academy battles not ancient demons [such as devils who possess people], but our own [demons]—sexism, nationalism, social hierarchy.” Such an approach may be a way of likening the scriptures to ourselves, a recycling of old issues renamed in current jargon, or a reflection of changing social values.

While contemporary social issues are significant, we must not assume that we are the generation to finally get everything right. We must consider the possibilities that some of our cherished values (e.g., individual autonomy) may have their downside and that earlier values or practices (e.g., arranged marriages) may not have been wholly invidious. It may be that reading the Book of Mormon is less like reading the editorial page of the Sunday paper than it is like the experience of temple ordinances: an invitation to separate ourselves from the world and join with others in a common purpose before the Lord. Suspending our enculturated expectations may allow us to read the Book of Mormon not so much in terms of our self-defined, biologically defined, or culturally defined differences of sex, race, or class, but rather in terms of our commonality as offspring of deity, as sinners in need of the Savior.

How many women should we expect to find in an ancient text, and what should we expect them to be doing?

There are, of course, ancient texts with fairly extensive stories about individual females, particularly female deities. Women also appear in ancient legal codes, contracts, and other legal documents. Extant ancient texts contain examples of females whose social status varies widely: goddess, queen, princess, high priestess, daughter, wife, mother, sister, aunt, grandmother, merchant, hierdoule, prostitute, and slave. While most women were likely occupied much of the time by responsibilities within the family and household, they likely also had additional opportunities or responsibilities according to marital and social status (e.g., according to whether they lived in a rural or urban area, and whether they lived within a tribal system or under a centralized monarchy). Bird’s caution about women in the Bible seems applicable to women in the Book of Mormon:

A common status or lifestyle cannot be assumed for the woman of an Early Iron Age pioneer settlement, the wife of a wealthy merchant or large landowner in Samaria or Jerusalem, the daughter of an indebted eighth-century peasant, the foreign wife of a returned exile, a priest’s daughter, queen mother, palace servant, childless widow, or prostitute. Nor can one expect a common portrait from narrative compositions, proverbial sentences, prophetic oracles, and legal stipulations.

In the Book of Mormon we do see women occupying a wide range of social roles and performing a variety of activities. In addition to their family roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, apparently some of them made yarns, textiles, and clothing (see Mosiah 10:5; Helaman 6:13). Some armed themselves for battle (see Alma 54:12; 55:17; Ether 15:15); some rebelled, murmured (see 1 Nephi 7:6; 16:35), complained, mourned, received comfort, testified, rejoiced, and gave thanks (see 1 Nephi 5:1–9); some pleaded for Nephi’s life (see 1 Nephi 7:19); and some danced or sang (see 1 Nephi 18:9; Mosiah 20:1, 2, 5; Ether 8:10–11). Some were conspirators in murder and overthrowing a kingdom (see Ether 8); some were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ (see Alma 14:8–12); some were deceived by an anti-Christ (see Alma 30:18); some were polygamous wives or
concubines (see Mosiah 11; Ether 10:5); some were prisoners of war who were fed human flesh or were raped, tortured, and eaten by their captors (see Moroni 9:7–10); some were harlots (see Mosiah 12:29; Alma 39:3); some were queens (see Alma 19; 47:32); some were slaves or servants (see Alma 19:15–16; 50:30); some were witches (see 3 Nephi 21:16; Mormon 1:19; 2:10); and some were “married” by capture and later pleaded for the lives of their husbands/captors (see Mosiah 20:1, 2, 5; 23:31–34).

Although we have no indication that women authored religious texts in Book of Mormon subcultures, it is apparent that women were converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ, participated in ordinances, bore testimony, and taught their children the gospel. It appears that the transmission of the gospel was primarily by word of mouth and that the peoples of the Book of Mormon probably did not have access to vast quantities of texts in the way that we do. Writing and reading reformed Egyptian may have become a specialized task. But it appears that whether or not women could themselves read the sacred records, they knew the content, including knowledge of secret combinations.

There are no direct references to goddesses, although some of the peoples in the Book of Mormon at times were practicing idol worship, including human sacrifice (see Mormon 4:14). So it is possible, but not certain, that goddesses were represented or associated with some of the idols. Nor do we find direct references to priestesses in the Book of Mormon. Just as the secular record is truncated or absent, the record of religious activities is also partial in the Book of Mormon, as it is in the Bible. Phyllis Bird argues that “where women appear at all in the standard [biblical texts], it is in incidental references, as exceptional figures, or in limited discussion of practices or customs relating especially to women. . . . But it can no longer be viewed as an adequate portrait of Israelite religion.”

Noting that the incomplete material gives a skewed view of women’s participation, Bird points out that women appeared to have a supporting role that did not require clergy status, such as spinning or weaving temple hangings, preparing meals or foods used in sacrificial ritual, and cleaning temple vessels, furniture, or quarters. She also suggests that women perhaps enjoyed more public roles as members of a royal or priestly household. It may be the case that women in Book of Mormon cultures served in similar ways. While we do not have that record, neither do we have the extensive outline of the Mosaic law of sacrifice or of ritual impurity found in the Bible, nor as much information about the religious practices of those who rejected the gospel.

Ze’ev Falk contended that in order to understand the status of women in biblical law, one must see it as a reaction “against the worship of female goddesses and the role of women in fertility cults.” It may be that the peoples of the Book of Mormon were also tempted to worship goddesses and engage in the practices of fertility cults, although it seems that the abridger and compiler included relatively little about competing religious practices. If it was the case that women were fully engaged in the tasks of family and household, then it is not surprising that the record of Mormon contains relatively little about those roles, given its focus on the spiritual state of the people as a whole.

Why are there so few individual women named in the text?

It is fair to ask why certain things are included in a text and others may have been excluded from it. For example, we may ask why a person in a narrative might be named or not named. In the Book of Mormon only six women are named (Sariah, Mary, Eve, Sarah, Abish, and Isabel), and three of those are from the Bible. The inclusion of a name may provide meaning if the name is descriptive or symbolic in some sense (e.g., Adam meaning “[hu]man”), or
simply may make it easier to refer to an individual (e.g., referring to Sariah by name avoids repeating a phrase such as “the mother of Nephi” or “the wife of Lehi”). Such constructions as those in the latter example seem awkward to us, but depending on how the character or glyph was written, and on the social or linguistic conventions of the culture, they actually may have been more natural to the writer or may have demonstrated respect for the individual woman or her family. Certainly such constructions are numerous and are not confined to references to women (e.g., brother of Jared, sons of Ishmael, priests of Noah). Given the difficulty of etching the plates, it is reasonable to suppose that this may have been the easiest or most efficient way of designating those individuals or groups.

While naming has had tremendous importance in most cultures, public knowledge of one’s name may not necessarily indicate the importance of the name or the named person. It was the custom anciently to identify people according to family—their primary source of sustenance and social identity for both males and females, although not all cultures use surnames, or family names. In fact, not to be linked to a family or a city was to have no identity, to be an outcast. Merely being named, however, gives relatively little information about the individual. Although there are two dozen genealogical lists in the Old Testament, two in the New Testament, and one each in Alma 10:2–3, Ether 1, and Moses 6, we know little or nothing about most of those named persons in most of those lists. Because the Book of Mormon contains fewer genealogies than does the Bible, we need not conclude that familial identity was less important to Book of Mormon peoples than to those of the Old Testament. It seems that for the purposes of the abridgment, the full list was not necessary:

And now I, Nephi, do not give the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record; neither at anytime shall I give it after upon these plates which I am writing; for it is given in the record which has been kept by my father; wherefore, I do not write it in this work. For it sufficeth me to say that we are descendants of Joseph....I desire the room that I may write of the things of God. For the fullness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Israelite captives from Lachish approach the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.), as poignantly portrayed in a panel from Ninevah (now in the British Museum). Note the mother in the cart kissing her baby and the boys clinging to their father. Redrawn by Michael Lyon.
Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved. (1 Nephi 6:1–4)

Nephi subordinated the custom of giving a complete paternal lineage to his task of bearing testimony of Christ. He may have expected that other records would survive to more fully identify him and those who traveled from Jerusalem.

Further, it is unlikely that simply giving the names of Nephi’s sisters or of Lamoni’s queen would provide much insight regarding their lives and their respective testimonies. Their actions suggest more about their spiritual contributions to ecclesiastical history than about their individual identities.

Nephi’s sisters recognized the “warnings and the revelations of God” and chose to separate themselves from Laman and Lemuel, following Nephi’s counsel (see 2 Nephi 5:6). It appears that Lamoni’s queen used her own powers of observation (“as for myself, to me he doth not stink”), investigation (“The servants of my husband have made it known unto me that . . .”), and judgment to know that Lamoni was not dead before calling Ammon to confirm her evaluation (see Alma 19:4–5). By believing Ammon, a witness for the Lord’s hand in the matter, she demonstrated a faith greater than any Ammon had witnessed among the Nephites (see Alma 19:10). She was quite obviously teachable and amenable to the Spirit, despite her elevated social status and Ammon’s servant/alien status. While we do not have extended narratives of named women in the Book of Mormon, we do have interesting glimpses that point to ways in which women participated in family, religious, and social life.

Why aren’t women more prominent in the Book of Mormon narratives?

Obviously, the mere presence of women in a text is not sufficient to make that text of interest and value to women. Nor is it logical to suppose that merely because women do not appear in a specific text that the text was written by a misogynist. Biblical scholars look to comparable cultures as part of their task of interpreting women’s lives in ancient Israel; we may also reasonably look to biblical and comparable cultures to better decipher why the role of women in the Book of Mormon may, upon first consideration, seem small.

A primary reason may be that the book focuses on the larger culture, rather than the family, and on extraordinary events rather than daily occupations. This focus does not give attention to modesty or unheralded service, both of which are undervalued in our own culture and perhaps in most others. Bird also reminds us that “a woman’s primary and essential role within the family, with its multiple demands of time and skill, . . . accounts for her highest personal and social reward—but also for her restriction in roles and activities outside the family and her hiddenness in documents from the public sphere.”

Even when women are prominent in narratives, their stories might not be considered helpful to women or positive in general. According to Alice Bach, while a substantial number of feminist biblical studies during the past 20 years have examined ancient texts with the purpose of “recovering submerged female voices,” the results have been mixed. A significant number of “subversive” readings affirm women’s courage, strength, faith, ingenuity, talents, dignity, and worth. Some interpreters see women as sometimes challenging the patriarchal culture in which they lived. But the “valorization” of mothers, Esther Fuchs argues, is also in support of patriarchy, making those women “enablers” in their own suppression and in the suppression of women generally.

Because our larger contemporary culture does not value mothering, it is difficult for us to believe that any culture, ancient or modern, truly can. Because modern society in general has been educated to regard population growth as negative, it is hard for some people living today to appreciate the social value of giving and sustaining life in a subsistence economy or a preindustrial society. Both in terms of religious belief and economic need, the birth and survival of children was a necessity, and women were the workers who ensured the continuation of the family and the society through birthing, childcare, and management of the household.

It is also difficult for us, steeped as we are in power politics, to appreciate roles that appear to have little or no power in the polity. Yet the too-common view of ancient women as uniformly oppressed is being discarded in light of the “anthropological study of gender [which] reveals complex patterns of male-female relationships within patriarchal societies, involving distinctions of formal and informal power and recognition of spheres of influence and authority, which require qualification of many commonly held views of women’s lives in ancient Israel” and elsewhere.
Clearly, women did not receive “equal treatment”—nor did anyone else, for that matter—in ancient societies. Martha Roth points out that “to assess the standing of a person before the law, to arrive at a systemic valuation of the individual, it is necessary to know much more than simply whether the person is female or male. A wide range of tangible and intangible factors, such as citizenship, wealth, age, family position, as well as gender, combine in often subtle and unexamined ways to produce an individual’s standing in the law as a ‘legal subject.” Early legal codes, with their distinctions among citizen and noncitizen, male and female, husband and wife, parent and child, slave and freeborn, appear glaringly unjust to contemporary readers. Nevertheless, they set a predictable standard for conduct and outlined a person’s rights and duties, although we have relatively little documentation of the application and enforcement of those laws. No person in ancient societies was completely unfettered simply because he was male, and even slaves had some minimal protections.

Men as well as women were constrained by family duties and customs. Lehi apparently arranged marriages for his sons, just as Ishmael apparently arranged marriages for his daughters. Predisposed as we are to prize individual autonomy above subordinating our desires to the good of family or group, practices such as arranged marriages seem obviously oppressive to us. But part of our repugnance may arise from our ignorance of the values or the safeguards that may be inherent in such practices, or of the relative merits of the then-available alternatives.

Clearly, the Book of Mormon record is not the detailed history of any one individual or family; rather, it is a story of peoples and a witness of Christ. The emphasis on peoples and witnessing does to some degree keep the record focused on activities outside the household, women’s primary sphere of influence and action. About 50 percent of the Book of Mormon could be classified as historical narrative or historiography designed to inculcate moral values. In addition, significant portions of the book comprise doctrinal exposition (including what Sperry calls “prophetic discourse”), oratory such as King Benjamin’s address, and the words and actions of Christ (see 3 Nephi 11:8–28:13). The condensed nature of the book may have also decreased the incidence of women’s stories or the number of stories about individuals in general. Covering 1,000 years in 522 pages allows only an average of about one-half page per year, scant space for recording names or events, much less prophecies, revelations, and testimonies.

While the Book of Mormon’s witnessing of Christ is more pronounced than its narrative, some of the narratives of the Bible seem at times almost unrelated to the witness of Jesus Christ, the Father, or the Holy Ghost. Susan Niditch sees the tales of the women of Genesis as arising from traditional Hebrew literature. She argues that several of the women in Genesis are “portrayed as active tricksters who, like Eve, alter the rules, men’s rules.” This creates a tension between the wishes of the males (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and “the women’s wishes and God’s wishes,” which are aligned in these stories. This kind of tension between the sexes is a classic scenario in folklore. The books of Ruth and Esther are named after their protagonists but contain relatively little that is overtly about God. “Women in the biblical texts,” Bird states, “are presented through male eyes, for purposes determined by male authors. This does not mean that women are necessarily suppressed in the account or portrayed unsympathetically. It does mean, however, that women are not heard directly in the biblical text, in their own voices; the Old Testament gives no unmediated access to the lives and thought of Israelite women.” It might be safe to say we have no unmediated access to any ancient author or person, given our understanding of the means of transmission. We may feel we are closer to the ancients in the Book of Mormon because the individual writers identify themselves and frequently tell their own stories. In contrast to the overwhelming use of the third person in biblical narrative, the first person is used extensively in Book of Mormon narrative.

Why didn’t God command the prophets to include more women in the record?

Francine Bennion’s hypothetical critical reader asks: “Whatever the assumption of the people [of Nephi], couldn’t God tell the men to record women’s names and make opportunities equitable, even if the men didn’t know enough to ask about it?” Bennion concludes that “God speaks to us according to our own language and understanding, which at the same time both aids and limits us.” Of course, such commandments for inclusion might have had results that would now dismay us: had the text included as many named women as men, or many women functioning equally in the public sphere, it is likely that today’s
critics would view such an “ancient” society as anachronistic and see the inclusion as evidence that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic ancient text.

Perhaps reading scripture as a woman has its limitations and drawbacks. Sensitivity to individual and group differences can be positive, but once we begin to read scripture from an interest-group perspective, we may enter the clash of diversity politics so common in academe today. Such an approach can eventually lead to the view that a male Savior cannot understand the suffering of women or other marginalized groups, or it can turn Christ from a person to a symbol. This may encourage the view that what we seek is not a literal savior who atoned for our sins but principles for a “redemptive community” that “transforms people and social systems,” the focus remaining on a social system rather than on a savior.

Some feminists both inside and outside the church argue that viewing God as literally male disadvantages women as individuals and as members of the church. For example, drawing on the LDS standard works and principles of equality, Janice Allred sees the Holy Ghost as the immanent manifestation of God the Mother and argues that “we must also picture God as female and experience her as mother if women are to attain equality and if feminine attributes and roles are to be valued equally with masculine ones.” Pearson contends that significant detrimental effects result from the absence of women in the Book of Mormon, coupled with the positive images of males and what she considers the negative images of females.

To those who never viewed the alleged negative female imagery as hurtful to women, the emphasis on re-imaging or reconstructing women in the Book of Mormon may seem at best unnecessary or speculative. For some readers, even if the Book of Mormon contained only the equivalent of the published proceedings of a contemporary general priesthood meeting in Moroni’s time, it might still be of interest and spiritual value to female readers. Asking the “woman question” is not tantamount to apostasy, and neither Ruether nor Allred nor Pearson would recommend that we simply reconstruct God or women in scripture according to our own tastes. Rather, it appears that asking the woman question can become, for some readers, an indictment of our collective religious history and the foundation for recommendations to change our practices today. Certainly that is not the trajectory of every questioner. However, we might ask ourselves: Am I concerned about the status of women in scripture, or am I more worried about my own status today? Am I reading into an ancient text my own self-concern? Clarifying our own concerns and motivations may change how we approach the text. At the least, we may be able to evaluate whether we are acting on what we find as evidence about women in the Book of Mormon or whether we are actually focused on women’s roles in our own time.

If scripture is simply narrative aimed at personal religious experience, then those questions are relatively unimportant. If, on the other hand, the Book of Mormon is an ancient record designed to give witness of factual events of eternal import, then a focus on myself and contemporary social or psychological concerns may distort the witness and obscure the saving message. The Book of Mormon is about the saving mission of Christ, and in a very real sense the mission of Christ is about us—those he was sent to save. Examining how the record keepers in the Book of Mormon tried to communicate Christ’s message to us is an interesting venture, whether we ask the woman question or not.

Inclusion and Exclusion in the Book of Mormon Text

Why were specific stories included in the Book of Mormon and others apparently excluded?

How did the stories function as part of the cultural history? Why so much about Nephi and the journey and relatively little about Jacob and the time and lives that passed away like a dream? (see Jacob 7:26). Why is the book of Omni so short and the book of Alma so long? Why is there so little about how those peaceable people lived for 200 years after Christ’s visit (23 verses) and so much about so many wars?

Robert Alter proposes that “biblical narrative characteristically catches its protagonists only at the critical and revealing points in their lives.” The Book of Mormon narratives highlight important transitional events in the history of the gospel among the children of Lehi but do not provide much detail. Unlike biblical narrative, they contain considerable interspersed or embedded explanation to aid the reader’s interpretation.

The first part of the Book of Mormon lays the foundation for the Nephite-Lamanite schism that dominates the bulk of the record. Just as Genesis
presents the patriarchs, introduces the Abrahamic covenant, and sets the stage for the rivalry among brothers—all preparatory to understanding the Egyptian sojourn, the exodus, and the struggle to maintain Israelite allegiance to God—so 1 Nephi presents to us in rapid succession the exodus of the Book of Mormon patriarchs, a covenant specific to Lehi’s family and the intersibling rivalry, and a prophecy of the coming of Christ while introducing the theme of preserving sacred records, which permeates the remainder of the text. Book of Mormon links to Old Testament narratives are numerous and richly allusive, although narrative in the Book of Mormon is subordinated to the interpretive or didactic treatment of the events and helps fill in the gap in religious history between the Old and the New Testaments. In the Bible, each writer/compiler gives relatively few interpretive comments and virtually no information about the preparation of the text itself or the purpose of the book. In contrast, the editing, abridging, and custody of the Book of Mormon text are matters repeatedly brought to the fore.

Concerning the Book of Mormon, some have concluded that the male record keepers overlooked women or did not understand what it feels like to be a woman and so did not include female role models in their records. But if we say, in effect, to Mormon, “What do you know about being a woman?” couldn’t he fairly reply, “What do you know about being a prophet?”

The Record Keeper’s Self-Interest and Burden

If we take the words of the record keepers at face value, the provenance of the Book of Mormon is a model of simplicity and clarity in comparison to that of the Bible. Even if we grant that the biblical books were written by those traditionally considered the authors or by their scribes, we do not know who had custody of the texts for significant periods of time. In contrast, the chain of custody for the Book of Mormon record is unbroken (which explains the inclusion of the otherwise puzzling book of Omni). That these record keepers took their charge seriously, and testified that they had custody of the record, even when they gave little other information about themselves, their families (except as it was relevant to the task of record keeping), or their times may be an indication of the authenticity of the record.

Feminist studies commonly conclude that women and women’s stories “have been (and continue to be) erased from the historical record” because men fear them or do not value them. We cannot conclude that those topics the Book of Mormon authors did not or could not write about were excluded because they were feared or not valued. Nor can we conclude that those topics were all too sacred to be recorded. Rather, in the Book of Mormon, we see a range of topics excluded, from the very sacred words of Christ (and those blessed by him) in 3 Nephi to the names of the three Nephites who remained upon the earth and the prohibition on including in the record information about secret combinations (see Alma 37:29; Ether 8:20), as well as much of the historical information regardless of its moral content.

We know that Mormon and the other record keepers faced a number of constraints that limited the length of their records. One was spatial—the surface area of the available plates was relatively small. For example, Jarom explains his brevity by twice noting that “these plates are small” (Jarom 1:2, 14). Amaleki notes that “these plates [the small plates of Nephi] are full,” adding, “And I make an end of my speaking” (Omni 1:30). Moroni, finishing his father’s record, states, “I would write it also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not; and ore I have none [to make additional plates], for I am alone [with neither family nor friends who could obtain plates]” (Mormon 8:5). Moroni apparently left room for an abridgment of the Jaredite record (the book of Ether), then was surprised to find that there was still some space on the plates and that he was still alive to write something (see Moroni 1:1, 4). There were also orthographic or linguistic challenges outlined by Moroni, who referred to “our weakness in writing,” for “we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands,” and “when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:23–25).

The more important constraint, however, was deciding which “hundredth part” of the record of the peoples should be included. Some things were included because the Lord directed or commanded that they be included. Since at least two kinds of records were kept—one historical, the other religious—and we have an abridgment of the religious record alone, we can reasonably assume that there may be more about women in the historical record or in the complete religious record, neither of which we can access at this time. Even in the religious record, some things were excluded by way of commandment, forbidden to be written. At other times
there is a record of an event, but the time was not right to have the record come forth.  

Mormon and Moroni have given us a remarkably cohesive abridgment of the records of at least 18 men who were given custody of the record and the assignment to write the things of God. We possess few details about the manner of transferring the record, the usual age (if there was one) when the recorder was given the plates, or how the decision was made about when to transfer the plates to another person. These decisions appear to have been at the discretion of the record keepers. It is possible, too, that the length of the various books is directly related to the importance Mormon placed on each book rather than to the length of the unabridged records alone. Occasionally a particular writer’s comment is preserved in Mormon’s abridgment and may echo to a certain extent the principles and exigencies guiding Mormon’s handling of the record. For example, Amaleki gives two reasons for ending his record: “I am about to lie down in my grave; and these plates are full. And [so] I make an end of my speaking” (Omni 1:30). Jarom notes that the plates are small, so he needs to write but little, then states tellingly: “I shall not write the things of my prophesying, nor of my revelations. For what could I write more than my fathers have written? For have not they revealed the plan of salvation? I say unto you, Yea; and this sufficeth me” (Jarom 1:2).

Is a writer advancing his own self-interest by excluding stories about women?

While it may be possible to apply the hermeneutic of suspicion to the Book of Mormon and assume that the stories were included in order to advance male interests, or the interests of specific males, the text may not support such a conclusion. If Mormon wanted to consolidate patriarchal or male power, it was a mistake for him to have included Jacob 2, which better than any other scriptural
discourse advances the interests of women and children and clearly condemns their exploitation by men. Jacob’s words are remarkably like President Hinckley’s at the priesthood session of the April 2002 general conference,109 except that Jacob castigated the men in the presence of their wives and children (see v. 7), indicating that the meeting was not segregated by age or gender. Mormon should also have edited out Jacob 3:7, 10 and other empathic references. Had the record keepers sought to portray males well, it would have been wiser, perhaps, for the writers and editors not to have used women as an index of the health of the Book of Mormon societies.110 Even Laman and Lemuel describe their wives’ travails in the wilderness as the sufferings of persons, distinguishable from damage to or loss of their possessions (see 1 Nephi 17:1, 20–21). In the Book of Mormon, war is justified only as a defensive action to protect religion, freedom, and family (see Alma 48:14; also Alma 24:5; 35:14; 43:23, 26, 30; 3 Nephi 3:22). War to avenge supposed wrongs was not justified (see Mormon 3:15–16). In the Book of Mormon there are no triumphal hero celebration scenes akin to the praise received by Saul or David (see 1 Samuel 18:7; 2 Samuel 6:15–16). In fact, war is seen as the destructive force that it is, leading not only to death by violent means but also to famine (see Alma 62:35, 39), either because armies ravage the crops or because farmers must leave their fields to fight and have no time to plant.

Rather than describing the depth of Nephite and Lamanite depravity in terms of the suffering of women (as in Moroni 9:8–10, 16, 18–20; Mormon 4:15, 21), Mormon could have focused more on male suffering. Mormon’s descriptions of final battles include women and children (see Mormon 6:7) but give little detail about the glory of war or the gore involved in the killing of around 220,000 warriors. Even his lament is inclusive, addressed to fair sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, rather than to his soldiers (see Mormon 6:16–20). More detail about the male martyrs cast out and stoned in Alma 14:7–8, rather than on the suffering of their wives and children in verses 8–9, would have created more admiration for the men and would have avoided expressions of concern for the women and children. The tone of the above passages, coupled with the overt denunciation of wrongs against women and children, suggests that Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, Alma, and Moroni felt the same empathy that contemporary readers feel for those women and children. In fact, Mormon’s syntax breaks down as he describes atrocities against women and children (see Moroni 9:11–15), in the way that a man’s voice catches when he is near weeping. It is difficult to see how those passages advance either the self-interest of males generally or of the writers and editors specifically.

It is possible that the Book of Mormon writers and editors were fairly uninterested in advancing themselves at the expense of their task and the text. Perhaps they were kept on task and in the right frame of mind in part by the admonishment of the Lord (as in Ether 12:35) and by the ability they were given at various times to “see” those for whom they made the record (e.g., Mormon 8:35). Some readers of the Book of Mormon focus on the woman questions; some readers from other faiths seek answers to the “fundamental questions of mankind”111 or to “the great question”: Is there really a redeeming Christ?112 The Book of Mormon prophets may not answer the questions we have about women today, but they do advance considerably the knowledge we have of Christ, which advances the self-interest of every reader, whether male or female. The Book of Mormon does not deal with every contemporary concern; that was clearly not its mission or purpose. Certainly the testimonies of the prophets are expansive in comparison to the amount of history, sociology, geography, demographics, or law contained in their accounts.

The record keepers and the abridgers were united in their desire to present the testimony of Christ and the plan of salvation.113 In fact, if they showed a “self-interest,” it was the interest they had in ridding their garments of the blood of those to whom they were called to preach. After outlining the calling Nephi gave to him and Joseph, Jacob states:

And we did magnify our office unto the Lord, taking upon us the responsibility, answering the sins of the people upon our own heads if we did not teach them the word of God with all diligence; wherefore, by laboring with our might their blood might not come upon our garments; otherwise their blood would come upon our garments, and we would not be found spotless at the last day. (Jacob 1:19)

Being found spotless seems to have particular relevance for those called as special witnesses of Christ.114 Jacob’s concern is repeated by the Three Witnesses in their testimony of the Book of Mormon
and is echoed in the warning of the title page: “condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ.” Moroni is even more direct, promising that “the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?” (Moroni 10:27).

The writers and abridgers were convinced of the purpose of their calling, even if they did not know the details. They were witnesses of Christ to their own people and to generations unborn, seen by some of them in vision (see Mormon 8:35). It may be churlish to condemn an aged prophet and his prophet son, hunted fugitives lugging 60-plus pounds of plates, for failing to include more of the female perspective. All things considered, they were remarkably faithful and successful in carrying out their charge.

Conclusion

The status of women anciently and currently is both interesting and important and is not unrelated to the mission of Christ, Savior of us all. The record of women in the Book of Mormon, like the record of virtually every other aspect of those people, is incomplete, fragmentary. Nevertheless, the Book of Mormon is a worthy witness of Christ and a resounding affirmation that “all are alike unto God,” for through its divinely inspired teachings Christ invites all of us—each of us—to come unto him (see 2 Nephi 26:33). And even if some female readers were to insist that they could access the Book of Mormon witness of Christ only through Book of Mormon women, the book makes that possible.

In the very heart of the abridgment, Alma 19, is the story of the queen and her servant Abish, a narrative that could serve as a pattern for our efforts to understand “the things of God.” These women are at opposite ends of the social scale: if anyone lived in luxury or had access to education, it was likely to be the king, the queen, and their children; we don’t know Abish’s marital status, but she was at least a working woman, if not a slave, and already converted to the Lord. Whatever else she didn’t have, we know she had the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one thing we all must possess.

We don’t know the queen’s name, but we know the name of the servant, a believer who was able to understand “the power of God” (Alma 19:17). Abish naively assumed others would also understand merely by “beholding th[ei] scene” of the court and Ammon, sunk to the earth, overcome by the power of God (see vv. 19:14, 17). The multitude that gathered faced a task of interpretation not unlike our own as readers of the Book of Mormon.

Some could not perceive the power of God because of the cultural tradition that viewed Nephites as enemies: a Nephite witness such as Ammon was unacceptable. For how could a Lamanite be touched by a witness so foreign and unaware of the unique Lamanite experience of perceived Nephite dominance and oppression? Some thought Ammon a “monster,” not a man. Some tried to slay Ammon where he lay. The actions of the faithful servant woman in gathering a crowd and taking the hand of the queen set in motion the successive testimonies of the queen and the king, resulting in the conversion of many hearers. By the end of the story there are an abundance of witnesses: many hearts are changed, many see angels, many are baptized, and the church is established among the Lamanites.

While it does not do to push the analogy too far, it might be said that some feminist critics may reject the Book of Mormon because it is the “witness of males” and therefore unavoidably sexist. Some may view the Book of Mormon as a “monster” created by Joseph Smith, an amalgam of biblical and other sources, some manifestation (even if unintended) of a male-dominated culture. Some may have supposed the Book of Mormon vulnerable, capable of being “slain” or rendered powerless by those aggrieved by it or its alleged “male perspective.” But, like Ammon, it has been and is preserved by God for his purposes. Whatever its perceived shortcomings, it possesses a spirit that no other book has. Readers have responded to that spirit and testimony as did those who heard the queen and King Lamoni: their hearts have been changed. That change of heart is a primary component of coming unto Christ. And like the queen and Abish, we each are dependent upon Jesus Christ for our salvation.

Will women today, trained to be suspicious of texts that appear male-dominated, be able to find themselves through reading and pondering the Book of Mormon? If we are first able to find Christ, who has promised that he will neither forsake nor forget us, we will surely find ourselves where we have always been: “graven . . . upon the palms of [his] hands” (1 Nephi 21:16).
handed down from one generation to another? Why would the Lord allow a people to have two sets of interpreters? Where did Moroni leave Mosiah’s other interpreters, if not with the gold plates (Joseph Smith found only one set)?

7. Hugh Nibley, in trying to solve the seeming anomalies that Benjamin found in the Book of Mormon in his last years had a share in the record keeping of the 24 plates with his son Nibley. Besides the possibility that the sealed record and the 24 plates were separate records, this is rather unlikely since Benjamin was probably already dead or, if he still lived, in his very last months. Why would Moroni particularly refer to Benjamin’s very short joint record keeping of the 24 plates with his son if there already had been custody of all the records and sacred artifacts three years earlier? (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 7.

Into the Desert: An Arab View of the Book of Mormon
Shibam Al-Awaz


8. Ibid., 82–83.


10. Ibid.

11. While published discussion of women in the Book of Mormon has focused on the small number of named women, and their mostly unknown roles in the narratives of these peoples, interpretative issues related to the inclusion and exclusion of women in the Book of Mormon may also ask, for example: Is there a woman or woman’s point of view in this text? (The places where women do not appear in the text can be as significant as the places where they do appear.) How are women portrayed in this text? How is power distributed? How have women’s lives and voices been hidden or displaced by this text? What hidden gender assumptions lie behind this text? For example, women lead men astray in public texts (Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative). What interests are being served by this text? These questions (slightly modified and with considerable text deleted) are taken from, Cheryl Eaton, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?” in Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies, ed. Gail A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 69.


17. There may be a death in the editors willing to publish LDS feminist writings. LDS publishers may be uncomfortable with the term feminism itself, which is widely associated with support for abortion and gay rights; and non-LDS publishers may consider the audience interested in LDS feminism too small to justify publication or may consider Mormons too like-minded to interest these publishers.


want “the assurance that the efforts and faithfulness of young women were noticed [in ancient times]. And that as well as now. Without role models, without stories, that's a hard point to get across.” Christie B. Gardner, in her review of Heroes from the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), makes the point: “I think of the many lovely and faithful young women who also have named their feminine heroes. The only element I might suggest for consideration in creating such a book as Heroes from the Book of Mormon is to include some women for us to emulate” (FARMS Review of Books 9/1 [1997], 10).

29. See, for example, Donald W. Parry, The Prophetic Book and FARMS, 1989), 542. If this was the case with Isabel, then Corianton was probably guilty of not only sexual sin but also apostasy.


32. Kevin and Sharron Christensen present probably the most exhaustive list (“Nephi Feminism Revisited,” 59–60).


35. Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephiites?” 34.


41. Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” 60.

42. Kevin and Shauna Christensen present probably the most exhaustive list (“Nephi Feminism Revisited,” 59–60).

43. Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” 60.

44. As in the Bible, servant probably means “slave” in some contexts.

45. See 1 Nephi 5:8–9, where Sariah testifies to obtaining kingdoms and great glory (see 1 Nephi 5:20–21; 21:2;Ether 7:25–26).

46. See 1 Nephi 5:8–9, where Sariah testifies to obtaining kingdoms and great glory (see 1 Nephi 5:20–21; 21:2;Ether 7:25–26).

47. Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” 60.

48. See 1 Nephi 5:8–9, where Sariah testifies to obtaining kingdoms and great glory (see 1 Nephi 5:20–21; 21:2;Ether 7:25–26).

49. See 1 Nephi 5:8–9, where Sariah testifies to obtaining kingdoms and great glory (see 1 Nephi 5:20–21; 21:2;Ether 7:25–26).


51. Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephiites?” 34.


58. There are also 11 men listed as the leader of their thousands, and 10 leaders of 10,000 each. It may be that the naming of the leaders and their 10,000 is part of a refrain or other rheotetic device. Rather than to utter a victory song, as in 1 Samuel 18:7, “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousand.


64. Bird, Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities, 54–55.

65. Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephiites?” 34.


73. See, for example, the Babylonian laws known as the Laws of Eshnunna (1900 B.C.E.) and the Laws of Hammurabi (1729–1705 B.C.E.) and the laws contained in Exodus 20–23.


76. See Carolyn Pressler, “Wives and Daugh- ters,” in Gender and Power in the Slaves of Exodus 21:2–17, in Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and
79. Consider, for example, Mormon’s and
83. The first person is also used in the words
82. Warfare and defensive actions were
81. take into account the time span covered
78. Ether 1:3–4).
77. Of Mormon title page; 1 Nephi 5:11–16;
76. Moroni’s decisions not to include in
75. See also David B.
74. Warned against. Sperry cites 1 Nephi 22;
73. sified as “exemplar historiography, “ which
72. Book of Mormon writings might be clas-
71. spuriousness of personal narrative or biog-
70. raphy by its emphasis on “the big picture,”
69. As opposed to our contemporary fascina-
68. tion and to home life and drew attention
67. both agricultural and to home life and drew attention
66. away from the ordinary activities of daily
65. Bible Commentary,
64. Academy, the men in many of the women’s
63. deceit her father Laban, or in Tamar’s
62. special pleasure in Rebekah’s fooling her
61. uncompleted future of redemption,
60. that desperately poor parents could not
59. duty to provide for a slave, a duty
58. to love each other after the marriage cer-
57. honor the family of origin and to insult
56. She observed that people in the United States spend a lot of time
during both the war they marry, they “complain, complain, complain.”
55. Such complaints in her culture would be a
dance of immorality for embarrassment to
54. Sperry, Our Book of Mormon, 113–24, reprinted in
53. 91–94. Historical narrativism might be distin-
52. sible from general historiographic, which
51. pictures that is desired to be inscribed in
dated in the New Testament, might be classified as “exemplar historiography,” which
50. views of the female affect our lives, our self-
49. king of the epoch, is not the message God wants us to have.
48. Mosiah trusted him because he is commanded to
47. the referent is unclear; perhaps the
46. The referent is unclear; perhaps behind the name
45. the familial relationships stated, the in-
44. But given the charge to hand them
43. of the female affect our lives, our self-
42. our relationships to God, and our rela-
41. to one another.” Pearson also recommends
40. the context because he is commanded to
39. and their diverse liberation struggles. We
38. to our relationships to God, and our rela-
37. to relationships to one another.” Pearson also recommends
36. to our relationships to God, and our rela-
35. and our psyches as we study this book
34. or a factual measurement; rather than a factual measurement;
33. concerning That Which I Have Written. ‘” (Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the
32. and her husbands’ parents have sold children to richer
31. that desperately poor parents could not
30. to provide for a slave, a duty
29. honor the family of origin and to insult
28. of Mormon’s and
27. the first person is also used in the words
26. of God given to Moses in Moses 1:4–4 and to Abraham in 1:3–32. That pat-
25. of “I, [given name],” used in the words in the Book of Mormon, is also used in
24. Abraham’s account (see Abraham 1:1;
23. Bennis, “Women and the Book of Mor-
22. to know that the “biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence but at the
21. the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes,
20. and Moroni, the hero of this book
19. of Mormon can bring unity to societies
18. to centred on war, on 328pp.
17. the Dalai Lama, to decide to
16. 214–38. Our disdain for slavery might be
15. take away from the ordinary activities of daily
14. that the uncompleted future of redemption,
13. is not the historical Jesus returned, but
12. neither the fullness of human diversity
11. and their diverse liberation struggles. We
10. to love each other after the marriage cer-
9. to love each other after the marriage cer-
8. to husband and wife learn to love each other after the marriage cer-
7. and her husband’s parents have sold children to richer
6. they also used in the words
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4. to love each other after the marriage cer-
3. to husband and wife learn to love each other after the marriage cer-
2. the five books of Moses and most of the
1. of complex material.

92. Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative
91. ” (Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the
90. “men and malefemales, that we create new vol-
89. volumes of history and indeed new scrip-
88. to fill our minds and our hearts with
elements; pictures with positive female features, pictures of
87. Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the
86. ‘I will save the Nephites!’” (see 39–40).
85. Or it may address social situations in Book
84. it could be argued that the transfer of
83. of Mormon in a broader context, explicitly
82. of Mormon in a broader context, explicitly
81. We have seen the marriage of the king of the
echo of the message God wants us to have. “I know that the Lord’s arm is extended to all
80. and our psyches as we study this book
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78. from oral to written record forms a sub-
77. their existence is mostly unknown. The
76. including the various texts of the books of the Bible and their transmission history
75. critics for Christ with the analogical approach that the Old Testament seems at times to
74. we [must] real-
73. and her husbands’ parents have sold children to richer
72. that desperately poor parents could not
71. that the uncompleted future of redemption,
70. “Could Feminism Have Saved the
69. Our Book of Mormon: A Witness for Christ
68. and record keepers, editors, and abridgers.
67. does not allow readers to excuse the rela-
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32. to love each other after the marriage cer-
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29. in the words
28. of God given to Moses in Moses 1:4–4 and to Abraham in 1:3–32. That pat-
27. of “I, [given name],” used in the words in the Book of Mormon, is also used in
26. Abraham’s account (see Abraham 1:1;
25. Bennis, “Women and the Book of Mor-
24. to know that the “biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence but at the
23. the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes,
22. and Moroni, the hero of this book
21. of Mormon can bring unity to societies
20. to centred on war, on 328pp.
19. the Dalai Lama, to decide to
18. 214–38. Our disdain for slavery might be
17. take away from the ordinary activities of daily
16. that the uncompleted future of redemption,
15. is not the historical Jesus returned, but
14. neither the fullness of human diversity
13. and their diverse liberation struggles. We
12. to love each other after the marriage cer-
11. to love each other after the marriage cer-
10. to love each other after the marriage cer-
9. to love each other after the marriage cer-
8. to love each other after the marriage cer-
7. to love each other after the marriage cer-
6. to love each other after the marriage cer-
5. in the words
4. In the words
3. in the words
2. in the words
1. of God given to Moses in Moses 1:4–4 and to Abraham in 1:3–32. That pat-

with the problem (see Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:15; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 3:8, 26; Ether 15:33).

104. See 2 Nephi 22:13, where the Nephi record did not contain part of the prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite (now in Helaman 14:25) and Nephi was commanded to and did correct the record. Nephi and the other disciples were commanded to “write the words which the Father had given unto Malachi” (chaps. 3 and 4) in 3 Nephi 24–25. Mormon, having been forbidden to write all of Christ’s words to the Nephites, notes in 3 Nephi 26:18, “Mormon, do write the things which have been commanded me of the Lord. And you, Alma, write the things which have been commanded me of the Lord.”

105. See, for example, 2 Nephi 4:14: “For I, Nephi, was constrained to speak unto [Laman and Lemuel], according to his [Laman’s] way; for I had spoken many things unto them, and also my father, before his death; many of which sayings are upon mine other plates; for a more history part are written upon mine other plates.” See also Jacob 1:2. “And he (Nephi) gave me, Jacob, a commandment that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered to be most precious, that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi.”

106. For example, Nephi is forbidden to write part of his vision in 1 Nephi 14 (see vv. 19–28) and is told that John, “the apostle of the Lamb of God,” should write them; Nephi is “bidden” not to write things he viewed that were “too great for man” (2 Nephi 4:25); Mormon is forbidden from writing “part of his vision in 1 Nephi 14” (2 Nephi 29:25); and Mormon was forbidden from writing all of Christ’s teachings that were engraved on the plates of Nephi (see 3 Nephi 26:11), the day after Christ healed the multitude and ascended a second time into heaven, the words given to children and babes, heard by the multitude, “were forbidden that there should not any man write them. . . . And many of the disciples and law and heard unspeakable things, which are not lawful to be written” (3 Nephi 26:16, 18). Christ instructs the disciples to “write the things which ye have seen and heard, save it be those which are forbidden” (3 Nephi 27:23). Mormon was forbidden to record the names of the three Nephites who would remain upon the earth until Christ’s second coming (see 3 Nephi 28:23); and Moroni was forbidden to write more of the prophecies of Ether (see Ether 13:13).

107. See Ether 4:1, where the brother of Jared was commanded to write his vision of the Lord, but the record was not to come forth until after Christ’s crucifixion. Mormon testifies in Ether 3:1: “1. Moroni, have written the words which were commanded me, according to my memory; and I have told you the things which I have sealed up; therefore touch them not in order that ye may translate; for that thing is forbidden you, except by and by it shall be wisdom in God.”


111. See John W. Welch, in “Ten Testimonies of Jesus Christ from the Book of Mormon” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 313–49.


113. See John W. Welch, in “Ten Testimonies of Jesus Christ from the Book of Mormon” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), chart 42 (“Nephi’s Declaration of Faith”) and chart 43 (“Consistent Elements in Nephi’s Declarations of Faith”). See the plan of salvation as taught, for example, by Lehi (1 Nephi 10:2–11, 14–29; 2 Nephi 6:2–13) and Nephi (1 Nephi 19:8–24 through 1 Nephi 22).

114. The blood of the consecration ram on the priest’s garments, the blood of Christ, another’s atoning sacrifice, the blood of the unrepentant on Christ’s garments, and the effort of chosen witnesses to rid their garb of the blood (sins) of their hearers are linked. See Genesis 49:11; Isaiah 63:5; D&C 138:6–61 (of Christ); Exodus 29:21; Leviticus 6:27; 8:30 (of priests and the sacrificial animals); 1 Nephi 12; 10, 20, 9, 44; Mosiah 2:28; Mormon 9, 35, Ether 12:38, DM 88:74–8, 85, 110–32 (of special witnesses); 1 Nephi 12; Alma 5:21, 22, 27; 13:11, 36, 34; Nephi 29:13, 28:9; Ether 7:6, 16; Deuteronomy 12:6, 12–13, 20, 27; 13:10–11, 12–16, 18, 19, 23; 14:21; 15:18, 27; 20:19; 26:10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17 (of the righteous and high priests). We note that Zeerom cries of Alma and Amulek: “I am guily, and these men are wicked before God” (Alma 14:7). No doubt the “blood of the innocents,” mentioned in Alma 14:11 and in numerous other places in the Book of Mormon is related to the day of judgment, and being cleansed by the blood of Christ is part of the imagery used for repentance. See, for example, Alma 12:4; 3 Nephi 27:19, and Mormon 9:6.

115. An alternative interpretation would be to see these affirmations of the writers’ abridgers’ faith, knowledge, and purpose as appeals to authority, or ways of influencing how their writings are interpreted. The writers acknowledged their incomplete understanding and gave reasons for keeping the record (see 1 Nephi 9:5; Words of Mormon 1:7; Alma 37:12).

116. We may reject any witness upon any ground that appeals to us, or on no ground whatsoever. It may be that the activeness of those ordinary persons who know the Book of Mormon is a true witness of Christ will prove to be those of Ahith. They give a copy of the Book of Mormon to a friend or a stranger, trusting that the spirit of God will work each person that and that the successive witnesses in that book will bear testimony of Christ again and again to the reader. Many will believe these witnesses, though they have no other.

[With Real Intent] Living the Book of Mormon James E. Faulconer

1. I have recounted my experience with this professor, Steven L. Goldman (Mormon, Distingiushed Professor of Semitic, Hebrew, and Egyptian, Lehigh University, in “Studying the Scriptures,” chapter 1 in my book Scripture Study. Tools and Suggestions (Rexburg, Idaho: Rexburg High School, 1988), 1–17.


3. I use the name Canaanite for simplicity’s sake, knowing that there is still controversy over what that term denotes and connotes. I use it here simply to designate the people in the Late Bronze Age who wrote the letters sent from Palestine to Egypt.

4. For example, in 1 Nephi 16:34, the chapter previous to the one in which Irenæus appears, he provided no translation of the place-name Nazan. By contrast, in the very same verse in which Irenæus appears (1 Nephi 17:5), he provided a translation of the place-name Bosrauth. Why provide both translation and translation for Irenæus when that is not the normal practice in the Book of Mormon?

5. I use the name Nahumite for simplicity’s sake, knowing that there is still controversy over what that term denotes and connotes. I use it here simply to designate the people in the Late Bronze Age who wrote the letters sent from Palestine to Egypt.

6. In Irenaeus’s Against Heresies, he provides no translation of Monton. Why provide both translation and translation for Monton when that is not the normal practice in the Book of Mormon?

7. In fact, Irenaeus appears in a text that is not so well known to modern readers, which provides no translation of Monton. Why provide both translation and translation for Monton when that is not the normal practice in the Book of Mormon?

8. In inscriptions, the root rwy means “irrigation system” (Stephen D. Ricks, Lexicon of Inscriptional Qaballalim [Roma: Editrice Pontifici Instituto Biblici], 335). In Sabac, the root is means “to provide with irrigation,” while rwy is a well or watering place (see Joan Copeland Belka, Dictionary of Old South Arabic. Sabaeo Dialect, Harvard Semitic Studies 25 [Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982], 482). Finally, in modern Arabic, the root is is associated with water for drinking and irrigation (see Edward William Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon [Beirut, Lebanon: Librairie du Liban, 1901], 3:1194–95).

9. This root, rwy, appears in Hebrew and Egyptian. The following could provide help when looking for etymologies of Book of Mormon names, given here in the approximate descending order of importance: Northwest Semitic languages (of which Hebrew is one), such as Uguric, Phoeni-