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Book Notice
Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology

Nicholas J. Frederick

In a groundbreaking article published in the 2009 *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Ben McGuire explored a new methodology for discovering and analyzing literary allusion in the Book of Mormon. McGuire began his article by quoting John W. Welch’s 1994 call for firmer Book of Mormon methodology:

> Notwithstanding the significant increase in Book of Mormon studies, little has been written in this field of study about methodology itself. . . . Accordingly, if the study of the Book of Mormon is to become a more rigorous discipline, all of its practitioners will need to become more explicit about their methods, their assumptions, their purposes, and the degree to which their conclusions are based on various forms of evidence or depend on various theoretical predilections.¹

McGuire then proceeded to lay out the scope of his own study:

> This study is an exploration of the Book of Mormon as a complex piece of literature and of a methodology useful in discovering the meaning of the text. In presenting a new approach to the Book of Mormon, I am hoping not only to present new meaning to the

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Following an enlightening examination of literary parallels between the stories of Nephi and David, McGuire ended his article with a call of his own, in this case further utilization of intertextuality in serious study of the Book of Mormon:

In detailing exactly the process by which I justify this identification, I hope to encourage discussion and critical input. The Book of Mormon as a repository of intertextual material has not begun to be explored. It will take patience and significant effort to re-examine the text and to produce an exegesis that more closely resembles the intent of its authors. A study of the intertextuality of the Book of Mormon will help us not only find better meaning within the text, but also better understand the texts that the Book of Mormon authors reference in their writings.

This essay attempts to answer McGuire’s call for further intertextual study of the Book of Mormon by addressing a significant (and underdeveloped) issue in Book of Mormon studies—namely, the appearance of New Testament phrases within the Book of Mormon. This paper will first address the problems inherent in recognizing the New Testament in the Book of Mormon. This paper will then propose and explore a new methodology for evaluating valid New Testament language, including a means of classification and a series of criteria for evaluation. Finally, this paper will explore the usefulness of this methodology through a series of case studies. It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate what the textual connections between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon may mean or offer speculation as to why they are present.

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4. While little has been done in the area of evaluation, two examples of such studies are Mark Thomas, “A Mosaic for Religious Counterculture: The Bible in the Book of
issues would need a much longer study, one that would rely on data drawn from the Book of Mormon through a close study and application of a fixed methodology, one this paper hopes to provide.

The problem

It is undeniable that the Bible plays a role in the textual construction of the Book of Mormon. Grant Hardy writes:

Even a cursory glance reveals that the Book of Mormon wants to be seen as a companion to the Bible. It is divided into books named after prophets; biblical phrases and even chapter-length quotations are scattered throughout; and it is written in the diction of the Authorized Version, including the general use of archaic words such as thou, doth, hath, and all manner of verbs ending in –eth.¹

As Hardy notes, one of the most noticeable aspects of the Book of Mormon is its integration of the King James Bible into its own text. The lengthiest sections of the Bible present within the Book of Mormon—namely, the Isaiah passages in 2 Nephi and Matthew’s (slightly altered) Sermon on the Mount found in 3 Nephi 12–14—have been the topics of much analysis. Lengthy pericopes—such as Alma 13, Ether 12, and McGuire’s own study of 1 Nephi—have also been the topics of analysis. Less attention, however, has been paid to single verses or phrases that closely mirror, sometimes even word for word, verses or phrases from the Bible, likely due to the magnitude of the project as well as the difficulty in ascertaining

¹. Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5–6. Philip Barlow adds, “Like the revelations that preceded it, and even more extensively than scholars have hitherto guessed, the Book of Mormon narrative bulges with biblical expressions. More than fifty thousand phrases of three or more words, excluding definite and indefinite articles, are common to the Bible and the Book of Mormon.” Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in the American Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 27.
what, exactly, constitutes a valid biblical phrase contained in the Book of Mormon.\(^6\)

An additional complication arises when one chooses what word or phrase to use in describing the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Those who have written on the topic have relied on a series of terminologies in an attempt to accurately define the connection between the two texts. These include the popular *quotation*, *allusion*, and *echo*;\(^7\) other terms such as *parallel*, *mirror*, *symmetry*, \(^8\) *similar . . . referencing*,\(^9\)

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6. The task of identifying New Testament parallels within the Book of Mormon has largely been taken up by those hostile to the Book of Mormon, such as Jerald and Sandra Tanner in their “Joseph Smith’s Plagiarism of the Bible” and the website http://skepticsannotatedbible.com/BOM/index.htm (the latter in particular is an excellent resource). The issue with these sources is that they lack a critical methodology and an analysis of the text beyond a simple identification of parallel language. For those who defend the Book of Mormon, the FARMS Critical Text is an invaluable resource.

7. It was Richard Hays who defined *quotation*, *allusion*, and *echo* as “points along a spectrum of intertextual reference, moving from the explicit to the subliminal.” *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 23. The result of Hays’s work is that those who study biblical intertextuality frequently adopt those terms, although much debate continues as to the proper definition (or even usefulness) of each. For a further elaboration, especially in regards to the difficulties of assigning appropriate terminology, see Christopher Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 12–40; and Cynthia Edenburg, “Intertextuality, Literary Competence and the Question of Readership: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35/2 (2010): 131–48.

8. With the exception of *quotation*, all five of these terms are used by Noel B. Reynolds in his article “Lehi as Moses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 27–35. *Quote* and *quotation* are used extensively by Gaye Strathearn and Jacob Moody in their article “Christ’s Interpretation of Isaiah 52’s ‘My Servant’ in 3 Nephi,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18/1 (2009): 5–15.

9. “The relationship between the KJV and the Book of Mormon in particular is complex, as the Book of Mormon includes large blocks of biblical text similar to equivalent passages in the Old and New Testaments and translated into King James English. Beyond the large blocks, there are numerous paraphrases of biblical texts as well as allusions to biblical events and use of biblical imagery. All of these are not only biblical but also specifically written in King James English and thus sound similar to the King James Bible versions of the passages. And even when the Book of Mormon is not explicitly referencing or quoting biblical text, the rest of the Book of Mormon prose reads ‘biblically,’ the translation utilizing King James English to reveal the Book of Mormon’s message.” Daniel L. Belnap, “The King James Bible and the Book of Mormon,” in *The
cites,\textsuperscript{10} and borrowing;\textsuperscript{11} and phrases such as verbal parallel,\textsuperscript{12} substantial similarities,\textsuperscript{13} textual interdependence,\textsuperscript{14} unacknowledged plagiarism,\textsuperscript{15} and similarity of language.\textsuperscript{16} Terms such as quotation, allusion, and echo may be appropriate and even accurate for describing the way the Book of Mormon interacts with the Old Testament. After all, Nephi states that he has a record, the brass plates, in his possession. Readers of the Book of Mormon should then expect to encounter passages such as Genesis or Isaiah from the Old Testament. However, these terms become problematic when discussing passages from the New Testament found in the Book of Mormon, since, as far as can be determined, the Nephites did not possess that record.\textsuperscript{17}

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\textsuperscript{10} “Revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants frequently quote from the Book of Mormon or the Bible, just as the New Testament often quotes Old Testament passages and the Book of Mormon cites the Bible.” John A. Tvedtnes, The Most Correct Book (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 58.


\textsuperscript{12} McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath,” 19.

\textsuperscript{13} John W. Welch, The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 93, speaking of general similarities between Matthew 5–7 and 3 Nephi 12–14.

\textsuperscript{14} David P. Wright, “‘In Plain Terms That We May Understand’: Joseph Smith’s Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12–13,” in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, ed. Brent L. Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 181. Wright frequently employs depends and dependence throughout.

\textsuperscript{15} “The Book of Mormon account of Jesus’ sermon in 3 Nephi 12–14 originated in the nineteenth century, derived from unacknowledged plagiarism of the KJV.” Stan Larson, “The Historicity of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi,” in New Approaches to the Book of Mormon, 132.


\textsuperscript{17} “The process is even more complicated when the King James Version language of a Book of Mormon passages comes from the New Testament, not the Old Testament. . . . Lehi’s family had access to the Old Testament (or much of it) but not to the New Testament. The only conclusion is that the Book of Mormon language is Joseph’s not
In cases where the Book of Mormon text may contain a New Testament phrase or passage, terms like *quotation*, *allusion*, and *echo* become problematic for at least two reasons: (1) quotation and allusion are author-oriented literary devices, and (2) quotation and allusion imply a source upon which they are drawing. Stanley Porter, who has studied extensively the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, addresses the problem of using quotation and allusion in biblical studies:

One of the obvious terms that requires definition is explicit or direct quotation or citation. I would suggest that this term needs a larger definition than is often found in monographs discussing the topic . . . and more in line with how quotation is apparently handled in commentary discussion. The focus would be upon formal correspondence with actual words found in antecedent texts. Although there would of course be the question of how many words would qualify as a quotation, at least there is now debate over data, as opposed to hypotheses about reconstructed competencies. Another difficult term is allusion. Perhaps the best way of handling this is not in terms of large and complex categories that prove unworkable, but rather in terms of a streamlined definition (resembling those in literary criticism) that covers the material not found in quotation. Allusions (or “echoes,” if one must) could refer to the nonformal invocation by an author of a text (or person, event, etc.) that the author could reasonably have been expected to know (for example the Old Testament in the case of Paul).\(^\text{18}\)

Porter’s elaboration on quotation and allusion illustrates why both terms pose problems for discussion of the New Testament within the Book of Mormon. By defining quotation as the “formal correspondence

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Nephi’s (or Mormon’s or Moroni’s). This situation has long caused difficulties for Book of Mormon readers.” Gardner, *Gift and Power*, 307.

with actual words found in antecedent texts,” Porter envisions an author
consciously reaching back into a prior text and embedding the words of
that text into their own. Readers most often encounter quotations in
the New Testament in the form of formal quotations, where the state-
ment is qualified with phrases like “as it was written” or “which was
spoken of the Lord by the prophet.” Examples include the angel of the
Lord’s announcement to Joseph in Matthew 1:23 that Jesus is fulfilling
the prophecy laid out in Isaiah 7:14 or Paul’s appropriation of Deuter-
onomy 27:26 in Galatians 3:10. However, the Book of Mormon rarely
acknowledges its interactions with the Bible through formal quotations,
with the exception of lengthy excerpts of Isaiah quoted by Nephi or
Zenos’s olive-tree allegory quoted by Jacob, but even in those cases the
brass plates are named as the source text. Instead, the Book of Mormon
prefers to weave phrases from the New Testament into its own text.
Sometimes these phrases in the Book of Mormon maintain the same
word order they had in the New Testament, while other times words
may be added or removed, leaving the reader with a phrase that is no
longer a quotation.

For example, when readers encounter the phrase “full of grace and
truth” in 2 Nephi 2:6, they can be positive they are encountering a bib-
lical interaction with John 1:14. However, many other potential biblical
interactions are not as clear-cut as 2 Nephi 2:6, so the question of how
to apply this criterion becomes important. In biblical intertextuality,
identifying a fixed number of identical words that follow an identi-
cal sequence is sometimes used to differentiate between quotation and
allusion. However, the Book of Mormon introduces a complication
because of its tendency to alter the structure of New Testament phrases,

19. Porter, “Use of the Old Testament,” 95. While a source text is less significant
in exploring allusions, it is still relevant: “Often, the points of correspondence between
the source text and the present text are left unstated and range beyond the words cited
to include features from a broader context.” David Matthewson, A New Heaven and

20. For example, Beetham notes that “the length of a reference plays a role in its
classification,” before defining a quotation as “an intention, explicit, verbatim or near
either by adding, subtracting, or replacing words that would assist in proper identification. For example, in addition to the phrase “full of grace and truth,” the Book of Mormon also offers: “full of grace, equity, and truth” (Alma 13:9), “full of grace and mercy and truth” (Alma 5:48), and even “full of grace, equity, and truth, full of patience, mercy, and long-suffering, quick to hear the cries of his people and to answer their prayers” (Alma 9:26). For this reason, relying on the presence of a fixed number of words or evaluating a phrase or passage based on an identical sequence of words becomes less useful, as does jettisoning a phrase simply because the word order has been rearranged or the terminology altered. Additionally, some three-word phrases could clearly present biblical interactions with the New Testament, while some four- or five-word phrases can simply be the result of a shared vocabulary and syntax.

On the other hand, application of the term allusion to a passage or phrase from the Book of Mormon presents different problems. By defining allusion as a “non-formal invocation by an author of a text (or person, event, etc.) that the author could reasonably have been expected to know,” Porter situates the author and his knowledge as key components. These ideas present problems for the Book of Mormon, a text verbatim citation of a former text of six or more words in length,” and an allusion as “a reference that is less than five words.” Echoes of Scripture, 16–17.


22. Jan W. Fekkes has written that “the more a text is broken up and woven into a passage, the less likely it is to be a quotation.” Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and Their Developments (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 63–64. However, for a text like the Book of Mormon that skillfully weaves and alters biblical phrases throughout its narrative, it would be counterproductive to eliminate passages that do not follow a fixed sequence.

23. The issue of authorial intent is less of an issue for allusion, but it is still present: “Although allusion is understood as a device an author uses to establish linkages between texts, the intention of the author fades as an area of inquiry. The author is an actor who manipulates and reconfigures cultural material, but the emphasis is on that reconfiguration as evidence in the text rather than the consciousness of the author.” Susan Hyland, Allusion and Meaning in John 6 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 52. Beetham adds: “An allusion by definition must be overt enough to be recognized by the audience.
where authorship and possible sources remain topics of hot debate. When we talk of what the “author could reasonably have been expected to know,” are we speaking of Mormon? Joseph Smith? God? A spirit world translator? If we speak of the New Testament as an “antecedent text,” are we implying that Joseph Smith copied from the New Testament or that the author of the text was consciously drawing upon the New Testament for certain language or ideas? If carefully defined, the terms quotation and illusion can be useful. Otherwise, potentially fruitful discussions about the relationship between the two texts can quickly deteriorate into arguments over authorship, translation, and source.

An author has failed in his use of allusion as a literary device if the audience does not catch the reference. If the audience fails to recognize the allusion, however, it does not follow that the attempt to allude was not made by the author. The allusion may be there, embedded in the text, even though the audience missed it.” Echoes of Scripture, 12.

24. Grant Hardy sums up the problem well in his discussion of the Epistle to the Hebrews and Ether 12: “From the perspective of believers, it would be rather ironic if Moroni, who eschewed his father’s program of evidence-based faith, here inadvertently ended up providing perhaps the strongest textual validation for the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Paradoxically, though, with Ether 12’s clear and thorough dependence on Hebrews 6 and 11, Moroni has simultaneously supplied some of the most compelling evidence that the book has its origins in the nineteenth century.” Understanding the Book of Mormon, 260.

Methodology

In an attempt to extend discussions about the intertextual links between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, this essay suggests that the phrase *biblical interaction* be employed in describing the presence of New Testament phrases or passages within the Book of Mormon. This phrase places the primary emphasis on an intertextual approach.26 There are at least two good reasons for using the phrase *biblical interaction*, both of which serve to remedy the problems discussed above.

1. This phrase shifts the attention away from the troublesome issue of authorship and places the burden of interpretation on the reader while still acknowledging that the biblical authors did have a yet-undefined role in the composition of the text.

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26. Like the terms *quotation* and *allusion*, *intertextuality* must also be clearly defined, as it is often used in a variety of contexts to mean a variety of things. Patricia Tull has insightfully noted that “the concept of intertextuality represents a battleground of differing emphases and claims, both linguistic and ideological. . . . Few agree on how best to understand and use the term.” “Intertextuality and the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8/1 (2000): 59. A single fundamental definition of the term would be, in the words of Graham Allen, “doomed to failure.” *Intertextuality: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2. I prefer Hyland’s definition: “Intertextuality may be best understood as a *feature* of texts; it is a way of understanding how texts intersect, destabilize, and transform one another.” *Allusion and Meaning*, 50. However, as Ellen Van Wolde has warned, authors who utilize intertextuality as a lens of study need to develop a strict methodology and avoid “trendy intertextuality,” where intertextuality “seems the result of a superficial sightseeing tour.” “Trendy Intertextuality?,” in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel*, ed. Sipke Draisma (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 43. Other authors who attempt to explore the range of intertextuality and its meaning include Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6–10; and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms through the Lens of Intertextuality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).
2. This phrase promotes a *synchronic* rather than a *diachronic* approach, meaning that the issues of a source or antecedent text become diminished in favor of examining the complex interplay between the two texts.\(^{27}\)

However, as those who have studied the intertextuality between the Bible and the Book of Mormon know well, not all biblical interactions are created equal. Sometimes the interaction will involve a lengthy string of phrases or even a pericope. On other occasions, the interaction may involve a simple phrase of three or four words. Sometimes the interaction with the New Testament will be easily apparent and recognizable, while at other times the interaction may be tenuous enough that it cannot be determined one way or the other. Because the lengthier Book of Mormon interactions with the New Testament are readily apparent, such as Matthew 5–7 and 3 Nephi 12–14, or 1 Corinthians 13 and Moroni 7, this essay will focus more on the shorter phrases that are skillfully woven throughout the Book of Mormon at the phrasal level and as such are more difficult to identify. With the difficulty regarding

\(^{27}\) This is not to say that a diachronic study of the Book of Mormon and the Bible is not useful. Quite the contrary: The language of the Book of Mormon seems overt and explicit in its use of the King James Bible, and an in-depth examination of the different ways in which the Book of Mormon uses the biblical text would be quite informative. In his critique of some contemporary studies of intertextuality, Jeffery M. Leonard stated that “tantalizing through . . . varied insights may be, to be valid they must rest on genuine textual connects whose directions of dependence can actually be established.” “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127/2 (2008): 243. In the case of the Book of Mormon, the “directions of dependence” can be established, and if the author of a paper on the Book of Mormon is diachronically drawing connections between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, then terms such as *allusion* or *quotation* are appropriate. However, this is not often the case, and for this reason a reliance on synchronic study may be more useful and avoid relaying the wrong ideas about the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon. For the issues involved in the synchronic and diachronic studies of biblical texts, see Geoffrey D. Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9/3 (2010): 284.
the certainty of the interaction in mind, this essay suggests three categories for classification:\textsuperscript{28}

1. Precise biblical interactions: This category contains phrases or passages from the Book of Mormon that are almost certainly interacting with the New Testament. The connections between the two texts are too strong to overlook.
2. Probable biblical interactions: This category contains phrases or passages from the Book of Mormon that are likely interacting with the New Testament. The connections are recognizable, but not as definitively as those classified as precise.
3. Possible biblical interactions: This category contains phrases or passages from the Book of Mormon that are possibly interacting with the New Testament, yet with the recognition that there is not enough evidence to make a claim one way or the other.

While these categories are useful in and of themselves, we are left with the issue of identification. In his study of Psalm 78, Jeffery M. Leonard noted that “antecedent to the task of categorizing textual allusions, however, lies a more fundamental problem of method, namely, determining just how textual allusions are to be confidently identified in the first place and then evaluated in terms of their direction of dependence.”\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{itemize}
\item This hierarchy preserves the spirit of John Hollander’s “rhetorical hierarchy” of quotation, allusion, and echo but without the problematic implications. \textit{The Figures of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 64. This hierarchy, and the criteria which follow, also attempts to address the recent comments made by Russell L. Meek regarding the current state of intertextual study: “Despite the advances in methodological consistency, there still seems to remain some confusion over exactly how and when to apply the appropriate terms to one’s task. Furthermore, after thirty years of defining and delineating terms, it is necessary that scholars begin to demonstrate transparency and clarity in their methodological vocabulary.” “Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical Exegesis, and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Ethics of a Methodology,” \textit{Biblica} 95/1 (2014): 281.
\end{itemize}
With Leonard’s words in mind, this essay proposes the following five criteria: shared terminology, dissimilarity, proximity, sequence, and context.\(^{30}\)

**The criterion of shared terminology**

The criterion of shared terminology asserts that when evaluating phrases from the Book of Mormon as having interaction with the New Testament, a shared terminology increases the likelihood that readers are dealing with a biblical interaction. For obvious reasons, this is the most important of the five criteria, and a biblical interaction can be accurately determined if it meets this criterion, even if the other four are absent.\(^{31}\) An example of how this criterion can be applied is seen in Nephi’s description of his father’s visionary experiences in 1 Nephi 1 (the interactions have been italicized):

> And it came to pass that when my father had read and saw many great and marvelous things, he did exclaim many things unto the

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\(^{30}\) These criteria should not be mistaken for proof or evidence. As John P. Meier notes in his magisterial study of the historical Jesus, “Criteria are rules or norms that are applied to the Gospel material to arrive at a judgment.” Their function is simply “to pass from the merely possible to the really probable, to inspect various probabilities, and to decide which candidate is most probable. Ordinarily, the criteria cannot hope to do more.” A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 185n4 and 167–68. In his own study of Isaiah, Sommer wrote: “Developing criteria to decide what parallels can be termed allusions, citation, or the result of influence is the project of the study of inner-biblical allusion and exegesis—a project I think possible and to which I hope to contribute.” Prophet Reads Scripture, 10. This paper has a similar aim, with the Book of Mormon being the focus.

\(^{31}\) “Shared language is the single most important factor in establishing a textual connection.” Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusion,” 246. “Foremost among these criteria is the presence of shared lexical features. All scholars utilizing the author-oriented approach agree that similar wording is a telltale sign of intertextuality, and many regard it as most important.” Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” 295. Michael Fishbane adds: It is not by virtue of objective criteria that one may identify aggadic exegesis, but rather by a close comparison of the language of a given text with other, earlier Scriptural dicta or topoi.” Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 285.
Lord, such as: *Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty.* Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power and goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish. (1 Nephi 1:14)

In John’s vision recorded in the book of Revelation, he sees those who “had gotten the victory over the beast” sing praises to God:

> And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, *Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways,* thou King of saints. (Revelation 15:3)

Both 1 Nephi 1:14 and Revelation 15:3 record the language of the hymn of praise with almost exactly the same terminology, the only difference being that the “O” of 1 Nephi 1:14 is absent from John’s account. While other criteria would need to be applied to decide whether to label this interaction as precise, probable, or simply possible, the obvious textual overlap would suggest at the very least a probable interaction.

*The criterion of dissimilarity*

According to the criterion of dissimilarity, if a short phrase or short series of phrases appears infrequently in the New Testament, the appearance of the same phrase in the Book of Mormon supports a biblical interaction. The uniqueness of the phrase or the phrases makes them dissimilar in relation to other language in the New Testament, rendering the possibility of coincidental language less of a possibility.  

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32. “When two texts are marked by shared vocabulary, there exists the possibility that one alludes to the other. Our ability to prove or even lend support to such allusion, however, depends in some measure on the nature of the vocabulary the two texts share. If the shared language consists solely of common terms, it does not automatically negate the possibility of a connection; after all, an author can borrow common terms as well as distinctive ones. It would make it quite difficult to prove that a connection exists, however. On the other hand, if the language shared by two texts is relatively rare or is used in a manner that is distinctive, it can lend support to the possibility of a connection.” Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions,” 251.
For evaluating interactions where the possible similarity in language may only extend to a short phrase, the criterion of dissimilarity could be applied. A useful example of this criterion can be found in Ether 12:4, where readers encounter the following passage:

\[
\text{Wherefore whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith and maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast, always abounding in good works, being led to glorify God.}
\]

Ether 12:4 appears to be a biblical interaction with Hebrews 6:19:

\[
\text{Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil.}
\]

In comparing these two passages, one finds the following identical words: anchor, soul/souls, sure, and steadfast. This by itself is not necessarily enough to classify Ether 12:4 as a biblical interaction, since these are common words that appear several times in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon. Anchor appears 4 times in the New Testament and 2 times in the Book of Mormon. Soul/souls appears 55 times in the New Testament and 228 times in the Book of Mormon. Sure appears 14 times in the New Testament and 12 times in the Book of Mormon. Finally, steadfast appears 7 times in the New Testament and 6 times in the Book of Mormon. Significantly, the only time all four words appear in the same sentence are the two verses cited above, Ether 12:4 and Hebrews 6:19, suggesting that the phrases possess a dissimilarity in relation to other biblical phrases. Furthermore, in both verses, these four words appear in the same order—anchor, soul/souls, sure, steadfast. The combination of both the sharing of key terms and the identical sequence in which they appear in the two verses strongly supports Ether 12:4 being a biblical interaction with Hebrews 6:19. Again, when evaluating the type of biblical interaction—precise, probable, or possible—other criteria would need to be involved.
The criterion of proximity

The criterion of proximity asserts that when two or more phrases from the same biblical text can be located in the Book of Mormon within close proximity, this increases the likelihood that readers are encountering biblical interactions. Ideally, this proximity would occur within a single verse, but it can be extended to proximity within a pericope or even, in some cases, within a chapter. For example, the phrase “believe on his name” occurs (with slight variation) 12 times in the Book of Mormon. One location where “believe on his name” occurs is Alma 19:13:

For as sure as thou livest, behold, I have seen my Redeemer, and he shall come forth and be born of a woman, and he shall redeem all mankind who believe on his name. Now when he had said these words, his heart was swollen within him. And he sunk again with joy; and the queen also sunk down, being overpowered by the Spirit.

The appearance of “believe on his name” could be a quotation from John 1:12:

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. (John 1:12)

However, the appearance of “believe on his name” could simply have become part of the Nephite theological vocabulary or a phrase chosen by the translator of the plates. There is simply no way to tie Alma 19:13 firmly to John 1:12.

However, the same is not true for Alma 5:48, another verse where the phrase “believe on his name” can be found. Alma 5:48 reads:

I say unto you that I know of myself that whatsoever I shall say unto you concerning that which is to come is true. And I say unto

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33. “While an isolated term or phrase may well constitute an allusion, the likelihood of a connection increases with the accumulation of other shared terms. . . . Each additional connection found in a text provides supporting evidence for affirming less obvious allusions.” Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions,” 253.
you that I know that Jesus Christ shall come, yea, the Son, the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and mercy and truth. And behold, it is he that cometh to take away the sins of the world, yea, the sins of every man which steadfastly believeth on his name.

In addition to “believe on his name,” this verse presents readers with two additional phrases which also appear to be biblical interactions with John 1:

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Unlike the example cited above from Alma 19:13, the appearance of two other phrases from John 1 in such close proximity to “believe on his name” links Alma 5:48 and John 1, and thus these phrases from Alma 5:48 can confidently be cited as biblical interactions.

However, not all possible biblical quotations found in the Book of Mormon are as conveniently clustered in one verse as Alma 5:48. For that reason, the criterion of proximity should be expanded to chapters within a larger text or even to the larger text itself. For example, Mosiah 3 concludes with an eschatological scene illustrating the fate of the wicked:

And thus saith the Lord: They shall stand as a bright testimony against this people at the judgment day; whereof they shall be judged every man according to his works, whether they be good or whether they be evil. And if they be evil, they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return; therefore they have drunk damnation to their own souls. Therefore they have drunk out of the cup of the wrath of God, which justice could no more deny unto them than it could deny that Adam should fall because of his partaking of the forbidden fruit; therefore mercy could have claim on them no more forever. And their torment is as a lake of fire and brimstone whose flames are unquenchable and
whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever. Thus hath the Lord commanded me. Amen. (Mosiah 3:24–28)

Now compare these verses from King Benjamin’s speech in Mosiah 3 to four verses from the book of Revelation:

The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name. (Revelation 14:10–11)

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. (Revelation 20:13–14)

The similarities between the two texts could be ascribed to two phenomena: both Mosiah 3 and the book of Revelation draw upon a common experience or source (perhaps Benjamin had a vision similar to that of John), or what readers encounter in Mosiah 3 are biblical interactions. If Mosiah 3 had contained language shared with either Revelation 14:10–11 or Revelation 20:13–14, the similarities could be ascribed to coincidence. But the fact that two separate sections from the book of Revelation are quoted in such close proximity in Mosiah 3 again strengthens the case that biblical interactions are present in Mosiah 3.

The criterion of sequence

The criterion of sequence is closely linked with the criterion of proximity. The criterion of sequence asserts that if multiple biblical interactions found in close proximity in the Book of Mormon follow a similar
sequence or ordering as they appear in the Bible, the likelihood is increased that readers are encountering biblical interactions.34

A useful example is encountered in Alma 5, Alma the Younger’s lengthy discourse to the Nephites in Zarahemla. Among the statements made by Alma are several that appear to interact with Matthew 3, not only in terminology but also in the same sequence:

In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judæa, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. . . . But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (Matthew 3:1–3, 7–10)

Alma 5 relates Alma the Younger’s lengthy discourse to the Nephites in Zarahemla. Among the statements made by Alma are several that appear to interact with these verses from Matthew 3, not only in language but also in the same sequence:

Behold, are ye stripped of pride? I say unto you: if ye are not, ye are not prepared to meet God. Behold, ye must prepare quickly; for the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand [cf. Matthew 3:2], and such an one hath not eternal life. (Alma 5:28)

34. In his list of six criteria for tracing intertextuality (what he calls “mimesis”) in ancient texts, Dennis R. MacDonald writes, “The fourth criterion, order, looks for similar sequences for the parallels. The more often two texts share content in the same order, the stronger the case for dependence.” MacDonald, ed., Mimesis and Intertextuality in Antiquity and Christianity (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2001), 2.
Yea, come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness [cf. Matthew 3:8], and ye shall not be cut down and cast into the fire [cf. Matthew 3:10]. (Alma 5:35)

A few verses later, this pattern repeats itself.

Yea, thus saith the Spirit: Repent, all ye ends of the earth, for the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand [cf. Matthew 3:2]. Yea, the Son of God cometh in his glory, in his might, majesty, power, and dominion. Yea, my beloved brethren, I say unto you that the Spirit saith: Behold, the glory of the King of all the earth and also the King of heaven shall very soon shine forth among all the children of men. (Alma 5:50)

And again I say unto you: The Spirit saith: Behold, the ax is laid at the root of the tree. Therefore every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit shall be hewn down and cast into the fire [cf. Matthew 3:10], yea, a fire which cannot be consumed, even an unquenchable fire. Behold and remember, the Holy One hath spoken it! (Alma 5:52)

Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better one than another? Yea, will ye persist in the persecution of your brethren who humble themselves and do walk after the holy order of God wherewith they have been brought into this church, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit?—and they do bring forth works which is meet for repentance [cf. Matthew 3:8]. (Alma 5:54)

Both proximity and sequence can be applied to these verses. Alma 5:28 and 35 interact with Matthew 3:2, 8, and 10. Alma 5:50, 52, and 54 nearly repeats that pattern through an interaction with Matthew 3:2, 10, and 8. While the order of the verses is not perfectly sequential, enough sequentiality does exist to support the argument that these verses from Alma 5 are biblical interactions.

The criterion of context

The criterion of context suggests that a biblical interaction with the Book of Mormon increases in validity if the context of both passages is
This criterion is probably the weakest of the five, since proper context cannot always be ascertained and there is no way to determine whether an author is deliberately changing context to illustrate a particular point or is simply writing in a genre that differs from the earlier text. While phrases used in different contexts should not eliminate passages from consideration, similarity in context should be one criterion in establishing validity, especially for passages where the criteria of specific terminology and proximity may be inconclusive.

This criterion can be applied to numerous lengthy passages in the Book of Mormon, such as the announcement of Christ’s divinity in both John 1 and 3 Nephi 9, the hymns to charity preserved in 1 Corinthians 13 and in Moroni 7, or the interaction between 1 John 3:1–3 that closes out Mormon’s words in Moroni 7. However, it can also be useful at the phrasal level. Consider the following verses:

And he said unto me: Awake and hear the words which I shall tell thee; for behold, I am come to declare unto thee glad tidings of great joy. (Mosiah 3:3)

Yea, and the voice of the Lord by the mouth of angels doth declare it unto all nations, yea, doth declare it that they may have glad tidings of great joy. Yea, and he doth sound these glad tidings among all his people, yea, even to them that are scattered abroad upon the face of the earth; wherefore they have come unto us. (Alma 13:22)

35. “Even when verbatim correspondence is lacking, two texts can mirror each other by means of content. . . . As with lexical similarities, parallels based on content must not be adduced indiscriminately as proof of intertextuality.” Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” 295–96. “When context is paired with the earlier principle concerning distinctive terms, the likelihood of a textual connection is even greater.” Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions,” 255.

36. “Materials are always moving from one setting to another, being joined to different genres, and resulting in new redactional units for instruction. Indeed, we must take note of the fact that traditions were always being integrated and moved from one sphere of instruction—be that oral, written, priestly, sapiential, or whatever—to another.” Michael Fishbane, “The Hebrew Bible and Exegetical Tradition,” in Intertextuality in Ugarit and Israel, ed. Johannes C. De Moor (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 18.
And angels did appear unto men, wise men, and did declare unto them glad tidings of great joy. And thus in this year the scriptures began to be fulfilled. (Helaman 16:14)

The phrase common to all three, “glad tidings of great joy,” appears to be a biblical interaction with Luke 2:10:

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

The context to Luke 2:10 is the annunciation of the birth of Jesus by the angel Gabriel to the shepherds. Interestingly, the three uses of “glad tidings of great joy” in the Book of Mormon all concern the deliverance of news by angels. In Mosiah 3:3, King Benjamin encounters an angel who delivers news regarding the future birth and death of Jesus. In Alma 13:22, Alma the Younger speaks more generally of angels who will declare that “now is the time to repent, for the day of salvation draweth nigh” (Alma 13:21). Finally, in Helaman 16:14, the context of the use of “glad tidings of great joy” is nearly identical to that of Luke 2:10, namely, the announcement of the impending birth of Jesus. While not conclusive on its own, the criterion of context would serve to strengthen the argument that Mosiah 3:3, Alma 13:22, and Helaman 16:14 are biblical interactions after the other four criteria have been applied.

Case studies

In order to explore the usefulness of these criteria, I will present case studies on five Book of Mormon passages, all of which need to be carefully evaluated to see if they qualify as biblical interactions and all of which present unique difficulties.

Case study 1: Mosiah 16:7–8, 10 and 1 Corinthians 15:14, 53–55

In an exploration of biblical interaction, Mosiah 16:7–8, 10 provides fertile ground. In these verses, Abinadi discusses the deep significance behind Jesus's resurrection from the dead:
And if Christ had not risen from the dead or broken the bands of death—that the grave should have no victory and that death should have no sting—there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection. Therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ. . . . Even this mortal shall put on immortality, and this corruption shall put on incorruption and shall be brought to stand before the bar of God to be judged of him according to their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil.

These verses bear marked similarity to Paul’s discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul begins his discussion with a hypothetical situation similar to Abinadi’s:

And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. (1 Corinthians 15:14)

Paul then goes on to discuss the relationship of Jesus to Adam, the Corinthian practice of baptism for the dead, and the potential for different types of resurrected bodies before concluding:

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1 Corinthians 15:53–55)

Thus, when the words of Abinadi are compared with the text of 1 Corinthians, we get the following:

And if Christ had not risen from the dead [cf. 1 Corinthians 15:14] or broken the bands of death—that the grave should have no victory, and that death should have no sting—[cf. 1 Corinthians 15:55] there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection. Therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death
is swallowed up [cf. 1 Corinthians 15:54] in Christ. . . . Even this mortal shall put on immortality, and this corruption shall put on incorruption [cf. 1 Corinthians 15:53–54] and shall be brought to stand before the bar of God to be judged of him according to their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil. (Mosiah 16:7–8, 10)

With seven phrases shared between the two passages, the criterion of shared terminology is clearly met. The interaction with three verses from Mosiah 16 and four verses from 1 Corinthians 15 meets the criterion of proximity. Additionally, the four verses from 1 Corinthians 15 appear in roughly the same sequence or order in Mosiah 16 as they do in 1 Corinthians 15, which meets the criterion of sequence. Finally, the context of both passages is the conditional exploration of Jesus's ability to conquer death through the resurrection, satisfying the criterion of context. Having satisfied four criteria allows us to classify Mosiah 16:7–8, 10 as a precise biblical interaction.

Case study 2: 1 Nephi 6:5 and John 15:19; 17:14, 16

In 1 Nephi 6:5, Nephi describes the differences between the content on the large and the small plates. He tells his readers that he will place only matters of spiritual concern on the small plates:

Wherefore the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto them which are not of the world.

Nephi’s description of the audience of the small plates includes a highly significant phrase: those which “are not of the world.” In John’s description of Jesus’s farewell discourse, Jesus uses the phrase “are/am not of the world” on three occasions to describe his apostles and on two occasions to describe himself:

37. The phrase “stand before the bar of God to be judged of him according to their works” appears to be interacting with Revelation 20:12–13.
If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. (John 15:19)

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. (John 17:14)

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. (John 17:16)

Are readers encountering a biblical interaction in 1 Nephi 6:5, or is Nephi’s description of his intended audience simply the result of a common vocabulary? The criterion of shared terminology is relevant, as a string of five consecutive words (“are not of the world”) is shared between 1 Nephi 6:5 and the three passages in John 15 and 17. While none of the five words in and of themselves is overly unique, the only places in the New Testament or the Book of Mormon where the phrase “are/am not of the world” appears are the ones listed above, satisfying the criterion of dissimilarity. The criterion of context is also applicable, as both Nephi and Jesus are demarcating between things that are worldly and spiritual, and the use of the same phrase to perform this demarcation is notable. Absent are the criteria of sequence and proximity, as no other phrases from John 15 and 17 are present in 1 Nephi 6. The combination of shared terminology, a dissimilarity in the phraseology, and a similar context all suggest that 1 Nephi 6:5 be understood as a probable biblical interaction.

Case study 3: Mosiah 13:34 and Philippians 2:6–7

Mosiah 13:34 presents a different set of issues for us to consider. In that verse, Abinadi reminds the priests of King Noah that several different prophets have spoken regarding the condescension of God:

Have they not said that God himself should come down among the children of men and take upon him the form of man and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth?
There is a potential biblical interaction between this verse and Philippians 2:6–7:

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

First, what similar terminology can be seen? The key phrase common to both is “take upon him the form of man” (Mosiah 13:34) and “took upon him the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). Unfortunately, this is the extent of the shared language between the two verses, raising a legitimate question about whether or not a biblical interaction is present in Mosiah 13:34. However, at this point the criterion of dissimilarity becomes useful. In the New Testament, the noun form appears only six times (two of them in Philippians 2:6–7), and of these only Mark 16:12 applies form to the body/appearance of Jesus. In the Book of Mormon the noun form appears ten times total, referring to the orbit of planets (Alma 30:44), the resurrected body (Alma 11:43), angels (Alma 30:53), the Holy Spirit (1 Nephi 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:8), the Spirit of the Lord (1 Nephi 11:11), the Messiah (3 Nephi 20:44; Mosiah 13:34; 14:2), and the “form of godliness” (Moroni 7:30). It is fully possible that the form used in Mosiah 13:34 is interacting with the Isaiah 53:2 passage quoted by Abinadi in Mosiah 14:2. However, the combination of “take/took upon him the form of” appears only in Mosiah 13:34 and Philippians 2:7, thus satisfying the criterion of dissimilarity. Unfortunately, no other passages from Philippians are quoted in Mosiah 13, thus eliminating the criteria of proximity and sequence. This leaves us with the criterion of context. The context of both verses is clearly the condescension of God from a heavenly state to an earthly existence. Thus Mosiah 13:34 satisfies both the criterion of dissimilarity and the criterion of context. However, the lack of a sufficient number of shared terms and other verses from Philippians suggests caution in classifying this verse, leaving us with what can most accurately be called a possible biblical interaction.
Case study 4: Jacob 4:5 and John 1:12

This case study is perhaps the most difficult of the four to this point to adequately classify. Jacob 4:5 reads:

Behold, they believed in Christ and worshipped the Father in his name; and also we worship the Father in his name. And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him. And for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which was a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son. (Jacob 4:5)

This verse is potentially interacting with John 1:12:

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

The key phrase in question is “believed in Christ and worshipped the Father in his name.” The criterion of similar terminology would identify “believe” and “his name” as potential links, but this is simply not enough terminology to draw a conclusion. Additionally, both “believe” and “his name” are commonly found in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, and even the combination of the two appears 5 times in the New Testament and 18 in the Book of Mormon. Thus the criterion of dissimilarity is of little help. The criterion of proximity offers more support in the use of “Only Begotten Son” in Jacob 4:5, which is a uniquely Johannine title for Jesus that appears in John 1:18 and twice in John 3:16 and 18 (a slight variation, the “Only Begotten of the Father” appears in John 1:14). The presence of this title and its appearance after John 1:12 satisfies both the criteria of proximity and sequence. The context of Jacob 4:5 is the striving of the Nephites to maintain proper worship and adherence to the law of Moses, seeing it as a type of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The context of John 1:12 emphasizes the need to “believe” in Jesus Christ over and against the law of Moses, “For the law was given
by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Both passages concern the law of Moses, but any connection is indirect at best. While the criteria of proximity and sequence allow for this verse to be considered as a textual interaction, the lack of satisfying the other criteria renders this verse at best a possible interaction, but more likely the result of shared language on the part of both authors.

Case study 5: Mosiah 25:20 and Luke 5:1

Mosiah 25 describes the reforms in Zarahemla initiated by Mosiah<sub>2</sub> following the return of Alma the Elder and his people from the land of Nephi. In Mosiah 25:20, readers are told that Mosiah<sub>2</sub> granted power to Alma to ordain priests and teachers in several churches due to the rapid increase in population:

> Now this was done because there was so many people that they could not all be governed by one teacher, neither could they all hear the word of God in one assembly.

The phrase “hear the word of God” is also found in Luke 5:1, where, speaking of Jesus’s popularity, Luke writes,

> And it came to pass, that, as the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he stood by the lake of Gennesaret.

What are we to make of this phrase “hear the word of God”? Are readers encountering a biblical interaction?

First, the phrase satisfies the criterion of shared terminology, as an exact phrase of five words is shared between the two passages. The criterion of dissimilarity, however, suggests that this is not an interaction. The exact phrase appears on four other occasions in the New Testament, and numerous examples appear of biblical phrases where the words hear, word, and God are present in various forms. The criterion of proximity does reveal some interesting points. All the New Testament references where the exact phrase “hear the word of God” occurs are from passages written by Luke (Luke 5:1; 8:21; 11:28; Acts 13:7, 44),
thus raising questions about whether or not this exact phrase should be viewed as the product of a single biblical author. Additionally, all three Book of Mormon uses of the exact phrase occur within a short span—Mosiah 25:20, Alma 1:26, and Alma 6:5, all chapters dealing with the fallout from the arrival of Alma’s people and the subsequent establishment of multiple churches. The criterion of sequence is not applicable here, as only one phrase is in play, and the context of both passages is too broad to employ the criterion of context. Although the criterion of similar terminology is satisfied, and while the criterion of proximity raises some tantalizing questions, the phrase is best disregarded as a biblical interaction. The language is simply too general and the context too vague. However, this case study is useful in demonstrating the fallacy of relying on word length as a means of identification of biblical interactions.

Conclusion

In his analysis of the role of Isaiah in the book of Revelation, Jan W. Fekkes stated that “it is not enough merely to be sympathetic to the presence and influence of possible Old Testament texts; . . . one must dig deeper and look closer at apparent biblical links.” The same holds true for a study of the Book of Mormon. As the Book of Mormon finds more acceptance as a text worthy of rigorous study within the academy, the interaction between the Book of Mormon and the New Testament will continue to be a significant area of focus. While many have noted the presence of the New Testament in the Book of Mormon, little has been done by way of identifying, classifying, and analyzing New Testament interactions with the Book of Mormon. This paper suggests a methodology for accomplishing the first two steps, namely identification and classification. The final step, proper analysis, can realistically

38. Alas, the Greek and Latin texts of Luke and Acts do not demonstrate the same uniqueness as the King James Version does, making a case for Lucan origins a difficult case to make. This is especially true for Luke 13:44, where the Greek κύριος is used in place of θεός.

39. Fekkes, Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions, 63.
be performed only once the first two steps have been fully explored. Once we have ascertained where the precise and probable biblical interactions exist within the Book of Mormon and we can set aside those phrases that are simply the result of a shared vocabulary, we can begin to look more closely at why biblical phrases constitute such an apparent, yet so very intrinsic, part of the text. Are they the merely the result of a nineteenth-century translation? Are they more easily explained as author-oriented or audience-oriented? While answers may be hard to come by, they are certainly worth exploring, and possessing a clear idea of the function of the New Testament within the Book of Mormon will no doubt contribute greatly to such an exploration.

But more important than the why would be the how, both in terms of how the phrases are being used by the author of the text, and how we as readers ought to interpret them. We will return to a phrase used in case study 2, Nephi’s claim that he is writing for those “who are not of the world”; we saw that this phrase appears in the New Testament only in John 15 and 17. These two chapters—the one containing the description of Jesus as the “true vine” (John 15:1) and the other Jesus’s poignant intercessory prayer—contain some of Jesus’s finest words on what it means to be “in Christ.” To have Nephi refer to his intended audience with the same phrase opens up theological space to explore what it means to be a reader of the Book of Mormon and may lead to a greater understanding of how Nephi understood his own role as an author. To engage in such a discussion would be beyond the scope of this paper, but it is precisely to facilitate the exploration of such issues that this methodology was conceived, in hopes that we can move beyond the discussion of where biblical interactions exist and venture headlong into the more fruitful areas of why and how they do.

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Samuel’s Reliance on Biblical Language

Shon Hopkin and John Hilton III

This essay grows out of a larger project focused on the word patterns of individual speakers in the Book of Mormon. As we have worked on this project, a unique characteristic that has come to the foreground is Samuel the Lamanite’s use of certain biblical phrases. Naturally, many Book of Mormon speakers consistently employ biblical language and allusions since the Old Testament is presented as part of their historical and literary milieu. Three authors, however, demonstrate an especially marked reliance on certain specific biblical titles and phrases: Nephi, Jacob, and Samuel. However, because of the relatively surprising nature of Samuel’s use of these biblical phrases, we will focus on him in this study.

One can explain Nephi’s and Jacob’s familiarity with and use of biblical language because of their close proximity in space and time to their Jewish origins and their documented enthusiasm for the Hebrew prophets. But Samuel’s use of specific biblical phrases otherwise used only by Nephi and Jacob is not as easy to explain. He lived almost six hundred years after the time when the brass plates containing Old Testament writings were first obtained, was almost certainly not connected to the lineage that would have been trained to read and use the plates, and was not part of the Nephite community that had retained the primary biblical and Nephite religious records over the centuries. How is the reader to understand the fact that Samuel employs biblical phrases so rarely used by others? While this question lacks perfect answers, we will exhibit evidence of Samuel’s reliance on biblical language, suggest answers regarding such usage from clues and literary patterns in the Book of Mormon, and explore how an awareness of Samuel’s use of
biblical language can provide insights into his unique personality, message, and contribution in the Book of Mormon.

One note regarding methodology before turning directly to our task: The nature of the Book of Mormon as a text available only in translation complicates the analysis of voices and requires cautious conclusions.\(^1\) Accordingly, this study does not seek to prove the validity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text written by multiple authors.\(^2\) Rather, in this study we take the Book of Mormon as it presents itself and use data-driven literary analysis to see what insights into Book of Mormon figures and their speech and messages come to light using that lens.

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1. Identifying the source of biblical similarities or differences in Book of Mormon authors can be challenging since the translation shows a strong preference for King James Version renderings, at times possibly selecting language that was similar to that biblical version because it was in prominent use in Joseph Smith’s time. There is no perfect way to distinguish between translation choices and original language choices. Our database compares the use of specific and unique phrases in English between authors with the assumption that these likely would reflect unique phrases in the original language.

Samuel’s background

In the Book of Mormon narrative, Samuel the Lamanite’s historical background is shrouded in mystery. The text reports nothing about his childhood or his ministry apart from his brief interaction with the Nephites in Helaman 13–16. And he disappears from the narrative as rapidly as he appears, departing “unto his own country” (Helaman 16:7; see 13:2), never to be heard from again. Yet it might be noted that Mormon prefaces Samuel’s teachings by declaring that the Lamanites at this unique time “did observe strictly to keep the commandments of God, according to the law of Moses” (Helaman 13:1). This reference to a “strict” observance “according to the law of Moses” seems intended to indicate to readers that the Lamanites of Samuel’s day had access to a detailed biblical account, something on which they could rely closely in order to follow the commandments in such a detailed fashion.3

This characterization fits what the reader might expect to find culturally. The recently converted Lamanites had little cultural foundation on which to build their covenant identity as Israelites. They no longer trusted the traditions of their Lamanite fathers, but neither could they be termed Nephites. The difference in their appearance was presumably so overwhelming as to allow a clear, ethnic divide. Nor did they approach the gospel in the same way as the Nephites—a society often characterized by dissent, apathy, elitism, and rapid shifts in religious devotion. When an earlier generation of Lamanites was converted by Ammon and departed from their own people, they never integrated into

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3. The copying of the biblical records and their dissemination among the Lamanites is evidenced by Helaman 13:1, quoted above. The medium on which the records were recorded and how widespread the dissemination was, however, are never discussed in the text. The accessibility of biblical records would have been significantly lower than today because of a number of factors, including—most importantly—the lack of a means to print or copy in mass. For viewpoints on limited literacy among Book of Mormon peoples, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 53; William G. Eggington, “Our Weakness in Writing: Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon,” FARMS paper (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 11. For an alternate viewpoint, see Deanna Draper Buck, “Internal Evidence of Widespread Literacy in the Book of Mormon,” *Religious Educator* 10/3 (2009): 59–74.
Nephite society. Rather, they lived as a people apart, fully and fiercely loyal to their religious conversion. They indicated their feelings of otherness even by the name they adopted—Anti-Nephi-Lehies. (Various explanations for the name have been proposed, including the most simple, that they were describing themselves as “non-Nephite Lehites”: not Nephites, but desiring to connect to their Lehite heritage rather than their Lamanite background. No matter the interpretation, the most obvious point of the name is that the converted Lamanites felt different.)

Where could the converted Lamanites of Samuel’s generation look for a sense of identity, for an understanding of what it meant to be God’s covenant people? Helaman 13:1 seems to indicate that they looked to the biblical text and were determined to interpret it conservatively and live it strictly. The Lamanite prophet’s name itself, Samuel, fits this pattern. Few Book of Mormon prophets have overtly biblical names, although many Nephite and Lamanite names have been traced back to potential Semitic antecedents. Among a sea of names such as Amalickiah, Ammoron, Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, the few clear adoptions from famous biblical heroes—Jacob, Aaron, and Samuel, for example—stand out. Apparently, readers are to understand that a generation of converted Lamanites looked, as they named their children, to the biblical text, just as they did for their mode of daily life.

The converted Lamanites had something to prove to themselves before God in their religious devotion, as their earlier king had expressed when urging his converted people to bury their weapons as a testimony before God of their repentance (see Alma 24:15). This fits the sociological patterns of new religious converts in any time: deeply committed but somewhat insecure in their new identity, anxious to prove themselves both to themselves and to others, and seeking for stability amidst the instability of change.

The Lamanites may also have felt a need to prove themselves to the Nephites, among whom sentiments of racial superiority had reverberated throughout the generations. In a scriptural account with numerous recorders and authors over the course of more than a thousand years of history, Samuel emerges as the only Lamanite prophetic voice throughout the text. This identity does more than make Samuel stand out in the account; he is a complete outlier in the Nephite religious experience, at least as Mormon has detailed that history. Mormon’s inclusion of Samuel’s teachings suggests that he was not guilty of deleting important Lamanite voices when they spoke—although Jesus’s reminder that it was precisely one of this prophet’s predictions that had been left out of the text (3 Nephi 23:7–13) may indicate some cultural bias on the part of the Nephite historians. If Jesus had not given a specific command to include the prophecy, it is not certain that the Nephites would have felt obligated to do so. Nevertheless, whether the inclusion of only one Lamanite prophetic figure was a result of ethnocentricity, or whether the Lamanites simply did not produce prophetic figures that spoke to the Nephites (the Nephites certainly had a history of sending prophetic emissaries to the Lamanites), these hints can act as keys that help unlock Samuel’s unique use of biblical language. First, Samuel came from a convert culture that clung tenaciously to their religious texts to give them a sense of identity. Second, Samuel would have felt a need to support the reality of his own prophetic calling with his audience as he broke centuries of non-Nephite religious tradition to prophesy to the Nephites.

While no close parallels exist between the life of the biblical Samuel and that of his Book of Mormon namesake, both offered messages to their people that were almost completely rejected (as was the case for many biblical prophets). The biblical Samuel encouraged his people to choose God rather than adopting the practices of surrounding nations in choosing a king. Samuel the Lamanite encouraged the Nephites to

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5. Joseph Spencer makes precisely this point when introducing his study of this unappreciated prophet, suggesting that Samuel may have been the recipient of negative cultural biases. See Joseph M. Spencer, “The Time of Sin,” Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture 9 (2014): 88.
abandon their love of worldly things and rely upon the Messiah who would come. Closer parallels exist between Samuel the Lamanite and the messianic forerunner John the Baptist. Both emerged from the wilderness to cry strident messages of repentance, working to prepare a people for the coming of Christ. Both prophesied of the coming of the Messiah, warning that those who rejected the message would be hewn down (see Matthew 3:10; Helaman 13:5–6). Both relied on biblical language to strengthen their messages (see Matthew 3:3). In other words, both employed the ancient language of the biblical word in order to prepare for the coming of the living Word, who would also teach from scripture, bringing it to life in new ways. The remainder of this paper will reveal Samuel’s unique reliance on biblical language and will demonstrate how that reliance supported his divine message and mission to the Nephites.

Samuel’s use of selected biblical phrases

Samuel’s use of selected biblical phrases is rivaled only by that of Nephi and Jacob in the Book of Mormon. Others have already noticed Samuel’s propensity to use the biblical literary pattern known as the prophetic lament, as well as other prophetic forms of speech. Future studies will likely reveal more connections between Samuel and the Old Testament. In this study we have chosen four phrases that demonstrate most clearly


7. Donald W. Parry, “Thus Saith the Lord: Prophetic Language in Samuel’s Speech,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 1/1 (1992): 181–83. In this brief article, Parry outlines six types of common, prophetic forms that are found in Samuel’s speech patterns: (1) Messenger Formula (“Thus saith the Lord”); (2) Proclamation Formula (“Listen” or “Hearken”); (3) Oath Formula (“As the Lord liveth”); (4) Woe Oracle (an accusation form, typically beginning with “Wo”); (5) Announcement Formula (“I say unto you”); and (6) Revelation Formula (“The word of the Lord came to me, saying”). Of these six forms, the first shows strong and unique emphasis in the words of Samuel and will be discussed further in this study.
some of the linguistic connections that exist. In analyzing these phrases we will focus on the number of times individuals used these phrases.8

“Saith the Lord”

The English phrase “saith the Lord” (most often found in Hebrew as ʾāmar yhwh or a similar form) is used 841 times in the Bible and is also used regularly by the biblical writers who are quoted in the Book of Mormon, such as Isaiah and Malachi. This phrase, however, is not often used by other Book of Mormon writers. Isaiah’s and Malachi’s writings make up only 3 percent of the Book of Mormon text, but their usage of “saith the Lord” accounts for one-third of its occurrences in the text. Analysis of the text (see table 1) indicates that three nonbiblical Book of Mormon authors exhibit a high rate of using the phrase “saith the Lord”: Nephi, Jacob, and Samuel. Nephi and Jacob do not use the phrase

Table 1. Distribution of “saith the Lord”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Total words</th>
<th>% of total Book of Mormon text</th>
<th>Usages of “saith the Lord”</th>
<th>Frequency per thousand words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malachi</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>3,068</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>7,818</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>8,363</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nephi</td>
<td>28,590</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (11 speakers)</td>
<td>220,189</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. This is a somewhat subjective figure, given that we cannot be certain at any given time what words were actually being spoken by an individual. For example, are the words we have recorded as those of Samuel the Lamanite actually his words, or were they altered by a contemporary scribe, Nephi, Mormon in his abridgment, or in some other way? Although precise certainty is impossible, for the purpose of this study we counted words in the Book of Mormon as actually being spoken by the person to which they were ascribed. Even if the words of the speaker were influenced by a subsequent editor, the choice by the editor in the case of this study still reflects a word choice different than the editor’s typical usage.
as frequently as biblical authors or as Samuel, but their language still manifests a much higher rate of usage than the other Book of Mormon voices. Whereas Nephi, Jacob, and Samuel collectively use the phrase “saith the Lord” 45 times, the phrase is used by all other nonbiblical Book of Mormon voices only 21 times in the remainder of the Book of Mormon text. These 21 times, moreover, are spread across eleven different voices, meaning that each uses the phrase only 1 to 2 times on average. Nephi uses the phrase with a frequency six times higher than other Book of Mormon voices, and Jacob about twice Nephi’s frequency. Especially striking is the fact that Samuel uses “saith the Lord” six times more frequently even than Jacob.9

These quantitative data show that Samuel, along with Nephi and Jacob, uses this particular biblical phrase with considerable frequency. But what might be said about their usage in a more qualitative fashion? Biblical prophets use the phrase “saith the Lord” to endow their words with divine power and authenticity. According to biblical usage, prefacing a statement with “saith the Lord” indicates that the prophet with his human frailties was no longer speaking but that God himself was speaking through the prophet, who acted as the divine mouthpiece.10 Samuel’s use of the phrase “saith the Lord” fits this tradition. His discourse to the Nephites in Helaman 13–15 is full of prophetic pronouncements of future events (such as the coming of Christ) or of future judgments that would descend upon the Nephites. In offering these pronouncements, he speaks with the authentic voice of the biblical prophets who had gone before him and declares that his words are not his own but have been given to him by God.

This pattern also fits Mormon’s preface to the Samuel narrative, which emphasizes the directness of God’s revelatory voice to the Lamanite prophet:

9. These figures come from The Voices of the Book of Mormon Database, created by John Hilton III, Shon Hopkin, Jennifer Platt, Randal Wright, and Jana Johnson, 2012.
The voice of the Lord came unto him, that he should . . . prophesy unto the people whatsoever things should come into his heart. . . . And he said unto them: Behold, I, Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart. . . . Therefore, thus saith the Lord: Because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of the Nephites, . . . I will withdraw my Spirit from them. (Helaman 13:3, 5, 8)  

Interestingly, Mormon’s description of God’s placing his words in Samuel’s heart anticipatorily correlates with the content of Samuel’s own first use of the phrase “saith the Lord,” warning the Nephites that because of their hard hearts they would no longer have the Spirit. The connection provides a contrast between Samuel (who receives the voice of the Lord) and the Nephites (from whom the Spirit will be withdrawn) that will culminate in the Nephite attempt to murder Samuel while he preaches upon the city’s wall.

This feature of the Samuel narrative—the placing of the Lord’s words directly in the prophet’s heart—may in fact indicate a unique facet of Samuel’s teachings. There are only three scriptural instances where God puts ideas or words into people’s hearts;  

12 two of these involve Samuel. According to Mormon’s narrative, Samuel, after being rejected once by the Nephites, “was about to return to his own land, . . . [but] the voice of the Lord came unto him, that he should return again, and prophesy unto the people whatsoever things should come into his heart; . . . therefore he went and got upon the wall thereof, and stretched forth his hand and cried with a loud voice, and prophesied unto the people whatsoever things the Lord put into his heart. And he said unto them: Behold, I, Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart” (Helaman 13:2–5).

All this seems to explain Samuel’s frequent use of the phrase “saith the Lord.” Samuel, in a way distinct from other prophets, uses words that the Lord puts in his heart rather than crafting his own message.

11. Any emphasis within Book of Mormon quotations has been added.
Importantly, Samuel’s speech patterns are not doctrinal or discursive in nature, in contrast to those of Alma, Benjamin, Jesus, and others in the Book of Mormon. Rather, Samuel foretells (tells the future) and forthtells (reveals the current state of hidden things) with prophetic clarity, often using strong language that could easily offend his hearers. This feature, moreover, provides an explanation of why Samuel’s use of this biblical phrase would mirror—and in fact exceed—that of Nephi and Jacob, two prophets whose rhetorical positions anticipate Samuel’s. The similarity may in fact be attributed less to Nephi’s and Jacob’s devotion to biblical texts (although that does appear to be a point of comparison with Samuel) than to the fact that Nephi and Jacob often engage in prophetic foretelling, and—especially in the case of Jacob 2–3—prophetic forthtelling and warnings. Because of the mixed nature of Nephi’s and Jacob’s writings, however, with significant discursive portions, Samuel stands out in his use of “saith the Lord.”

A further explanation lies in Samuel’s marginal status as a Lamanite. While Samuel lived in a time when Nephites and Lamanites had “free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire” (Helaman 6:8), Nephite ethnocentrism is a consistent problem in the Book of Mormon, whether coming from dissident groups such as the Zoramites or the people of Ammonihah, or whether found in troubled relations with Mulekites or Lamanites (see Jacob 7:24; Mosiah 9:12; 3 Nephi 5:20; 4 Nephi 1:43). Samuel, after all, preaches only after being initially rejected (see Helaman 13:2). Perhaps Samuel uses the phrase “saith the Lord” to bolster his authority and deflect his message from himself, emphasizing to the Nephites that he is but a messenger, notwithstanding the disconcerting fact that he is a Lamanite. Such an approach could potentially ease the discomfort that Samuel might have felt as he rebuked those who had been, for centuries, the more righteous part of the people (or at least had viewed themselves that way).

Finally, it is interesting that Samuel’s use of this phrase is most similar to the usage of Isaiah and Malachi, the two prophets in addition to Samuel to whom Jesus will refer to teach the Nephites and demonstrate
the fulfillment of prophecy in him. Together, then, Isaiah, Malachi, and Samuel stand as three united prophetic voices, pointing forward to the Son of God. When Jesus arrives, he points back to the message of previous prophets in order to enhance his living message to his people, even commanding them to add specific words from both Samuel and Malachi (see 3 Nephi 23:13; 24:1).

What do these various insights and connections, gleaned from Samuel’s use of “saith the Lord,” reveal about Samuel and his teachings thus far? First, like John the Baptist, he chooses to decrease his role as a messenger so that the Lord can increase (see John 3:30). Rather than call attention to himself as the messenger, he points to the Lord as the giver of truth. Second, the inspiration that comes to Samuel in his heart causes him to essentially act as a direct conduit for the Lord’s message. Third, Samuel the prophet is still a human figure with his own concerns. As a Lamanite, he needs to bolster his prophetic identity, and using the phrase “saith the Lord” helps him to do so. Fourth, the nature of his preaching seems to approach that of a biblical prophet more than a doctrinal teacher; he fits well within the scope of biblical prophets. Two things contribute to his prophetic behavior: his close attention to scripture and his close attention to those things that come into his heart. In other words, pure revelation—as found in the biblical texts and in his own heart—causes him to behave like earlier prophets. His behaviors cannot be attributed to cultural inheritance.

“Lord of Hosts”

Another phrase or title connecting Samuel, Nephi, and Jacob with biblical authors is the divine title “Lord of Hosts.” This title, yhwh šĕḇāʾōṯ in Hebrew, is used 245 times in the Old Testament but never in the New Testament. The writings of the biblical authors Isaiah and Malachi in the Book of Mormon account for more than two-thirds of the title’s occurrences (see table 2). Nephi, Jacob, and Samuel all use the title at a lower

13. Samuel uses “saith the Lord” with greater frequency than Isaiah but with lesser frequency than Malachi as found in the Book of Mormon, positioning him squarely between these two Hebrew prophets’ rhetorical styles (see table 1).
frequency than Isaiah and Malachi. But, significantly, they are the only other voices in the entire Book of Mormon who employ the title at all.

Biblical scholars have regularly affirmed that this title refers to God as the all-powerful being who can muster his troops or armies to battle. Depending on its use, those armies could consist of the house of Israel, with God as warrior at their head; they could refer to God’s role at the head of the heavenly council; or they could indicate God’s power as the one who orders and is master of the universe, particularly of celestial bodies such as the sun, the moon, and the stars, which at times are called to fight on the Lord’s behalf. According to C. L. Seow, “the sun, moon, and stars may be depicted as composing this heavenly retinue.”

Joshua 10:12–13; Judges 5:20; Habakkuk 3:11; and Daniel 8:10 all speak of the heavenly hosts in this way.

In light of this last point, Samuel’s use of the title “Lord of Hosts” is particularly interesting, considering his emphasis on two key events: the birth and death of the Messiah. The signs for these events center almost completely on heavenly bodies, such as a new star and light during the night at the time of Christ’s birth (see Helaman 14:3–5) and the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars at the time of his death (see Helaman 14:21). God—as ruler of the universe, or “Lord of Hosts” (of the hosts of heaven)—could command those heavenly powers to testify of him. But

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not only can God marshal the powers of heaven to testify of him, he can also command them to fight for him against the wicked. Samuel’s use of the title “Lord of Hosts” in connection with punishment, cursing, and desolation because of wickedness fits this model (see Helaman 13:17, 32). Since the title “Lord of Hosts” often describes God as one who can demonstrate his power in battle, arrayed against his enemies, the Bible’s uses of that phrase are often tied to desolation and punishment, as in Isaiah 5:9 and Jeremiah 33:12; 42:18. Thus not only does Samuel once again reflect biblical language, but his language mirrors biblical themes in appropriate ways.

Significantly, these two themes—power from heaven and destruction on earth—are intertwined in Samuel’s prophecy. His words are full of warnings of the destruction that will precede the coming of the Savior, and these mark a connection between destruction and the heavens: “If it were not for the righteous who are in this great city, behold, I would cause that fire should come down out of heaven and destroy it. . . . Yea, wo be unto this great city, because of the wickedness and abominations which are in her” (Helaman 13:13–14). Shortly after this passage, Samuel uses the term “Lord of Hosts” as he warns that the earth will also, as it were, do battle against the wicked Nephites: “It shall come to pass, saith the Lord of Hosts, . . . that whoso shall hide up treasures in the earth shall find them again no more, because of the great curse of the land” (Helaman 13:18). (Samuel even depicts the earth as fighting directly against the wicked in their own attempts at war: “Behold, we lay a tool here and on the morrow it is gone; and behold, our swords are taken from us in the day we have sought them for battle” [Helaman 13:34].)

Considering that the Lord of Hosts is often found in the Book of Mormon marshaling the forces of his covenant people Israel (the righteous Nephites), to find him now using the heavens and earth against them, as they are left unto themselves, would be extremely disconcerting for his erstwhile people. The effect is even stronger if one remembers that it is Samuel, a Lamanite himself, who utters these prophecies, almost serving in his person as an image of the reversal of the Nephite fortunes because of their wickedness. Samuel even uses war imagery to prophesy that the Nephites will one day be completely destroyed by
their enemies, the Lamanites: “The sword of justice hangeth over this people; and four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people. . . . I will visit them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence. . . . Your enemies [will live] to behold your utter destruction” (Helaman 13:5, 9–10). Samuel includes not only the Lamanites among God’s hosts in the destruction of the wicked Nephites, but also the earth, which smites them through famine and pestilence. Certainly Samuel could have used no more appropriate title for the Lord in these chapters than the biblical “Lord of Hosts.”

Another possible reason for Samuel’s use of “Lord of Hosts” may be to intentionally echo Nephi’s and Jacob’s use of the phrase, which follows biblical patterns. Nephi’s most concentrated use of the phrase (in 2 Nephi 26:4–6) surrounds his prophecy of the destruction that would come to the Nephites at the time of the Savior’s death, the very event of which Samuel prophesies. Jacob’s six uses of this phrase all occur within Jacob 2:28–33. Following this passage (in the 1830 edition, no chapter break appears after verse 35), Jacob condemns the Nephites for being less righteous than the Lamanites, another message clearly utilized by Samuel. It may be that Samuel’s use of “Lord of Hosts” is thus connected to either Nephi’s or Jacob’s use of the phrase—if not in fact both. If Samuel had been studying Nephite scripture in preparation for his preaching, both of these pericopes (the signs of Christ’s death provided by Nephi and the condemnation by Jacob of the Nephites being less righteous than the Lamanites) would have been pertinent passages to review. Perhaps readers are meant to understand that Samuel saw the frequent use of the phrase “Lord of Hosts” in these instances and was thereby influenced in his own word choices.

Finally, similar to using the phrase “saith the Lord,” Samuel’s use of the title “Lord of Hosts” would likely strengthen the Nephite view of his prophetic authority since the phrase seems to imply that he has been given heavenly instruction by joining God as part of his divine council. According to E. Theodore Mullen, “a major conceptual background for Hebrew prophecy was formed by the idea of the prophet as the messenger of Yahweh (Hag 1:13; Mal 3:1) who had been privy to
Yahweh’s council (Jer 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7). The frequent introduction of prophetic oracles with the phrase ‘thus says Yahweh’ (kōh ’āmar yhwh) suggests a further connection between the prophetic messenger role and the name [Lord of Hosts] yhwh šḇāʾōṯ.”16 Second Chronicles 18:18, for example, describes the prophetic experience in this way: “I saw the Lord sitting upon his throne, and all the host of heaven standing on his right hand and on his left” (emphasis added). In a passage quoted by Nephi, Isaiah speaks similarly when he sees God surrounded by angels: “Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). Mullen goes on to mention just how closely the use of “Lord of Hosts” was tied to biblical prophets and was also tied to the phrase “saith the Lord.” According to Mullen, “Of the 285 occurrences of šḇāʾōṯ [hosts] as part of a divine epithet, 251 (88%) are to be found in the prophetic books. Additionally, 244 instances (97.2%) of the phrase yhwh šḇāʾōṯ [Lord of Hosts] . . . occur in the following six works: Isaiah 1–55 (62x); Jeremiah (82x); Amos (9x); Haggai (14x); Zechariah (53x); Malachi (24x).”17

Samuel not only uses the title “Lord of Hosts” appropriately considering the type of prophecies he makes, but in doing so, he also connects himself with other biblical prophets, many of whose words he would presumably have studied closely, thereby bolstering his own position. As the prophetic figure sent to prepare the way for the coming of Christ among the Nephites, he also joined with Isaiah and Malachi, the two other prophets who would be cited by Jesus Christ in his visit.

“Signs and wonders”

Samuel’s use of “Lord of Hosts” as he proclaims God’s power over heavenly bodies connects with another biblical phrase used by Samuel: “signs and wonders.” This phrase, ʾôtōṯ ūmōp̱ētim in Hebrew, is introduced in the Bible as a description of miracles that God will perform, often having to do with heavenly signs: “He worketh signs and wonders in heaven and in earth” (Daniel 6:27). It occurs five times in the Old Testament and is employed by New Testament authors (who adopted it from Old

Testament speech) nine times, as sēmeia kai terata in Greek.\textsuperscript{18} Samuel, who uses the phrase twice, is one of only five Book of Mormon authors to employ it. Nephi also uses the phrase (once), as does Mormon (three times, although one instance is in connection with Samuel’s discourse). The only other voices to speak these words are an angel (as quoted by King Benjamin) and Zenos (as quoted by Nephi in 1 Nephi 19), who cannot properly be called direct Book of Mormon authors since one is a divine messenger and the other an extrabiblical prophet from Old Testament times. Although Samuel’s use of this phrase is more frequent than other voices in the Book of Mormon, the sample size is too small to determine whether this is significant. Nonetheless, the patterns of biblical usage already investigated, coupled with the relevance of “signs and wonders” to the themes already discussed, suggest that Samuel’s use of this phrase is of interest. And it is to be noted that important uses of the phrase “signs and wonders” outside the Samuel narrative are actually closely connected to Samuel’s prophecies. The frequency with which the phrase is found in Samuel’s preaching is much higher than that of either Nephi or Mormon.

Samuel’s usage of “signs and wonders” may be connected with an earlier prophecy of Nephi, which apparently relied on the words of Zenos (a Hebrew prophet whose words appear uniquely in the Book of Mormon). Zenos appears to be the original author of the prophecy that three days of darkness would be given to members of the house of Israel who inhabited the isles of the sea at the time of the death of Christ (see 1 Nephi 19:10). Zenos spoke of “the thunderings and the lightnings of his power, by tempest, by fire, and by smoke, and vapor of darkness, and by the opening of the earth, and by mountains which shall be carried up” (1 Nephi 19:11). Samuel likewise spoke of “the thunder and the lightning . . . and the tempest” that would occur at the time of Christ’s death, along with “darkness [that] should cover the face of the whole earth for the space of three days” (Helaman 14:27). It is important to

remember that Samuel has identified God, the God who would come down from heaven among them, as the Lord of Hosts, who can lead the powers of heaven described in Zenos’s words to testify of him and to war against those who reject that heavenly message. Samuel occupies his role as forerunner of the Messiah among the Nephites, working to prepare a people that will receive him. Referring to those at Jerusalem, Zenos had said that they would “turn their hearts aside, rejecting signs and wonders, and the power and glory of the God of Israel” (1 Nephi 19:13). Samuel seems to hold out more hope for at least some of the Nephites, teaching that “these signs and these wonders should come to pass upon all the face of this land, to the intent that there should be no cause for unbelief among the children of men” (Helaman 14:28). Notwithstanding his inflection of Zenos’s words, however, Samuel seems clearly to draw on them as Nephi does.

Further, these very heavenly signs first mentioned by Zenos ensure the existence of a remnant of believers to welcome Christ when he comes to the New World in the Book of Mormon’s narrative. Following Samuel’s witness, the people wait to see if his prophecies of heavenly signs will be fulfilled. When some calculate that the time has already passed, a day is set when the believers in the unfulfilled signs of Christ’s coming will be killed. But at the climax of the story, the night before the wicked plan to destroy all the righteous, God marshals the hosts of heaven, showing the sign of light. “And they knew that it was the day that the Lord should be born, because of the sign which had been given. . . . And it came to pass also that a new star did appear, according to the word” (3 Nephi 1:19, 21). Thus Mormon tells of the high drama when God saves his people by signs and wonders, just as he had done to save the Israelites from Pharaoh centuries earlier on the other side of the world (see Deuteronomy 6:22; Nehemiah 9:10; and Jeremiah 32:20). A few verses later, Mormon indicates that Satan spread a lying spirit among the people “to the intent that they might not believe in those signs and wonders which they had seen; but notwithstanding these lyings and deceivings the more part of the people did believe, and were converted unto the Lord” (3 Nephi 1:22). This beneficial effect is,
unfortunately, only temporary. Awe at the signs begins to diminish, “and the people began to forget those signs and wonders which they had heard, and began to be less and less astonished at a sign or a wonder from heaven” (3 Nephi 2:1). Nevertheless the heavenly signs play their role, as prophesied by Samuel and confirmed by Mormon.

“Anger of the Lord” and “kindled”

The phrase “anger of the Lord” (Heb. ʾap yhwh) is used thirty-two times in the Old Testament, and the context is extremely consistent. The user of the phrase regularly states the reason for the Lord’s anger and then proclaims the punishment that will come as a result of disobedience. For example, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the Israelites because they grew tired of the manna he had provided. The result of the Lord’s anger is provided in the same phrase, “and the Lord smote the people with a very great plague” (Numbers 11:33). The Book of Mormon, although not using the phrase frequently (only five times) is also consistent in its usage. For example, in Helaman 13:28–29, Samuel lists some of the sins of the people—that they love false prophets and give their riches to them. Because of these sins, Samuel states that the “anger of the Lord” is kindled (v. 30) and declares that the land will become cursed so that their riches become slippery (v. 31). After fully revealing the future results of the people’s wickedness, Samuel encourages them to turn away from their behavior so that the “anger of the Lord” will be removed from them and they won’t have to experience the consequences mentioned (v. 39). Samuel’s use of this phrase is consistent with its usage in the Bible, and although he employs the phrase only twice, this is more than any other voice in the Book of Mormon. (It appears only three other times, once in Alma’s voice, once in Isaiah’s voice, and once in a quotation of the Lord.)

Not only does Samuel’s usage mirror that found in the Bible, he also warns that the anger of the Lord will be “kindled” (Heb. yiḥar) against the people. This word regularly accompanies the warnings of the Lord’s anger in the Old Testament. Of the thirty-two times that “anger of the Lord” occurs in the Bible, twenty contain a declaration that the Lord’s
anger is “kindled.” Many of the instances lacking that wording encourage the people to repent so that the Lord will turn away his anger. Interestingly, Samuel’s usage follows this pattern as well. In Helaman 13:30, he declares that the Lord’s anger is “kindled,” but in Helaman 13:39 he encourages them to repent, and the word “kindled” does not appear. Besides Isaiah and the Lord (whose words are a direct quotation from Isaiah), Samuel is the only voice in the Book of Mormon to use the word “kindled” along with “anger of the Lord.”

The connection between the Lord’s anger being kindled and the prophesied result continues to build the high drama, already reviewed, of Samuel’s warnings to the Nephites. A Lamanite, typically despised by the Nephites, warns them of the Lord’s anger and predicts consequences. Having already rejected him once, the Nephites grow so angered at his prophetic activity that they seek to silence Samuel by killing him. Samuel prophesies that his people will one day eliminate the Nephites, but they take up their weapons to demonstrate the opposite—that they will instead eliminate him. In so doing, however, they end up proving the truth of Samuel’s message: they no longer act on behalf of the Lord, and they are powerless against this Lamanite.

Samuel may not look like a prophet to the Nephites, but he certainly speaks like one, and he demonstrates the power of a prophet as well. Accordingly, he not only warns that the Lord’s anger is kindled—something that could be said by anyone—but he then provides the conclusive evidence of his prophetic calling by telling them the specific consequences that will prove God’s anger to them. Years will pass before many of those consequences are fulfilled, but Samuel gives the Nephites all they need to determine whether he is indeed God’s prophet according to the rule set down by Moses in Deuteronomy (a rule with which Samuel would have been familiar):

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee [Moses], and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him. But the prophet,
which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him. (Deuteronomy 18:18–22, emphasis added)

Whether or not the Nephites were familiar with this statement, they put it to the test at the end of Samuel’s words and find that they could not immediately claim the falsehood of his prophecies; Samuel does not die. The remaining history of the Nephites is required to completely verify Samuel’s authority and fully prove to the Nephites that he has spoken as the Lord of Hosts has commanded him. Samuel prophesies of Jesus, serving as his forerunner. When Jesus indeed comes in fulfillment of this prophecy, he commands that an additional prophecy of Samuel also be included in the Nephite record, ensuring the existence of yet another evidence that Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, truly speaks on behalf of the Lord.

Conclusion

Samuel’s use of selected biblical phrases—“saith the Lord,” “Lord of Hosts,” “signs and wonders,” and “anger of the Lord” being “kindled”—in his discourse is consistently found at a higher frequency than for any other speaker in the Book of Mormon (besides biblical authors quoted in the Book of Mormon). These data display the depth of the Book of Mormon text that not only demonstrates a variety of styles between authors but also shows a varying degree of connection with the biblical text depending on the style and background of the author. Studying the Book of Mormon carefully by separating the various “voices” it portrays

19. Passages from Deuteronomy 18—and from this larger passage in particular—are actually quoted at several points in the Book of Mormon, suggesting general familiarity.
can suggest potential insights into the personalities, backgrounds, and speaking preferences of its multiple prophetic voices, and it can help the reader understand the beauty, truth, and purpose of their messages more completely.

The background supplied by Mormon indicates the strong possibility that the text of the law of Moses specifically, and other biblical texts more generally, were likely available to the Lamanite people and that many of the faithful Lamanites were familiar with it in a detailed fashion. It may be that since the law of Moses was so foreign to Lamanite culture, their study of the brass plates was, of necessity, even more detailed in order to absorb and adopt viewpoints that had been alien to them. Samuel apparently either came from one of these converted families—which could explain his biblical name—or had himself studied the biblical text enough to have absorbed it into his own speech patterns. It may be that as an “outsider” Samuel sought to bolster his authority by using language similar to that found on the brass plates. Even more importantly, as has been shown, Samuel uses these biblical phrases regularly because he acts in the role of a biblical prophet—a foreteller of future events and a forthteller to expose the sinful attitudes of the Nephites and warn them to change—rather than in the role of a doctrinal teacher. As God spoke to Samuel, so he spoke to the Nephites, and in doing so gave powerful witness of the reality of the prophetic office, of God’s ability to know and teach of future events, and of God’s power as the Lord of Hosts.

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There can be no doubt that the book of 3 Nephi takes fulfillment as one of its main themes.¹ When the resurrected Jesus appears midway through the book, himself the realization of centuries of Nephite prophetic anticipation, fulfillment is his constant refrain: “I have come to fulfil the law” (3 Nephi 15:5), “then will I fulfil the covenant” (3 Nephi 16:5), “this is fulfilling my commandments” (3 Nephi 18:10).² In fact, a full third of Book of Mormon occurrences of the word fulfill are found in 3 Nephi alone. But if fulfillment might be called a main theme for this book, it is a theme that is far from straightforward, and this is on display most clearly in the opening chapter. Third Nephi 1 complicates this theme by cautioning that fulfillment entails more than simply verifying predictions or accomplishing anticipated events and by demonstrating that how the Nephites understood fulfillment was conditioned by how they both conceptualized and related to time. Indeed, a close reading of 3 Nephi 1 shows that the Nephites’ obsession with the signs of Samuel the Lamanite obscures the temporal implications of fulfillment, implications which the signs themselves make blatantly obvious through their cosmic symbolism. Samuel’s message—and the message of the Book of Mormon itself—is that fulfillment of prophecy forms the beginning of a new era, rather than its end, and that such fulfillment is

¹. Grant Hardy has emphasized this point, though perhaps not in a distinctly theological vein. See Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 180–213.

primarily intended less to validate any one particular prophet than to reorient our experience of time.

Toward that end, this paper aims to uncover the latent temporal thematic in 3 Nephi 1 and explain its implications for the larger project of the Book of Mormon as a whole. The first section will provide an exegetical introduction to the context and structure of the chapter in order to highlight the complexity of the theme of fulfillment, after which the second section will analyze the role of time in the narrative, discussing the ways in which the Nephites’ problematic conceptions of time cause them to misunderstand the implications of Samuel’s prophecy. The third section will argue that the signs delivered by Samuel the Lamanite offer a kind of corrective to this problematic temporality by reorienting the Nephites to the present and calling them to a particular task. The paper will then conclude by briefly discussing the implications of this corrective for understanding Jesus’s prophecy in 3 Nephi 21, arguing that the Book of Mormon itself functions as a sign, which, like Samuel’s, orients its readers to both a new experience of time and a novel task.

Context and structure

Although 3 Nephi, like most books within the Book of Mormon, opens with a transition between record keepers (3 Nephi 1:2–3), this first chapter seems in most other respects an unlikely place to begin a new book. Third Nephi 1 shares a high degree of continuity with the book of Helaman, opening in medias res and borrowing both its plot and its main characters from events set in motion in the preceding book. For instance, although Samuel the Lamanite had announced an imminent

3. Brant Gardner posits that the transitions between books are largely dynastic (“related to the shift in the ruling lines”) but also notes that the shift from Helaman to 3 Nephi fails to follow that pattern, arguing that this particular transition instead indicates Mormon’s use of a new source. See Brant A. Gardner, “Mormon’s Editorial Method and Meta-Message,” FARMS Review 21/1 (2009): 87–90. For a more detailed examination of the breaks between books and the larger trajectory they indicate, see Joseph M. Spencer, An Other Testament: On Typology (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 110–14.
sign in the book of Helaman, the narration of that sign's arrival is reserved for 3 Nephi 1, and although Samuel's announcement had drawn sharp critique from an unbelieving contingent of his audience, we do not learn what befalls those individuals until, again, the opening chapter of 3 Nephi. It would seem more natural, in many ways, had Mormon contained the entire exposition, climax, and denouement of this narrative within the book of Helaman, instead of suspending the storyline across such a major internal division. This pronounced relationship between 3 Nephi and Helaman continues in the following chapters, as well—3 Nephi 2–7 seems more like a continuation of the previous book than a genuinely new story. These chapters recount the murder of a chief judge (3 Nephi 7:1), something that elsewhere occurs only in the book of Helaman (Helaman 1:9; 6:15–19; 8:27–28), and government corruption through secret combinations, another prominent theme again almost entirely unique to Helaman. All in all, the tone and content of these opening chapters has more in common with the previous book than with what follows in the rest of 3 Nephi, and the reader is left wondering why Mormon chose here, of all places, as the dividing point between books. The precision to what might otherwise appear an arbitrary boundary, however, may provide a clue to Mormon's editorial motivations in dividing the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi as he does. We might note, for example, that dividing the books in this way places the exposition of Samuel's two messianic signs firmly on one side of the break, while the fulfillment of both those signs is placed firmly on the other. It seems that Mormon may have wanted to reserve two of the most dramatic fulfillment narratives in Nephite history for a book dedicated to that theme.

But 3 Nephi 1 calls for our attention in other ways, as well. There is something curiously deliberate about the way this chapter structures itself. Third Nephi 1 splits into two main pericopes, each centering on the fulfillment of a particular aspect of Nephite tradition. In order to clarify why this structural division is so striking, we need first to lay out the contents of these two stories. The first pericope (3 Nephi 1:4–20) takes place approximately five years after Samuel the Lamanite's famous
wall-top sermon and its included promise of a sign of Christ’s birth (see Helaman 13–15). At the time the chapter opens, the anticipated miracle has apparently not taken place within the expected “five years” (3 Nephi 1:5; cf. Helaman 14:2), and the unbelievers gleefully begin to “rejoice over” (3 Nephi 1:6) the faithful. Their mockery is far from benign, however: so convinced are these unbelievers that the sign had passed its deadline that they designate a day for the mass slaughter of their believing brethren. Duly alarmed by this turn of events, Nephi, the current record keeper, prays for divine intervention. After a full day of “cr[y[ing]] mightily unto the Lord” (3 Nephi 1:12), he receives good news: “The voice of the Lord came unto him, saying: Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given” (3 Nephi 1:12–13). True to the divine message, Samuel’s predicted sign occurs that very night. With deliberate care, Mormon sums up the scene by concluding that “it had come to pass, yea, all things, every whit, according to the words of the prophets” (3 Nephi 1:20). The second pericope (3 Nephi 1:23–26) presents the theological aftermath of the previous episode. A small group takes Samuel’s fulfilled prophecy to imply a parallel fulfillment of the law, “endeavoring to prove . . . that it was no more expedient to observe the law of Moses” (3 Nephi 1:24). Mormon is quick to assure us that “in this thing they did err” and dismisses the scene in short order, informing us that “in this same year” they were “brought to a knowledge of their error” (3 Nephi 1:24–25).

4. The “deliberate care” I have in mind here refers to the fact that the division into two pericopes is not only thematic, but also marked textually by the phrase “every whit,” which appears toward the end of each scene. This point will be returned to below, albeit only briefly.

5. Although John Welch asserts that Nephi is the person correcting this interpretive error, he overlooks the text’s own ambiguity. The verse in question is almost self-consciously passive, saying only that “the word came unto them.” It is possible that perhaps even Mormon did not know who was responsible for correcting this group. At any rate, if it had been Nephi, odds are that Mormon would have simply stated that fact. See John W. Welch, “Seeing 3 Nephi as the Holy of Holies in the Book of Mormon,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Salt Lake City: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and Deseret Book, 2012).
Crucially, both pericopes center on the topic of fulfillment, but fulfillments of a different sort: where the first deals with prophetic fulfillment (will Samuel’s words be accomplished?), the second deals with legal fulfillment (has the law of Moses come to fruition?). While this structure serves to again highlight the general theme of fulfillment that preoccupies 3 Nephi, its intertextual allusions are even more striking. By juxtaposing the fulfillment of the law with the fulfillment of the prophets in this way, the text echoes a famous proverb from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17–18)

Thus, 3 Nephi 1 directly addresses the two objects of concern in Matthew 5:17–18 (“the law” and “the prophets”), similarly affirming the fulfillment of the law of Moses and the words of prophets in the face of what might be too easily misunderstood as their destruction. Additionally, further inspection reveals that the relationship between these two texts runs deeper still. When those who overzealously anticipate the law’s fulfillment are finally disabused, they are informed that “one jot nor tittle should not pass away till [the law] should all be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:25). The dependence of 3 Nephi 1 on Matthew 5:17–18 is thus not only thematic and structural, but explicitly textual.

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7. Although Brant Gardner sees in this echo an instance of Joseph Smith’s familiarity with the language of the King James Version—see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:242—it is also entirely possible to see 3 Nephi 1’s dependence on Matthew originating from Mormon himself. The Sermon on the Mount is also found, with some variation, in 3 Nephi 12. For those who wish to take the Book of Mormon’s historical claims at face value, it is possible to allow that 3 Nephi 1 takes its structural cues from 3 Nephi 12 rather than from Joseph Smith. For a particularly
The incorporation of Matthew 5:17–18 into both the structure and the narrative of this text demonstrates the deliberate care with which 3 Nephi 1 treats the theme of fulfillment and the meticulous attention with which Mormon crafts the opening chapter of this book. The way 3 Nephi 1 adapts Matthew 5:17–18 obviously has much to teach us about Mormon’s editorial interests and what is at stake in 3 Nephi more generally, and so warrants at least a few further comments regarding this textual and structural allusion.

First, it is worth noting that Mormon seems to afford greater narrative weight to prophetic fulfillment over legal fulfillment, and this inclination marks the first important difference between Matthew 5:17–18 and Mormon’s adaptation in 3 Nephi 1: the order and significance of “law” and “prophets” is reversed. Where Matthew’s primary focus is on the law, mentioning law first and prophets second in verse 17, and then focusing on the question of the law alone for the remainder of verse 18, Mormon instead privileges the prophetic, leading out with the fulfillment of Samuel’s words and touching on the question of the law’s fulfillment only secondarily. For Matthew, of course, the law and the prophets were textual designations, portions of the Hebrew Bible listed in sequential order—torah followed by nevi’im. For Mormon, however, there appears to be a greater ontological distance between law and prophets; prophets figure more prominently as characters in history rather than authors associated with particular writings. In addition to reversing the order in which law and prophets are mentioned


8. This is not to say that Matthew is uninterested in “the prophets.” On the contrary, it is likely that he added the words τους προφητας (“the prophets”) to his received tradition. See Robert Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17–20,” Journal of Biblical Literature 93 (1974): 228; Robert H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 78–79. In a sense, then, Mormon and Matthew are more similar in this respect than might at first appear; both writers built on their received tradition by gradually increasing the importance of the prophets in their relative texts.
in Matthew and treating prophets as characters rather than textual designations, Mormon emphasizes the prophetic pericope by granting it more space than the legal pericope (seventeen verses as opposed to two) and endowing it with more pathos. This story includes the relative joy and sorrow of the unbelievers and believers, Nephi’s distress and heartfelt prayer, and the “astonishment” of the people at the sign’s dramatic appearance; it introduces a fatal threat to the believers and their cathartic rescue in the nick of time; and the reader cannot help but relish the gratifying comeuppance of the would-be murderers. The legal pericope, by comparison, comes across as cerebral and abstract; a few aspiring interpreters of scripture simply misunderstand the scriptures and are corrected. There is no emotion, no dramatic story arc, and not even individual characters. Third Nephi 1 alters its Matthean source text by placing prophets and their fulfillment at the fore.

Despite that significant difference, Matthew 5:17–18 and 3 Nephi 1 share at least one potent similarity: an interest in totality.™ This is the force behind Matthew’s “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law”—he portrays Jesus preserving Mosaic law in its entirety, down to the smallest marks on the page; indeed, “all [will] be fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17–18, emphasis added). But if the totality in question in Matthew 5 refers to the enduring validity of the law prior to its fulfillment, totality in 3 Nephi 1 takes on a slightly different cast. Here, the completeness in view is not the completeness of the law, but of the fulfillment, whether legal or prophetic, and this totality manifests at several places in the text. First, both pericopes emphasize the totality of

9. Mormon’s interest in totality in this chapter is another element of continuity between 3 Nephi 1 and the preceding book of Helaman. Mormon’s drive to show fulfillment as inarguably comprehensive may stem in part from an implied challenge in the unbelievers’ initial response to Samuel’s words: “Some things they may have guessed right, among so many; but behold, we know that all these great and marvelous works cannot come to pass” (Helaman 16:16). The unbelievers will readily admit a kind of luck involved in the accomplishment of any number of the prophetic signs, but their refusal to believe the prophets is staked on the claim that the total number of signs cannot possibly occur. Piqued, Mormon is all too happy to prove them wrong in 3 Nephi 1, and he does so repeatedly and with relish.
fulfillment by concluding with the phrase “every whit.” After Samuel’s sign is given and the people fall to the earth, Mormon reports that “it had come to pass, yea, all things, every whit, according to the words of the prophets” (3 Nephi 1:20),¹⁰ leaving no doubt that the fulfillment has indeed been complete and total. As part of the corrective to those who think the law’s fulfillment has already been achieved, Mormon notes that “it was made known unto them that the law . . . must be fulfilled in every whit; . . . it should all be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:25). Totality also finds a voice in the words of the Lord to Nephi, who describes the purpose of his coming not just in terms of fulfillment, but specifically total fulfillment: “On the morrow come I into the world, to show . . . that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfil all things which I have made known” (3 Nephi 1:13–14). The people’s reaction to Samuel’s sign is also instructive: “All the people upon the face of the whole earth . . . fell to the earth” (3 Nephi 1:17). A total fulfillment has here induced a kind of aggregated, totalized response from the people. By shifting the force of Matthew’s totality from the unfulfilled law to fulfillment as such, Mormon not only reveals his personal eagerness for the complete realization of the law and the prophets, but also adds yet another degree of emphasis to the theme of fulfillment.

Fulfillment, then, is undoubtedly a primary theme contained in 3 Nephi 1, and the deft incorporation of Matthew 5:17–18 into both the structure and wording of the chapter should alert us to the fact that the theology of fulfillment at work is quite complex. As will be shown below, 3 Nephi 1 cautions that fulfillment demands more from its beneficiaries than a mere recognition that predictions have been verified or that anticipated events have been accomplished, and the chapter makes clear this complexity through its temporal thematic. In this thematic, the Nephites are portrayed as consistently misunderstanding the nature of fulfillment because of the various ways in which they conceptualize

¹⁰. Any emphasis appearing in Book of Mormon quotations has been added.
and experience time, and it is this situation Samuel attempts to obviate with his sermon. What the Nephites consistently fail to understand is that fulfillment here has a temporal inflection—the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy is more about time than it is about validating Samuel’s prophetic credentials, and Samuel primarily hopes to correct Nephite temporality rather than grant certain abstract, cognitive facts about the Messiah. To better illuminate this complexity, we turn now to examine the role of temporality in 3 Nephi 1.

Problematising time: Nephite temporality

In addition to its obvious preoccupation with fulfillment, 3 Nephi 1 is also heavily invested in a temporal thematic, something evident at both the linguistic and narrative levels of the text. The word time occurs in six places throughout the chapter, and a subtle fascination with units of time and the duration of events appears in practically every scene. When the unbelievers dismiss Samuel’s prophecy, for instance, they present their skepticism in specifically temporal terms: “Behold the time is past, and the words . . . are not fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:6). As their critique develops into radical violence the narrative continues to mark temporal overtones to the conspiracy, reporting that “there was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death” (3 Nephi 1:9). Even Nephi’s prayerful response is narrated with attention to time. The text reports that he “cried mightily . . . all that day” (3 Nephi 1:12), echoing the unbelievers’ action by likewise singling out a particular day, but characterizing it with prayer rather than violence. Continuing the theme, the divine response to Nephi also emphasizes temporality: “Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand” (3 Nephi 1:13). Not only does the Lord emphasize time explicitly, but he echoes the structure of the unbelievers’ critique in verse 6, implicitly correcting it.¹¹ When, at

¹¹ The skeptics had asserted “behold the time is past” (3 Nephi 1:6), to which the Lord emends, “behold, the time is at hand” (3 Nephi 1:13).
last, the sign finally arrives, the information the Nephites acquire bears a kind of temporal specificity: they “knew that it was the day that the Lord should be born” (3 Nephi 1:19). And even the chapter’s conclusion underlines the temporal thematic running through this text. Mormon concludes the chapter with what at first glance seems to be an entirely typical summary statement: “And thus the ninety and second year did pass away, bringing glad tidings unto the people” (3 Nephi 1:26). However, in a startling deviation from Book of Mormon convention, “glad tidings” are here delivered not by divinely appointed messengers but by the year itself—time becomes the messenger in question.  

Temporality is also brought into focus in 3 Nephi 1 by the way the Nephites consistently misunderstand the timing of fulfillment. In each pericope a group of Nephites anticipates fulfillment prematurely, only to be corrected that the expected event will take place at a later date. When the unbelievers insist, for instance, that Samuel’s sign ought to have happened by now, they are startled at its appearance several days later. When another group of Nephites argues that “it was [now] no more expedient to observe the law” (3 Nephi 1:24), they learn instead that fulfillment “was not yet” (3 Nephi 1:25). In other words, although the unbelievers claimed that the sign’s fulfillment belonged to the past, subsequent events located its fulfillment in the present; and although some believers insisted that the law’s fulfillment belonged to the present, the narrative positions its fulfillment in the future. What this consistent error reveals is that, rather than simply misunderstanding the nature of fulfillment alone, the Nephites’ mistake is slightly more specific: they misunderstand fulfillment’s relationship with time. The Nephites know what sort of sign to expect, what it would mean about the Messiah, and even what kind of Mosaic revisions it would entail. What they fail to understand is precisely when these things will take place.

This underdeveloped sense of fulfillment’s timing hints at a deeper problem. What 3 Nephi 1 ultimately shows is that the Nephites manifest a problematic temporality, both in how they think about time’s...
operation and in how they experience time’s passage, and this further threatens a parallel understanding of and relationship to the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy. Following a brief exploration of the unbelievers’ linear model of time, I want to present the two problematic temporal relationships portrayed in 3 Nephi 1—one belonging to those who believe in Samuel’s prophecy, and another belonging to those who disbelieve.

The temporal model with which Samuel will most directly contend is that of the unbelievers, whose conception of time is first exposed in verse 6 with the statement “Behold the time is past, and the words of Samuel are not fulfilled.” Despite its brevity, this assertion reveals a great deal about how the unbelievers think about both time and fulfillment, and it does so primarily by raising a pair of questions. First, what exactly is time past? Or, put verbally rather than adjectivally, what is time supposed to have passed? The unbelievers seem to be operating under a linear temporal model in which time is mobile, while historical events remain fixed. In this case, the unbelievers assert that time has passed a deadline for Samuel’s prophecy to be fulfilled, a deadline which stands as a kind of fixed marker in history; once time moves beyond that deadline, Samuel’s prophecy can be neatly categorized as belonging to the “past.” Our second question addresses the curious structure of the unbelievers’ assertion, and this, too, hints at a linear model. Rather than stating, perhaps more naturally, “the time is past for the words of Samuel to be fulfilled,” why do the unbelievers separate the two phrases with the conjunction and (“the time is past, and the words . . . are not fulfilled”)? In this way, strictly speaking, the unbelievers assert that time alone is past rather than time for a particular occasion, and thus betray a belief, however implicit, that the operation of time and the operation of fulfillment are distinct phenomena. Time is perceived to be a general, universal system functioning indifferently with respect to the specific events it maneuvers, all of which are largely interchangeable. In this way, time can be thought of here as a kind of container that various

13. Implicit here is the classic distinction between chronos and kairos. The former refers to undifferentiated, successive time (clock time), while the latter refers to the appropriate moment (opportunity).
events (including prophecies and their fulfillment) come to fill. Events can belong to containers marked either “past,” “present,” or “future,” but the sorts of events it contains does not determine the nature of time. By separating the operation of time from the operation of fulfillment in this way, the unbelievers tacitly insist that fulfillment is the province of historical contents (events and prophecies) rather than the province of the container (temporality itself). The failure or success of Samuel’s prophecy is thus seen as merely coincident to, not integrally connected with, how the Nephites identify and characterize time. As it turns out, it is this disjunction between time and fulfillment that Samuel’s sermon will reveal as most problematic about the unbelievers’ temporal model.14

How the unbelievers think about time’s mechanics naturally conditions how they relate to and experience time’s passage, and that relationship might be summed up as a kind of dismissive attitude toward the past. According to Mormon, they toss off their statement that “the time is past” without further comment, as if it contains all that needs to be said about time and the past in a straightforwardly evident way. With these four perfunctory words the unbelievers also hint at the motivation for their dismissive attitude—a belief that the past is irrelevant. Thus, their eagerness to identify the deadline for the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy is not driven by faith, but rather by a desire to relegate this prophet and his words to the past, where they can be effectively ignored. This indifference to the past also explains how the unbelievers can view time and fulfillment as fundamentally disjoint operations. If the past renders particular content completely irrelevant, there is no need to pay any real attention to that content. Rather, the exigent task is simply to keep an eye on the movement of time; one only needs to know the

14. By way of clarifying this point (and anticipating my later argument), we might at least briefly mention the sort of contrasting temporal model Samuel will offer. In the language of this metaphor, Samuel suggests that temporal “containers” are fundamentally changed based on the types of events they hold. When Christ arrives, for instance, he does not simply fill an indifferent “present” but alters the entire temporal situation by ushering in a messianic era. In other words, once Christ arrives, his mortal ministry changes time itself, characterizing it as the crucially important and decisively salvific lifetime of the Messiah.
point at which a prophecy is past relevance and can be safely disregarded. From their opening words, the unbelievers’ every subsequent expression and action is based on a view in which the past—precisely because it is past—can be effectively ignored.

A related implication of this dismissive attitude is the unbelievers’ interest in ending or termination, and this is evident in the particular conclusions they draw from their critique: “Behold the time is past . . . ; therefore, your joy and your faith . . . hath been vain.” Because Samuel’s prophecy has passed its deadline, they argue, the believers’ joy and faith are rendered nonsensical and futile. Or, in more general terms: once an event is safely in the “past,” its prior implication and relevance are effectively canceled. Indeed, this obsession with the terminating effect of an event becoming “past” may even provide the key to understanding how the unbelievers’ behavior escalates into such extreme violence. Their insistence that Samuel’s prophecy no longer holds any implication for the present is threatened by the believers’ continued faith (and apparently distinct approach to time) and so, asserting that the erstwhile implications of Samuel’s prophecy have been entirely ended, the unbelievers threaten to likewise end anyone who insists otherwise. One of the most problematic results of the unbelievers’ temporal relationship is thus the way it leads them to (mis)understand the lack of fulfillment as a question of ending—an end to anticipatory hope and joy, and, at its most perverse and grotesque, an end even to the believers’ very lives.

But it is important to notice that something like this perspective continues among the Nephites more generally even when fulfillment does occur: after Samuel’s signs are accomplished, this miraculous event is thought to primarily imply an ending to observance of the law of Moses (3 Nephi 1:24). Whether Samuel’s prophecy is understood as fulfilled or unfulfilled, there is a strong strain of Nephite thought that sees the implications of the prophecy as a question of terminating prior attitudes and devotional practices.

Situated over against the unbelievers with their trivializing disregard for the past are “all those who believed in those traditions” (3 Nephi 1:9). Although the text does not hint in any clear way at their temporal
model, there is abundant evidence that the believers also experience a problematic relationship with time. In contrast to the unbelievers, who manifested a dismissive relationship with the past, the believers instead exhibit a peculiar orientation to the future, and this is made evident by a subtle shift in their anticipatory focus. The text reports that the initial object of their belief is specifically “those traditions,” in reference to the Nephite messianic tradition with its anticipation of Christ’s birth—a tradition that the unbelievers immediately begin to mock.\(^\text{15}\) Recall the unbelievers’ critique in full: “Behold the time is past,” they tell the believers, “therefore, your joy and your faith concerning this thing hath been vain” (3 Nephi 1:6). The believers—whom the text had just before characterized as “joy[ful]”—“began to be very sorrowful, lest by any means those things which had been spoken might not come to pass” (3 Nephi 1:7). Once they begin to doubt, the believers turn their anticipatory attention away from the Messiah to a more concentrated focus on the sign of his coming: “But behold, they did watch steadfastly for

15. It is clear that the believers are initially more attuned to the Christ-event than its associated sign, though the point is subtle. The word tradition(s) (3 Nephi 1:9) is particularly telling—it is used throughout the Book of Mormon to indicate ancestral religious beliefs handed down across generations (as used, for instance, in Enos 1:14; Mosiah 1:5; 10:12; 26:1; Alma 8:11; 21:8; Helaman 15:7, 15; incidentally, 3 Nephi 1:9, 11 are the last two instances of the word tradition or traditions in the Book of Mormon). Also indicative is the fact that these believers are described as experiencing “joy” (3 Nephi 1:6), echoing Nephite religious texts that encourage anticipatory rejoicing in Christ (see Jarom 1:11 and 2 Nephi 25:25–26). As strong as this Nephite messianic tradition is, there is an equally strong tradition of its criticism of which the unbelievers’ response is entirely characteristic. Consider, for example, the striking parallels between 3 Nephi 1 and Jacob 7: criticism of the peculiar Nephite admixture of Mosaic observance and Christian anticipation, demand for a sign, a religious leader “cry[ing]” to the Lord, and a collective collapse of the people when the sign occurs. Seen in this light, the prophetic pericope in 3 Nephi 1 is simply another iteration of a more or less continuous conflict throughout Nephite religious history. For a philosophical and theological exploration of the anachronistic nature of Book of Mormon Christianity, see Adam S. Miller, “Messianic History: Walter Benjamin and the Book of Mormon,” in Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities, ed. James M. McLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 227–43; reprinted in Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 21–35.
that day and that night and that day which should be as one day as if there were no night, that they might know that their faith had not been vain” (3 Nephi 1:8).

Two observations follow. First, it is significant that joy is removed from the narrative. Not only has their joy been exchanged for sorrow—an indication that their temporal orientation has also undergone a subtle shift—but when the believers turn their attention to the sign for confirmation of their past faith, joy remains conspicuously absent; they only wish to know “that their faith had not been vain,” despite the unbelievers’ initial criticism of both “joy and . . . faith” (3 Nephi 1:6). Although their faith remains, the absence of joy suggests a kind of hopeless anticipation; the unbelievers’ critique has, in some fashion, struck home. Second, notice how the unbelievers’ ridicule alters the believers’ relationship with the future. What had previously been joyful anticipation of the Messiah becomes anxious sign seeking. Both attitudes are oriented to a future event, but where the former was characterized by faith, the latter is motivated by desperation. Indeed, the believers’ desperation seeks a very particular aim: they watch for the sign specifically “that they might know” the validity of their devotion. The believers hope to acquire a kind of knowledge for themselves—a knowledge that will secure the potential “vanity” of faith—and they fixate on the future as the source for that knowledge. The future becomes a meager prop for their hopes, a kind of crutch on which the believers pin their now-desperate faith, even while they begin to fear the apparent unlikelihood of the prophecy’s fulfillment. Rather than seeing in the future something to be assertively anticipated in joy, the believers now see the future as something to be desperately obsessed over in fear. What had been a kind of jubilant confidence in the Messiah’s coming becomes a kind of mere desperation, and thus, by the time Samuel’s sign finally does arrive, the believers are in as much of a problematic temporal relationship as their unbelieving brethren.16

The import of these dual relationships with or experiences of time is revealed in the aftermath of the sign’s fulfillment. As Samuel had foretold, “at the going down of the sun there was no darkness” (3 Nephi 1:15). Here the narrative splits, reporting the effects of this event in two scenes—one to describe the unbelievers’ reaction (3 Nephi 1:16) and the other to illustrate the response of the believers (3 Nephi 1:17–18).

As we might expect, the outcome is significantly more damning for the unbelievers. The presence of the sign forces them to reinterpret both the content of the past and their earlier dismissal of it. This reevaluation is evident in the sheer number of past tense verbs in the scene: the unbelievers see that they “had not believed the words of the prophets,” that they “had laid [a] great plan of destruction”—a plan which “they knew . . . had been frustrated”—and that the sign “had been given.” Here, in the light of this miraculously lengthened day, the unbelievers’ past is revealed as skeptical and violent, a time of refusing both prophetic words and cosmic signs. The same past that they had so quickly dismissed returns in full force, and it bears with it all the implication they had earlier attempted to deny. Finding themselves condemned, the unbelievers “fell to the earth and became as if they were dead” (3 Nephi 1:16). Importantly, although the next verse reports that eventually all the people fell “to the earth” (3 Nephi 1:17), it is only the would-be murderers who assume a fatal posture (“as if they were dead”). Their earlier haste to violently impose murderous endings doubles back on them and the termination they had intended to inscribe on the bodies of the believers is written on their own flesh.

17. I am here making an axiomatic interpretive decision about one of the ambiguities of 3 Nephi 1:17. This verse opens with the words “and they began to know that the Son of God must shortly appear,” but it is not immediately clear to whom “they” refers. At first glance, these words seem to point back to the unbelievers of verse 16, but if this is the case, it is difficult to understand why Mormon would call what follows a “fine[r]” clarification, or why he would continue to narrate their response at such great length after describing them as fallen “to the earth . . . as if they were dead” (3 Nephi 1:16). Rather, I understand the “they” of verse 17 to refer to the believers and the rest of the Nephites, and the phrase “yea, in fine” to function as Mormon’s attempt to subsequently explain this ambiguity.
The believers fare somewhat better than their brethren. The narrative reports that, in addition to remaining conscious, the believers begin to focus anew on the Messiah. Ultimately, however, this outcome is not as positive as it first appears; their reaction bears more similarity to the unbelievers’ response than difference. Like the unbelievers, the believers come to “know” something, and it is worth noting that whatever temporal relationship each group had manifested in anticipation of the sign persists as the context of their knowledge once the sign arrives; the direction of their prior focus determines the direction of their knowledge. Thus, where the unbelievers “knew” that their “great plan . . . had been frustrated” (a look into the past), the believers “began to know that the Son of God must shortly appear” and that “the Lord should be born” (a look into the future) (3 Nephi 1:16–17, 19). Even here, though, joy does not return to the narrative, and its absence is revealing. When the sign arrives, the only emotion on display—for both unbeliever and believer alike—is astonishment (3 Nephi 1:15, 17). The believers may have had a better outcome than the unbelievers (that is, in addition to remaining conscious they perhaps have reason to again hope in the Messiah) but the conspicuous absence of anything like joy in their reaction still hints at a kind of loss when the believers’ response is compared to their earlier faith.

But perhaps the most striking similarity between the two responses concerns a detail that will prove particularly salient for our discussion of Samuel: from the Nephite perspective, fulfillment is narrated almost obsessively in terms of the sign. In each of the two scenes recounting the aftermath of the sign’s occurrence, the sign is curiously described as being “already at hand.” In the first instance, the unbelievers know that their planned genocide has been thwarted because “the sign which had been given was already at hand” (3 Nephi 1:16), and in the second instance, the believers fall to the earth in astonishment for an identical reason: “The sign which had been given was already at hand” (3 Nephi 1:18). For the Nephites, what is most readily “at hand”—most immediate, most visible, uppermost in their attention, and the most important implication of fulfillment—is the sign. However, in the very same
chapter, an alternative perspective is offered, and that perspective belongs to the Lord himself. When the Lord reassures Nephi about the fate of the faithful, he began by announcing, “Behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given” (3 Nephi 1:13). In fact, that same phrase is repeated at the end of the Lord’s words (3 Nephi 1:14), as if to explicitly counter the double insinuation elsewhere in the chapter (in verses 13 and 18) that the crucial element is actually the sign’s imminence. When the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy occurred, the sign dominated the Nephites’ attention; however, according to the Lord, what ought to have been uppermost in their thoughts was something about time.

A close reading of 3 Nephi 1 indicates that fulfillment’s most immediate implication has something to say about temporality—that time, not the sign, is what is most properly “at hand,” and thus it is time, not the sign, that is fulfilled. To this point, the Nephites have been so focused on the sign (either in trying to deny it or fretfully awaiting its arrival) that once it actually arrives it obscures both groups’ experience of temporality. Apparently the Nephites are only able to experience time as the anxious “not yet” or the resistant “not ever,” and the result is that they do not know what to do with the graceful “at hand.” Where the Nephites’ language of fulfillment was expressed in terms of the sign, the divine language of fulfillment was expressed in temporal terms, suggesting that while the Nephites (unbelievers and believers alike) cannot make sense of a fulfilled temporality, this temporal paradigm for fulfillment is precisely the paradigm 3 Nephi 1 intends to privilege. On this model, what is fulfilled is not a particular prophet’s words or a visible omen, but rather a particular era or period of history, suggesting that fulfillment is less about validating prophetic credibility and more about changing how God’s people experience time.

It is to this situation that the mechanics of Samuel’s sign are meant to respond, and the corrective is twofold: first, to clarify the relationship between time and fulfillment, and second, to alter the posture of Nephite discipleship according to a new, redemptive temporality.
Solving time: Samuel’s corrective

Samuel the Lamanite is widely recognized as a singular character in the Book of Mormon, and the signs he delivers are equally unique in a number of ways. To begin with, it is noteworthy that Samuel delivers two paired signs (although 3 Nephi 1 recounts the fulfillment of the first only). Coupled with his sign of the Messiah’s birth, Samuel also predicts “a sign of [the Messiah’s] death” (Helaman 14:14), and where the first sign involved roughly three days of miraculous illumination, the second is characterized by “no light . . . for the space of three days” (Helaman 14:20). This obvious pairing and correspondence stands out noticeably in the Book of Mormon, in which signs otherwise occur only as single, discrete miracles. The nature and purpose of Samuel’s two signs are also distinctive. Signs appear only rarely in the narrative action of the Book of Mormon, and when they do occur they are generally punitive, given to demonstrate the falsity of an anti-Christ (Jacob 7:14–15; Alma 30:43–50) or to convict an unbelieving audience of a prophet’s credentials (Helaman 9:24–25). Although Samuel’s first sign does have a kind of retributive outcome (3 Nephi 1:16–17) and the second sign is fulfilled to the effect of “great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people” (3 Nephi 8:23), these signs are not primarily punitive. Rather, they are primarily temporal, and this is marked by another unique element they hold in common: both signs concern themselves with the sun, moon, and stars (see 3 Nephi 1:15, 19; 8:22), the temporal import of which almost goes without saying. No other signs in the Book of Mormon are delivered as a corresponding pair for


a nonpunitive purpose while being involved with planetary bodies—put simply, there are no other signs quite like Samuel’s.20

The temporal overtones of Samuel’s signs are made explicit from the moment they are introduced. In announcing the first sign, Samuel tellingly refers to it not as a sign of Christ’s coming, but rather “a sign at the time of his coming” (Helaman 14:3), thus indicating that this omen is intended not to point to Christ directly, but more precisely to point to the particular era in which Christ’s coming is inscribed. This temporal intent is further developed in the symbolism of each sign, where the sign’s operation demonstrates deliberate and explicit involvement with time. (Here we will confine ourselves once again to the fulfillment of the first sign as narrated in 3 Nephi 1, although the parallels with the second sign should be obvious.) The first sign functions by taking the illumination characteristic of daytime and extending it past its regular duration, and in so doing, the Messiah’s birth is marked by what is effectively described as a kind of temporal contraction. In the words of Samuel, “there shall be one day and a night and a day, as if it were one day” (Helaman 14:4; cf. 3 Nephi 1:8). In the mechanics of the sign, two days and one night masquerade as one day, as if time has been compressed. Samuel’s sign thus marks out the Christ-event by figuratively condensing the time in which that event is inscribed, and it is not difficult to see the relevance of this gesture for the Nephites in 3 Nephi 1. We mentioned that in both pericopes a group of Nephites identified fulfillment prematurely, and although their timing was ultimately revealed to be incorrect, their initial confidence betrayed a kind of temporal oversight. Their unexamined assurance that they understood the operation of time led the Nephites to rashly stipulate the occasion when the sign or Mosaic revision ought to occur. In response, Samuel’s sign takes something as predictable as nightfall and upends it, showing the Nephites their utter inadequacy to dictate the timing of fulfillment and

20. There is, however, some biblical precedent for signs of this sort. In the battle with the Amorites, for instance, Joshua commanded the sun to stand still (Joshua 10:12–13), and Isaiah’s sign to King Hezekiah involved the shadow of a sundial moving both forward and backward by ten degrees (2 Kings 20:8–11).
striking at the heart of what they had taken for granted. In a radically
humbling gesture, the sign sweeps aside every Nephite confidence that
the operation of time is straightforward or easily fathomed.

If we might thus understand Samuel’s sign as clearly attempting to
communicate something about temporality, we now need to examine
the precise content of that message and how it counters the Nephites’
problematic relationships with time. Samuel’s first corrective appears only
as we further explore the Lamanite prophet’s direct comments about his
signs—comments which repeatedly (if implicitly) emphasize that fulfill-
ment cannot be understood separate from time. Recall how the Nephites’
experience of fulfillment neglected adequate attention to temporality;
they not only misunderstood the timing of fulfillment, but when the sign
occurred they experienced the sign itself as most readily “at hand,” rather
than “the time” mentioned by the Lord (3 Nephi 1:13–14, 16, 18). The
Nephites lost sight of time in the face of fulfillment, and this took on a
stark cast particularly for the unbelievers, who verbally separated time
and fulfillment with the conjunction and. Samuel’s diction, however, is
surprisingly consistent in the other direction: whenever Samuel mentions
a period of time in Helaman 14, it is always characterized by a Messianic
event. Fulfillment, for Samuel, is never a thing in itself, but rather what
orients his experience of time. For instance, when he announced that
“five years more cometh, and . . . then cometh the Son of God” (Hel-
aplan 14:2), Samuel positioned his audience’s experience of temporality
around a particular occasion—in this case, the event of the Messiah’s
birth. Likewise, in Helaman 14:3 he refers to “the time of his [Christ’s]
coming” and in 14:4 “the night before he is born,” again consistently
mentioning periods of time (“the time of” and “the night before”) only
in conjunction with a corresponding Messianic fulfillment (“his com-
ing” and “he is born”). In so doing, Samuel assigns a very specific role
to his paired omens: signs are the tertiary element that bind fulfillment
with time. “Behold, I give unto you a sign,” he announces, “for [that
is, because] five years more cometh” (Helaman 14:2). One of the main
purposes for signs, according to Samuel, is to orient temporality around
fulfillment, binding up their relationship. Samuel wants to be clear that
fulfillment always carries temporal implications, and towards this end he delivers a sign to cement that connection. To focus only on the sign or the fulfilling event to the exclusion of its accompanying temporality is to miss something crucial. This is why the Nephites were incorrect to lose sight of time in light of the sign’s fulfillment, and this may explain why the specific signs Samuel delivered are so invested in temporality. The temporal overtones of these signs—through their association with heavenly bodies and their symbolic compression of time—attempt to help the Nephites focus on the particular era inaugurated by fulfillment. Signs, according to Samuel, join fulfillment with a certain experience of temporality, although what this means in more concrete terms will be spelled out more fully below.

In dramatically counteracting the Nephites’ loss of temporal focus, however, the sign repositions their attention in a surprisingly precise direction: the sign directs Nephite awareness specifically to the present. Where the Nephite unbelievers focused on the past and characterized it as fundamentally irrelevant, and where the believers focused on the future and utilized it as an anchor to secure their desperate hopes, Samuel attempts to redirect both groups’ focus to the present, which he characterizes as the time of the Messiah, and he delineates the parameters of what constitutes that present era through the signs themselves. We mentioned above the strong correspondence between the signs—in addition to their joint delivery, both involve similar phenomena (light and darkness) and take roughly the same amount of time (three days)—but here that pairing becomes decisive. When Samuel’s signs are taken together as a pair, something interesting emerges in their symbolism: they can be understood as establishing a kind of cosmic day. The excessive light surrounding Christ’s birth acts as a kind of morning, while the darkness surrounding Christ’s death acts as a kind of evening. The (roughly) thirty intervening years are symbolically contracted into a

21. Gardner, Second Witness, 5:198, has also recognized the symbolic correspondence between these signs: “Just as the Messiah’s birth would be indicated by a night that was not night, so his death will be indicated by days that are not days. Miraculous light will accompany his birth; miraculous darkness will signal his death,” additionally noting that “they form contrasting parallels” (5:191).
single day, a day that corresponds quite directly and purposefully to the Messiah's mortal sojourn on another continent. Thus, rather than designating Christ's birth and death as isolable events with discrete salvific import, Samuel's signs bookend Christ's entire ministry.

By bracketing and highlighting the present in this way, and by so directly identifying the present with the Messiah, Samuel's signs not only call Nephite attention to the here and now, but also saturate the present with salvific meaning. The signs clearly outline what constitutes the present by bookending it with temporal miracles that catch the Nephites' attention, marking it with a definite beginning and end, and characterizing it with its own unique temporality. And all of this has an important effect on how the Nephites will experience the years corresponding to the Messiah's lifetime. Feeling themselves suspended between the already-accomplished fulfillment of the first sign and the anticipated fulfillment of the second, the Nephites are given a heightened sense of the reality of the Messiah, and their every experience from now until Christ's death can be viewed as parallel to a discrete moment in the Messiah's own life. The signs thus become a way of marking what is taking place on a separate continent, and the Nephites thus experience Christ's life somewhat similar to the first-century Palestinian Jews, but in its extent rather than its particular content. In fact, the very lack of shared content among the Nephites and the Jews highlights the importance of the temporal correspondence. Although Jesus will come to the Americas and retroactively fill in some of the subject matter (i.e., he will deliver some of the same teachings in the Sermon at the Temple, etc.), there is an apparent importance to the Nephites experiencing the raw duration of Jesus's ministry. And in experiencing only the raw duration of Christ's ministry without the content of Christ's physical presence or particular teachings, the Nephites are further directed to focus on the temporal implications of fulfillment. In other words, they are given to experience the time of the Messiah alone, without the potential distraction of the Messiah himself.22

22. The conception of time I see here finds its philosophical parallel in the work of Giorgio Agamben. See, for instance, Agamben, The Time That Remains: A Commentary
Thus, where the sign in 3 Nephi 1 indicates the Messiah’s arrival in a general sense, it also calls attention to the Nephites’ experience of time by filling the present with sufficiently important content that it will hold Nephite attention—after all, now is the time of the Messiah! The sign is meant to correct the Nephites’ problematic temporal relationships by directing attention—as all good signs do—beyond itself. Where the Nephites manifest obsession with the sign, it points them to the nature of time; where the Nephites fixate on the past or the future, the sign points them back to the present. But the question is not yet entirely settled. We still have yet to clarify exactly why Samuel is so interested in temporality and why he is so eager to redirect Nephite attention to the present, in particular. It is here, finally, that we can begin to clarify the relationship between temporality and fulfillment. I want to argue that Samuel’s emphasis on the present is for two reasons: fulfillment comes with both a task (repentance) and a problem (invisibility), and the solution to each involves a proper understanding of temporality.

The majority of Samuel’s sermon in the book of Helaman is occupied with this first task. He views his own role primarily as a prophet preaching repentance and opens his discourse with the announcement that “nothing can save this people save it be repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Helaman 13:6). Not even delivering the two signs distracts him from his intent; sandwiched between them is a lengthy theological aside about the possibility of repentance through Jesus Christ and his resurrection (Helaman 14:11–19). Part of the reason Samuel insists on directing Nephite attention to the present, then, is that repentance is the present task with which the Nephites ought to be occupied in light of the Messiah’s arrival, and if they reside in the fantasies of past or future, they will never get to work on the task at hand.

_23_ In fact, there is some indication in the text that Samuel succeeded in reorienting Nephite temporality. Third Nephi 2:8 reports the introduction of a new Nephite calendar, stating that “the Nephites began to reckon their time from this period when the sign was given, or from the coming of Christ.”
And here, again, the key to accomplishing this task is found in Samuel’s sign; it is as he describes the sign’s aftermath that Samuel provides the formula for redemption. Helaman 14:4 describes the anticipated outcome of the sign: “[The Nephites] shall know of a surety that there shall be two days and a night; nevertheless the night shall not be darkened.” It is in the tension between “know[ing] of a surety” and this “nevertheless” that the possibility of redemption occurs. The sign presents the Nephites with two conflicting observations—they can see “the rising of the sun and also . . . its setting,” they “know of a surety” that two days and one night are passing, and yet, “nevertheless,” there is no darkness where they expect it (Helaman 14:4). Samuel’s sign is designed to call their sure knowledge into question—indeed, to strike at the heart of what is most fundamental to their mortal experience—in order to show that even this is open to miraculous possibility.\footnote{24} If something as fundamental as time can bear this divine irruption, they are led to wonder what else might be possible? And the precise possibility Samuel seems to have in mind is the birth of faith:

> And ye shall hear my words, for, for this intent have I come up upon the walls of this city, that ye might hear and know of the judgments of God which do await you because of your iniquities, and also that ye might know the conditions of repentance; and also that ye might know of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and that ye might know of the signs of his coming, to the intent that ye might believe on his name. (Helaman 14:11–12)

Despite his repeated emphasis of the phrase “that ye might know,” Samuel paints a picture in which knowledge is not the desired culmination of his preaching; rather, he gives the Nephites knowledge in hopes that

\footnote{24. For a slightly different theological treatment of the redemptive possibilities of the word nevertheless, see Adam S. Miller, “Notes on Life, Grace, and Atonement,” in Adam S. Miller, \textit{Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology} (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 3–20.}
it will open onto belief, and it is this same process (knowledge opening onto belief) that Samuel hopes will occur in conjunction with his first sign. After delivering the sign and alerting the Nephites to the tension between what they will “know of a surety” and “nevertheless” witness, he delivers this promise: “whosoever shall believe on the Son of God, the same shall have everlasting life” (Helaman 14:8). Thus, the sign’s temporal elements are a way of keeping the Nephites rooted in the present and focused on the Messiah, but also interrupting their knowledge and assumptions, all so that they can begin to attend to the task of “believ[ing] on his name” and “repent[ing] of all [their] sins” (Helaman 14:12–13).

There is also a second reason for Samuel’s emphasis on time and the present: the problematic invisibility, from the Nephite perspective, of the Messiah’s coming. The Book of Mormon situates the Nephites in the Americas, several thousand miles away from Palestine and the events of Christ’s ministry, and since Christ does not appear in the Book of Mormon until after his resurrection (and even that appearance may not have been widely anticipated), the Nephites would presumably have no way of knowing of his birth or death unless it was indicated to them through supernatural means. It is precisely this invisibility that the unbelievers criticize in Helaman 16: “[If] such a being as a Christ shall come,” they ask, “why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem? Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?” (Helaman 16:18–19). Perhaps this is why Samuel’s signs are almost over the top with drama,


26. Despite several prophecies about the coming of Christ into the world, the Nephites seem unaware that the Messiah would visit them directly in the Americas. See Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 182–83.
indeed, arguably the most dramatic signs contained in the Book of Mormon—they need to be exceptionally visible to counteract the relative invisibility of the fulfillment they indicate. This invisibility is even thematically contained in the narrative of 3 Nephi 1. Notice that when Nephi prays for a solution to the pending genocide, the Lord reports that the sign will be given “on this night.” And yet Samuel had indicated that the sign would occur beginning, not at night, but rather on “one day” (Helaman 14:4; cf. 3 Nephi 1:8). Nephi, it appears, has already been living through the sign. “All that day” in which he was praying was actually the promised “one day” on which the sign was to begin (3 Nephi 1:8), but because the proposed miracle was simply an extension of daylight, it was undetectable until nightfall. Thus, when the Lord says “be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand” (3 Nephi 1:13), he is not alerting Nephi to the impending arrival of the sign but to its simultaneity; it is already happening. This thematic invisibility echoes the historical invisibility the Book of Mormon ascribes to Christ’s birth for the Nephites; although Christ will be born, it is not an event they can witness, and hence the necessity for a sign.

In sum, Samuel’s sermon and signs are heavily invested in temporality because a newly reconfigured experience of time provides the possibility and formula for the Nephite task of repentance, and Samuel’s particular characterization of the present alleviates the difficulties imposed by fulfillment’s invisibility. Keeping tabs on the march of time will ensure that the Nephites can follow the progression of the Messiah’s life, even though he has yet to appear to them in the flesh, and the interruption of time’s normal flow provides evidence for the possibility of redemption and inspires the kind of humility necessary to attain it. If the task of fulfillment is thus catalyzed by the unique temporality of Samuel’s signs, and the resultant present focus allows the Nephites to counteract fulfillment’s invisibility, it begins to become clear why time and fulfillment cannot be separated for Samuel and why understanding temporality is so crucial: the way in which the Nephites think about and experience time is vital to accomplishing the task fulfillment has given them.
Concluding time: The Book of Mormon

While everything we have explored thus far illuminates the phenomenon of Samuel’s sign and the theme of temporality in 3 Nephi 1 in new and significant ways, it is also important to recognize that this argument has essential implications for the Book of Mormon as a whole. Samuel’s sign and its paradigm for fulfillment and temporality runs parallel to the paradigm the Book of Mormon outlines for itself, and this is best revealed in 3 Nephi 21, where the text portrays the resurrected Jesus prophesying about the future gathering of Israel. What is crucial for our purpose here is that, included in this prophecy, Jesus also announces the emergence of the Book of Mormon as a sign to mark the fulfillment of God’s eschatological restorative work with Israel, and what is said about the Book of Mormon bears important affinities with Samuel’s signs from Helaman 14.27

In both cases, signs are explicitly temporal. Jesus announces “I give unto you a sign, that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place” (3 Nephi 21:1), thus indicating, like Samuel, that signs not only alert their audience to fulfillment alone, but also introduce them to a certain experience of time. Additionally, as in the case of Samuel’s sign, fulfillment will be already underway by the time the sign is recognized: “It shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced” (3 Nephi 21:7). The sign, again, is not an indication that fulfillment is imminent, but that it is presently in progress. And in this case, too, the sign prepares the way for its audience to complete a particular task. At the same moment that the Book of Mormon introduces the Gentiles to a new eschatological era, it also commissions them with the affiliated task of taking the gospel—in

the form of the Book of Mormon—to the Lamanite remnant of the house of Israel.\textsuperscript{28} Just as the Nephites were alerted by Samuel’s sign to a messianic era, prophetic fulfillment, and the task of repentance, so the Gentiles will be alerted by the Book of Mormon to the arrival of the last days, fulfillment of the record’s own self-aware prophecies, and the task of delivering that record to its original audience.

In addition to the similarities between the respective presentations of Samuel’s sign and the Book of Mormon, striking similarities also emerge when we compare their reception. Just as the Nephites understood Samuel’s sign to be a question of termination, concluding the prophetic arc of an obscure Lamanite preacher, the Book of Mormon has likewise all too often been taken as the conclusion to a previous era rather than the beginning of a new age. Latter-day Saints are quick to talk about the present as “the last days,” understanding by that term a kind of conclusion to world history, on the cusp of the eschaton.\textsuperscript{29} And just as the Nephites took the intention of the sign to be primarily a question of validating Samuel’s prophetic credentials, so too the Book of Mormon is often understood exclusively as a sign of Joseph Smith’s divine commission, thereby inadvertently obscuring the task it intends to inaugurate.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} This is the duty hinted at in 3 Nephi 21:5 (“these works . . . shall come forth from the Gentiles”), Mormon 5:15 (the “gospel . . . shall go forth unto them from the Gentiles”), and the title page to the Book of Mormon (“to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile”).

\textsuperscript{29} In this regard, Jesus’s words in 3 Nephi 21 are again instructive—the Book of Mormon is a sign that “the work of the Father hath already commenced” (3 Nephi 21:7), suggesting that the last days might be more productively thought of as a last beginning, in which the Father’s work commences one final time, rather than as a kind of conclusion.

\textsuperscript{30} Terryl Givens helpfully summarizes this phenomenon: “Looking at the Book of Mormon in terms of its early uses and reception, it becomes clear that this American scripture has exerted influence within the church and reaction outside of the church not primarily by virtue of its substance, but rather its manner of appearing, not on the merits of what it says, but what it enact. Put slightly differently, the history of the Book of Mormon’s place in Mormonism and American religion generally has always been more connected to its status as signifier than signified, or its role as a sacred sign rather than its function as persuasive theology.” Terryl L. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon: The
These similarities between the Book of Mormon and the signs of Samuel the Lamanite are instructive, and it is here, perhaps, that the tangle of temporality and fulfillment can be most clearly understood at a general level. These parallels make clear that the Book of Mormon must be understood to have an identical purpose to Samuel’s signs: it is intended to seal up a particular relationship between temporality and fulfillment, ensuring that fulfillment doesn’t slip into the past, a mere memory or set of facts about a past event, but rather that fulfillment opens onto a task. By inaugurating a new temporal era and a conscious awareness of it, the sign in each case guarantees that fulfillment is viewed as a beginning rather than an end—the beginning of a new work and a new temporality, even as it climactically closes the era of prophetic anticipation that preceded it. Thus, the temporal inflection of each sign is central to ensuring that the implications of fulfillment are borne out in the present. Just as the sign shifted the Nephites from a passive anticipation of the Messiah to a more active discipleship experienced through a temporal parallel with the Israelites, the Book of Mormon hopes to shift the posture of the modern Gentiles from passively awaiting the gathering of Israel to actively accomplishing this task themselves. And if the lessons of Samuel the Lamanite are any indication, this will be best achieved when the Book of Mormon successfully alerts its audience to the new era underway, thus granting the Gentiles urgency for their work and a conscious awareness of what that work is supposed to accomplish.

If the structural and linguistic allusions to Matthew 5 alerted us to the importance of fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1, and if the symbolism of Samuel’s sign communicated the equivalent importance of temporality for relating to that fulfillment in productive ways, the parallels with 3 Nephi 21 allowed us to reflect on what the tangle between fulfillment and temporality has to say about the greater project of the Book of Mormon. For fulfillment to achieve its larger aims it must be coupled with an awareness of its own temporal implications and a willingness to take

up the work that inevitably follows. Toward this end, time itself can be a messenger, alerting its addressees to the problematic invisibilities of fulfillment and ensuring that fulfillment opens beyond itself to a new posture of discipleship.

Here, at long last, we may finally be in a position to reflect once more on one of the questions with which this paper opened—namely, the curiously positioned division between the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi. If fulfillment is indeed most productively understood as a beginning rather than an end, placing the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy at the beginning of 3 Nephi is entirely fitting and suggests that this fulfillment most properly belongs to an opening chapter because of the nature of fulfillment itself. In fact, when considered in this light, the narrative’s apparent ability to fit so seamlessly into Helaman’s conclusion may be the precise problem Mormon wishes to counteract! The potent similarities between 3 Nephi 1–8 and the book of Helaman create a kind of invisibility that risks obscuring the inaugural force of fulfillment. Had Mormon included 3 Nephi 1 at the end of the book of Helaman, modern readers (much like the Nephites) would likely have misunderstood these fulfilled signs to indicate a mere conclusion to Samuel’s story. By positioning this text as he does, Mormon instead editorially alerts us to the proper paradigm for understanding fulfillment, showing that fulfillment is a beginning and inviting us to the task of actively working out those implications.

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Introduction

Research on the cultural background informing the title of liberty event in Alma 46 has primarily looked for Old World origins and parallels. Some researchers have pointed to the Persian hero Kawe, said by legend...
to be the founder of the Magi, whose banner served as a symbol of independence for the Iranian people for generations.¹ What is discounted in locating the rite solely within Old World practices is that the Nephites had been in the New World for over five hundred years, a considerable space of time for cultural change and adaptation. It is not unreasonable to assume that local customs and traditions regarding the ceremonial use of banners would have taken root by that point.

In one respect, Old World patterns in the title of liberty ritual certainly are present. We know this to be the case since Moroni explicitly links the rending of the coat of Joseph who was sold into Egypt to Moroni’s rending of his garment: “Moroni said unto them: Behold, we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces; yea, and now behold, let us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain” (Alma 46:23). Moroni then recites an unknown story in our day (but evidently well known in Moroni’s) from the life of Jacob, Joseph’s father, and ties it symbolically to the rending of his garment in the act of covenant making:

Ye, let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph; yea, let us remember the words of Jacob, before his death, for behold, he saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved and had not decayed. And he said—Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God, and be taken unto himself, while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment. Now behold, this giveth my soul sorrow; nevertheless, my soul hath joy in my son, because of that part of his seed which shall be taken unto God. Now behold, this was the language of Jacob. (Alma 46:24–26)

¹ Hugh Nibley drew a parallel between Moroni and his title of liberty and Kawe, a blacksmith in ancient times in Iran who fastened his leather apron onto a pole; the apron became a symbol for Iranian independence right through to the Arab conquest. *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 93.
Moroni is clearly basing his actions on Jacob’s prophecy about the continued existence of his seed represented by the preserved remnant\(^2\) of Joseph’s coat. In so doing, the precedent for the ceremony is established, and yet Moroni vastly expands upon Jacob’s experience, using it as a springboard for adaptation and innovation. Connecting his experience to that of Jacob’s likely legitimized the act in the eyes of the people—precisely what Moroni needed to help convince many who were not at all eager to enter into a covenant to fight and defend. Linking the Jacob narrative to their current situation by means of a banner was an especially erudite choice by Moroni, for banners in ancient Mesoamerica were “highly charged objects that were seen as emblematic of the polity or political division of the group”\(^3\) and were therefore ideal for marshaling support.

Banners in Mesoamerica

Banners appear early in the Mesoamerican iconographic record. An especially good example dating to about 500 BC is found on Monument 13 at the Olmec site of La Venta (fig. 1). The scene depicts a man with

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2. Hugh Nibley linked this notion of a remnant of Joseph’s clothing to a tenth-century Islamic tradition recorded by Muhammad ibn-Ibrahim ath-Tha’labi in Persia. He cites the following passage as evidence: “According to ad-Dahak that garment was of the weave [pattern, design] of Paradise, and the breath [spirit, odor] of Paradise was in it, so that it never decayed or in any way deteriorated [and that was] a sign [omen].” Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 220. Brian Hauglid, however, has offered a more correct translation of this key phrase that altogether changes its tenor: “Al Dahak said that garment was from the weave of Paradise, and there was in it the odor of Paradise, which does not fall upon the afflicted nor upon the sick but [that] it heals and gives health.” Brian M. Hauglid, “Garment of Joseph: An Update,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 4 (2003): 23. As Hauglid argues, the participle *mubtalan*, taken by Nibley to be “decay,” more properly refers to being “afflicted” or “tired” in this grammatical construction and therefore is not evidence of Jacob’s garment not decaying in Alma 46:20.

a turban on his head who is walking purposefully and is carrying a banner or flag near a series of hieroglyphs, one depicting a footprint, which usually represented the idea of travel in ancient Mesoamerica.\textsuperscript{4} Iconography throughout ancient Mesoamerica attests to the importance of various types of banners, both ritual and war-related. These battle standards had a considerable range of styles and sizes. The most commonly encountered were cloth banners on poles, while some were handheld as small bannerettes (figs. 2a–d; 3a–e). In ritual processions and battle scenes, fanlike banners and round parasol-like banners were held aloft, as richly demonstrated in the mural paintings at Bonampak (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{5} Warriors also carried decorated war banners (fig. 5). In the colonial period, Spanish authors made numerous references to banners


\textsuperscript{5} It is often difficult to distinguish between the use of parasols and war banners with these fanlike forms; cf. Ross Hassig, \textit{War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 219; and Mary Ellen Miller, \textit{The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec}, 5th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012). While Miller believes some of these objects are “parasols” (p. 12), Andrew Finegold sees them instead as standards with a “clearly heraldic signification.” “Dramatic Renditions: Battle Murals and the Struggle for Elite Legitimacy in Epiclassic Mesoamerica” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), 29. David A. Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker argue that Bonampak tells us that the great parasol standards not only functioned in battle but also had an important role in rituals before and after the battle.” \textit{Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path} (New York: William Morrow, 1993), 304.
Figure 2. (A) Graffiti of banner or standard from Tikal (Structure 5-D 65) (drawing by Asa Hull, after Helen Webster); (B) Las Higueras (drawing by Asa Hull, after Rex Koontz); (C) Codex Nutall, p. 28 (drawing by Asa Hull); (D) Codex Barbonicus, p. 23 (drawing by Asa Hull).

Figure 3. (A) Codex Barbonicus, p. 27 (drawing by Asa Hull); (B) Codex Laud, p. 8 (drawing by Asa Hull); (C) Codex Barbonicus, p. 9 (drawing by Asa Hull); (D) Codex Barbonicus, p. 31 (drawing by Asa Hull); (E) Codex Selden, p. 6 (drawing by Asa Hull).
among the Maya as well as the Aztecs, many of which will be discussed below. Yet for all the banners encountered during the colonial period, a mere handful of standards have survived the harsh jungle conditions of the Maya area since they were made primarily from perishable materials.6 Though hundreds of examples of standards and other warfare items were sent back to Europe at the time of the Conquest, fewer than ten exemplars survive today.7

Aztecs and banners

In Aztec society banners figured prominently in both ritual and military affairs. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a sixteenth-century Franciscan friar who labored in colonial Mexico, reports that some banners were enormous in size, stretching over 33 meters in length and 1.67 meters in width. Other uses of banners related to warfare among the Aztecs and Mixtecs included the holding of a small white banner by individuals to indicate their status as a captive slated for sacrifice. Furthermore, each Aztec city had its own war banner under which its army marched (fig. 3c). Individual warriors also had banners fastened tightly to their backs; this custom served a number of functions, such as aiding in locating one’s commander, coordinating movement of forces, and identifying one’s regiment. The warrior in charge of the military unit usually donned a special standard. The loss (capture) of one of these principal

8. For examples of Aztec banners and flags, see John Pohl and Charles M. Robinson III, *Aztecs and Conquistadores: The Spanish Invasion and the Collapse of the Aztec Empire* (Great Britain: Osprey, 2005), 75.


13. See Francisco J. Clavigero, *Historia Antigua de México* (Mexico: Editorial Porrua, 1964), 226. Pohl describes various types of Aztec banners: (1) the *quaxolotl*, which was umbrella-shaped and yellow, blue, and green in color, (2) the *tlecocomoctli*, said to represent a headdress on fire, (3) the *chimallaviztli*, meaning “shield insignia,” displaying a grinning demon’s face, (4) the *papalotl* insignia, representing a butterfly, and (5) the *caquatoniatiuh*, the sun insignia colored black and yellow. *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521*, 60. Aztec warriors were given different stages of warrior suits as they took more and more captives. Anawalt, “What Price Aztec Pageantry?,” 229.
war banners demoralized the unit, often causing them to abandon the fight. John Pohl, a specialist in ancient art and writing of Mexico, describes one particularly illustrative case of this strategy, involving Hernan Cortés, that occurred during the battle of Otumba.

Nowhere was the strategic significance of such banners more graphically illustrated than during the battle of Otumba. After they had succeeded in escaping a death trap in Tenochtitlan, Cortés led his troops north around Lake Xaltocan to Otumba located near the ancient ruins of Teotihuacan. Crossing a broad open plain, he was suddenly surrounded by an army of over 10,000 Aztecs. Exhausted and outnumbered, Cortés could do little but make a last stand. Soon he began to realize that the troops were being coordinated by a signal unit under the command of the Cihuacoatl or Snake Woman priest. Cortés boldly mounted his horse, charged through the oncoming Army and cut down the Cihuacoatl. The effect was devastating. Not only were the Aztec troops demoralised by this desperate gamble, but they appear to have been unable to any more effective movement than to withdraw in total confusion. Later the Tlaxcaltecas presented the principal signal banner called the xopilli or “claw” device to Cortés in honour of his heroism.

The loss of the signal banner and its commander was sufficient to throw the Aztec warriors into disarray. As a prize from battle, the banner became a trophy for Cortés. While some banners were kept or even given to other Aztec lords, others were summarily destroyed. For example, when Cortés and his indigenous allies eventually overpowered the regional Aztec overlords, friars set the idols and the captured war banners

15. As Mark Alan Wright (pers. comm., 2014) has pointed out to me, similar confusion followed the death of the leaders of the men of Antipus (Alma 56:51).
16. Pohl, Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521, 60.
17. Later, this net-bird claw signal banner, taken by Cortés during the battle of Otumba, was offered to Lord Maxixcatzin, according to the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. Pohl, Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521, 46.
of the Tlaxcalteca ablaze, a scene vividly illustrated in a sixteenth-century manuscript held in the Glasgow University Library.\(^{18}\)

Both war- and non-war-related banners were part of Aztec ritual practices. Aztec warriors would sometimes carry battle standards in their hands on certain ceremonial occasions.\(^{19}\) However, the principal rite involving banners took place at the midpoint in the war season from late November into early December when the Aztecs celebrated the annual Panquetzaliztli ritual,\(^{20}\) or “raising of the banners,” in the ceremonial center at Tenochtitlan.\(^{21}\) The rite involved the setting up of the war banner in the central part of the courtyard.\(^{22}\) The purpose of the ceremony was primarily to memorialize the birth of the god Huitzilopochtli, as well as other deities such as Tezcatlipoca and Yacatecuhtli. Commoners throughout the city would set up small banners made of paper in their houses during this celebration. Its timing, in the middle of the warfare season, was no coincidence. Beyond being simply a celebration of Huitzilopochtli’s birth, there were definitive military overtones associated with the Panquetzaliztli rite.\(^{23}\)

\(^{18}\) See Pohl, *Aztec Warrior AD 1325–1521*, 63. A copy of the manuscript, MS Hunter 242 fol. 242 (c. 1581–84), can be viewed at the Glasgow University Library, Scotland. An image of this page of the lienzo can be seen at http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/manuscripts/search/detail_i.cfm?ID=44.

\(^{19}\) Anawalt, “What Price Aztec Pageantry?,” 229.

\(^{20}\) The term panquetzaliztl in Nahuatl derives from pāntli (variants pámitl and pānitl), meaning “banner, flag,” and quetzatl signifies “stand something up, set something in place,” hence “raising of the banners.” John Bierhorst, *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos: With an Analytic Transcription and Grammatical Notes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 259, 281. In addition, in Aztec hieroglyphic writing, the symbol of a banner had the phonetic reading of pan.


\(^{22}\) This white-and-blue striped banner that was raised on Coatepec during the Panquetzaliztli rites is visible on p. 32 of the Codex Barbonicus.

\(^{23}\) According to Koontz, just such banners, appropriated by conquering groups, would have been paraded into the center of the Aztec capital and “raised, echoing
El Tajín and banners

At El Tajín in Veracruz, Mexico, standards or banners served a number of ritual functions, both in terms of pageantry and warfare. The iconography and archaeological remains at the site of El Tajín preserve key details that allow a reconstruction of the ritual use of banners in this society. The focal ritual action “associated with these devices seems to be raising or erecting,” according to Rex Koontz, art historian and specialist of ancient Gulf Coast art. Two clear examples from painted murals at the neighboring site of Las Higueras show several processes involving standards (see fig. 2b). As Koontz notes, “Most Higueras standards consist of a multicolored flag at the top of the staff.” Ritual processions bearing such standards often culminated in the standards being hoisted or erected at a ceremonial center. At the bottom of the famed Pyramid of the Niches at El Tajín are fifteen square stone bases with holes perfectly suited for receiving standards or banners. Based on the iconography of the north and west sides of the Central Plaza at El Tajín, Koontz states that this would have been the spot where the standard would have been ritually raised. The Maya site of Bonampak also has stones bored as receptacles for standards at the bottom of Structure 1, causing Koontz to posit a possible equivalency between this ritual raising of perishable banners to the erection of stone stelae at the base of pyramids, which were also explicitly labeled as “banner stones” (see discussion below).

Huitzilopochtli’s banner raising during the war on Coatepec.” Koontz, “Performing Coatepec,” 378. The manipulation of this banner was, as Koontz notes, “central to the performance of the Coatepec narrative” since it was none other than Huitzilopochtli’s war banner that was used to commemorate his birth and the first place of war at the mountain known as Coatepec (here represented by the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan). Koontz has also argued that Panquetzalitzli rite caused the war banner to “be seen as a physical manifestation of the military alliances that undergirded Mexica governance.” Koontz, “Performing Coatepec,” 378.

28. Archaeological examples of banner stands are found at other Maya sites such as Tonina (see photos at http://www.famsi.org, Schele Number 104084 and 104083).
In some cases, standards were also inserted into monumental sculpture that had a hole drilled in the center. Structure 4 Panel at El Tajín has a centered hole that would be ideal for a standard.\textsuperscript{29} This closely parallels an example in the Maya area where a hole drilled in the center of the Early Classic (AD 300–600) monument Hombre de Tikal from the site of Tikal in Petén, Guatemala, “would be suitable for insertion of the wooden staff of a battle standard,” as David Freidel, Barbara MacLeod, and Charles Suhler note.\textsuperscript{30}

Banners and warfare

While different types of banners had various uses in ancient Mesoamerica, one dominant theme among them is warfare, as much of the above discussion makes clear. Additionally, war banners could function as weapons themselves. For example, at the Zapotec site of Cerro de la Campana in Suchilquitongo, Mexico, dating to 400 BC, murals from the back wall of the East room of Tomb 5 show a procession of four warriors. The leader of the four carries a banner with painted horizontal stripes. The banner itself, however, is a sharpened lance and is thus likely a weapon.\textsuperscript{31} Likewise, a careful examination of banners shown in war contexts on Late Classic period (AD 600–900) Maya ceramics reveal that many are depicted with sharpened tips that could easily serve as spears in battle (e.g., Kerr\textsuperscript{32} vessels K4625, K8083; see fig.5).

\textsuperscript{29} Koontz, \textit{Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents}, 28.


\textsuperscript{32} Kerr (abbreviated K) notations refer to the Maya Vase Database by Justin Kerr, available online at http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html.
Similar sharpened banners also appear in the murals of Las Higueras in Veracruz, Mexico, a Late Classic site occupied by the Totonacs (fig. 2b). That war banners could also function as spears is further attested among the K’iche’ Maya. In an early K’iche’ manuscript called the Título de Coyoi, dating to approximately AD 1550–1570, anthropologists Robert Carmack and James Mondloch note that the verb tsoc’ “pique con un instrumento agudo” (poke with a sharp instrument) appears “en asociación con la bandera (lakam) y otros instrumentos de guerra. Posiblemente, era una bandera que también servía de picote” (in association with the flag [lakam] and other instruments of war. Possibly it was a flag that also served as a stabber). War banners were therefore not solely symbolic and heraldic but could at times be used as weapons of war.

Significantly, the term used for these war banner weapons in sixteenth-century K’iche’ was lakam, a word (as I will discuss in detail below) that meant both “stela” and “banner stone” for the Classic period Maya. Furthermore, the term lakam still retained strong connections to warfare at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in the New World.

Banners in the Maya world

As Maya specialist David Stuart has noted, “Graffiti and ethnohistorical sources show that standards or banners were widely used among the Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples as temple and plaza decorations, in processions, and on the battlefield.” Early ethnographic accounts in

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33. See Rubén B. Morante López, La pintura mural de Las Higueras, Veracruz (Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 2005). Koontz similarly observes that the standards appearing in Las Higueras murals “were both ritual objects as well as more pragmatic military devices.” Koontz, Lightning Gods and Feathered Serpents, 110. See examples of clothlike, decorated banners with a pointed or sharpened apex in Morante López, La pintura mural de Las Higueras, 116.

34. See Robert Carmack, Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).


Figure 6. (A) K5763, (B) K695, (C) K6990 (all photographs courtesy of Justin Kerr).
the Yucatán in Mexico detail the use of large standards in war. Diego de Landa, a Spanish bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of the Yucatán in the sixteenth century, noted: “Guided by tall banners they went out in great silence from the towns and thus they marched to attack their enemies, with loud cries and with great cruelties, when they fell upon them unprepared.” Mesoeconomic anthropologist Ross Hassig similarly states that the K’iche’ Maya in colonial times could “reportedly raise an army of 8,000 to 16,000 men, organized into military units marching under their own banners.” Late Classic Maya polychrome vessels contain numerous scenes of warriors, rulers, and attendants at the royal court holding banners (see fig. 6a–c). Standards were also ceremonially erected at sacred locations within restricted spaces. For instance, a stone effigy standard discovered at the site of Tikal in Guatemala contains epigraphic evidence that such standards would be erected and raised on the tops of ceremonial platforms (fig. 7).

The ritual association with banners also extended to the ancient Maya ballgame in the Classic period. S. W. Miles also notes that colonial Poqom Maya played a ballgame, or “sacred sport, [that] was played

Figure 7. Drawing of Altar 49-sub in the North Plaza of Tikal with the “Marcador” standard in its likely original position (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele).

38. Hassig, War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica, 162.
39. The verb at position A7 on the monument is tz’ahpaj, “it was planted,” referring to the setting up of the stone war banner. Cf. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, Maya Cosmos, 299, 470.
40. See K1209 for large, round banners at a Maya ballcourt.
exclusively by lords and principals.” The lords had “royal standards, or banners,” which he gives as *bacam ajual*—evidently a miswriting or variation of *lakam ajual*.

Even standard-bearers held a high status in Maya society. Known as *ajlaqam* (lit. “he of the banner”), the standard-bearer in war in colonial K’iche’ Maya society was a position reserved only for high-ranking individuals.

The title of liberty

In the Book of Mormon, books preceding the book of Alma contain nine references to “standards,” several in citations from Isaiah (cf. 1 Nephi 21:22; 22:6; 2 Nephi 6:6; 20:18; 29:2). The standards that concern us here are those contained in the historical account of Moroni and the title of liberty.

About 73 BC, after Alma had been “taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses” (Alma 45:19), Helaman continued preaching his father’s message and set about establishing the church throughout all regions under Nephite control. Some prideful dissenter among them openly rebelled against Helaman and his brethren and contrived a plan to kill them. They were led by a man of large stature named Amalickiah who had strong pretensions to the throne.

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42. Similar spellings of *lakam* as *bacam* also appear in various colonial Yucatecan sources (e.g., *bacam*, meaning “vela de navío” [sail of a ship]). See Alfredo Barrera Vásquez et al., *Diccionario maya Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya* (Mérida: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980). The word appears written as *cakam* in early Kaqchikel and K’iche’ sources; see José Mucía Batz, *Chajchaay, pelota de cadera* (Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala: Serviprensa, 2004).

43. The orthographic variation here of spelling *laqam* with *q* instead of *k* is common in colonial sources.

Amalickiah enjoyed considerable support from among the ranks of the lower judges, they having been promised positions of power if he succeeded in becoming ruler over the land. With Amalickiah's supporters growing in numbers, Mormon decried this “exceedingly precarious and dangerous” state of the affairs among the Nephite people (Alma 46:7) and further lamented: “Yea, we see that Amalickiah, because he was a man of cunning device and a man of many flattering words, that he led away the hearts of many people to do wickedly; yea, and to seek to destroy the church of God, and to destroy the foundation of liberty which God had granted unto them, or which blessing God had sent upon the face of the land for the righteous’ sake” (Alma 46:10). Not only did Amalickiah's philosophies cause numerous people to “do wickedly,” but his vision of rulership (read dictatorship) also included the abolition of the people's God-given liberty.

Faced with this burgeoning threat to the very existence of the church and the health of the state, Moroni, the chief military commander of the Nephite armies, fashioned a unifying symbol, the title of liberty, out of his torn coat to galvanize the people into supporting his aims (see Alma 46:11–12).

And it came to pass that he rent his coat; and he took a piece thereof, and wrote upon it—In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children—and he fastened it upon the end of a pole. (Alma 46:12)

What did Moroni write on the banner? A concise, poignant call to arms, elegantly presented in three semantic couplets: God—religion, freedom—peace, and wives—children. This type of parallel discourse has deep Hebraic roots and may be reflective of the enduring influence of Hebrew and Hebraic structures in the Book of Mormon. However, by this

time the Nephites had been in the New World for over five hundred years, and it is more than likely that the local poetic traditions specific to the area were also influencing their language. In ancient Mesoamerica, poetic language is dominated by *parallelismus membrorum* (parallelism of members), principally in the form of paired or couplet lines.\(^{46}\) Within the wide range of couplet types (synonymous, antithetical, grammatical, phonetic, etc.), the most commonly used form in moments of emotive impact is synonymous parallelism,\(^ {47}\) “the repetition of elements that are similar in meaning or significance.”\(^ {48}\) Synonymy creates narrative emphasis and tension through the pairing of associated terms in separate lines, as it causes the audience to contemplate the relationship between the two. The successive use of this type of parallelism pervades ritual discourse among modern Mesoamerican groups and has clear antecedents back into the Early Classic period of ancient Mesoamerica.\(^ {49}\) Indeed, many ritual texts are completely composed in parallel lines. In others a narrative climax or a highly emotive moment obliges its use for aesthetic reasons. It is of no small import then that Moroni employs precisely this type of poetic structuring on the title of liberty:

> In memory of our God,  
> our religion,  
> and freedom,  
> and our peace,  
> our wives,  
> and our children. (Alma 46:12)


In every respect this impassioned rallying call coincides perfectly with what we know of ancient Mesoamerican poetic discourse in terms of structuring, post-line-initial use of ellipsis, and noun-type pairing schemes. Moroni shows himself to be adept at using local poetic forms as a means of generating the greatest emotional impact on his audience.

The title of liberty as a war banner

One of the key aspects of the title of liberty in the Book of Mormon is its function as a war banner. Indeed, the other term used by Moroni for his banner was standard (Alma 46:36; 62:4–5), which in 1830 meant “an ensign of war; a staff with a flag or colors,” as it still does today. While sometimes assumed to be only a powerful, uniting symbol for the people to protect themselves and their rights, the title of liberty was in fact far more symbolic in that it represented—to a Mesoamerican


culture—a call to arms, an object around which to rally, a banner of warfare. The details regarding its function, appearance, and display provide a unique glimpse into cultural warfare practices, all of which match to a remarkable extent the use of war banners in ancient and colonial Mesoamerica.

As noted earlier, such standards were commonly carried by ancient Maya armies into battle. A Late Classic polychrome ceramic vase dating roughly between AD 600 and 800 shows a procession of elaborately dressed warriors carrying circular fanlike banners (K5763; fig. 6a). On another Late Classic polychrome vessel, a group of returning warriors presents themselves before a noble Maya lord (K7716). The foremost standing warrior holds a fanlike banner bearing the symbol of a shield with a flayed face cover—part of the insignia of warfare for the Late Classic Maya. On another Maya polychrome vessel (K695), four warriors are shown holding atlatl spear throwers in one hand and battle standards in the other (fig. 6b). Similarly, on K6990 a warrior brandishes an atlatl while carrying a decorated battle standard under his other arm (fig. 6c).

Clothlike banners are also common in ancient Maya iconography. Graffiti at the site of Tikal shows six long cloth or paper banners painted within Structure 5-D 65 that may be ceremonial or war-related banners (fig. 2a). On one Late Classic Maya ceramic vessel (K5024), three priests carry clothlike banners boasting various color schemes. At the site of Palenque, the Panels of the Orator and the Scribe (fig. 8a) both contain elegant examples of clothlike banners in a context related to warfare. In these scenes, two individuals kneel on the ground while holding banners, both in the act of speaking or supplicating.

52. John L. Sorenson also refers to the title of liberty as “a flag or virtual battle standard” in “Summary of Mormon’s Codex: A Preview” at http://www.johnlsorenson.com/docs/mcodex_preview.pdf.
53. An image of this K7716 can be found at http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=7716.
54. An image of this K5024 can be found at http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=5024.
Other clothlike banners have been dubbed “flap-staffs” by Maya specialist Linda Schele. Maya art historian Matthew Looper describes a flap-staff as “a ritual object consisting of a staff with a perforated device attached, possibly a tube made of fabric.” At sites such as Yaxchilán, flap-staff banners are displayed and danced with in ceremony. Stu-art has noted the clear connection between Maya flap-staffs and Aztec banners (pāmitl). Maya scholar Justin Kerr has identified the banner held in the warrior’s hand on vessel K6990 mentioned above as a possible


56. Nikolai Grube, “Die Entwicklung der Maya-Schrift,” in Acta Mesoamericana, 3 (Berlin: Von Flemming, 1990). One of the most common flap-staffs was known as the jasaw chan and was even labeled as such at times. These banners were held during ceremonial dances. A typical inscription mentioning the jasaw chan can be seen on a monument likely from the area of Retalteco in the Petén, Guatemala. It reads: ahk’taj ti jasaw chan chan-winikhaab ajaw yaxuun bahlam, “Yaxuun Bahlam, a four-score lord, danced with the jasaw chan.”

flap-staff (fig. 6c). Furthermore, warriors carrying poles with decorated clothlike banners attached can also be seen on other Late Classic Maya ceramics (see K8083). Flap-staff dance scenes in the iconography at the site of Yaxchilán also show rulers with warriors holding a flap-staff in the act of dance, which Mesoamerican specialist Susan Milbrath has suggested is related to events of capture and warfare. Looper also notes that the king depicted on Copán Stela H, Waxaklajuun Ubaah K’awiil, who ruled Copán from AD 695 to 738, “wears ‘flapstaff’ war banners in his headdress during the conduct of ancestral rites,” further linking flap-staffs to warfare.

Of the scant number of flap-staffs that appear in the iconographic record (principally at three sites), none has writing on it, except Stela 34 of El Perú, which dates to AD 692. Here a scribal notation appears on a signature on the cloth of a flap-staff held by Lady K’abel, a woman from Calakmul who married into the El Perú dynasty (fig. 8b). Stuart, however, believes that banners among the ancient Maya once carried written texts, just as stone stelae, or banner stones, did: “Conceivably, the Maya may have hung cloth banners inscribed with glyphic passages in their plazas, as well, as a less permanent medium for textual display. All that survives, of course, are the stone banners that adorn architectural spaces throughout the lowlands.” If Stuart is correct, such banners would be very much like-in-kind for Moroni’s title of liberty. Indeed, flap-staffs may have other important connections to the title of liberty, as I discuss below.

After fastening the cloth onto the pole and painting the battle slogan upon it, Moroni confirmed the status of the title of liberty as a war

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61. The flapstaff that Lady K’abel holds, according to Phil Wanyerka, is a symbol of “divine kingship and war and identifies it as a battle standard.” “A Fresh Look at a Maya Masterpiece,” *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 1 (1996): 80.
banner by immediately donning “his head-plate, and his breastplate, and his shields,” and he “girded on his armor about his loins” (Alma 46:13). Bowing to the earth, Moroni then “prayed mightily unto his God for the blessings of liberty to rest upon his brethren, so long as there should a band of Christians remain to possess the land” (v. 13). All those who were willing to maintain the title of liberty in their land (i.e., to support the principles for which it stood) were urged to step forward and enter into a covenant to preserve their rights and liberties not just in word but in action on the battlefield. Note also that those who accepted Moroni’s challenge to join their effort “came running together with their armor girded about their loins” (v. 21) and entered into a covenant before God—in full military garb—that they would fight for Moroni’s cause, which was, in fact, their own.

The title of liberty banner was the focal point of this dramatic ritual display by Moroni in part as a means of inspiring the people to join forces in preserving their rights—a classic use of a military banner in Mesoamerica. Freidel and others have argued that war banners in the Classic period for the Maya were not only “the representation of the state, but . . . [were also] an embodiment of a potent spiritual being whose presence, performance, were critical to success.” Their mere presence signified divine protection and direction. Thus, while war banners in Mesoamerica, according to pre-historian Kent Reilly and archaeologist James Garber, were “physical objects and ideological symbols,” they could also function at a metaphysical level as conduits for divine assistance in battle. Similarly, Moroni’s banner likely signified they could expect God’s favor in the forthcoming wars.

63. The appellation title for Moroni’s banner is also revealing in this context. In the 1828 Webster’s dictionary, one of the meanings of title was “the instrument which is evidence of a right”—a very apt description of the purpose of the title of liberty as a physical symbol of their rights.

64. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, Maya Cosmos, 294.


66. Geneviève Le Fort has cautioned against attempts to overemphasize the “sacred power” of associated battle standards. “Gods at War: Of War Protectors, Effigy
Captain Moroni emboldened his people and his troops by displaying his war banner. Aztec war banners had precisely the same purpose, as noted by Patricia Anawalt, the founding director of the Center for the Study of Regional Dress located at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History: “They were used as rallying points in times of adversity, thus sustaining the morale of the warriors.” In conjunction with the poetic and stirring message written on the banner, the ritual context (i.e., covenant making) of the presentation of the title of liberty would certainly have strengthened the resolve of many that God’s protection would accompany all who fought under this banner.

That the title of liberty was seen as a physical embodiment of principles of the divinely sanctioned movement is abundantly clear in Alma 51:20. When some of the remaining dissenters were faced with death or joining the cause to defend their country from Amalickiah and his forces, the text tells us they “yielded to the standard of liberty.” It was not to Moroni or his forces but to the standard that they covenanted their allegiance.

After Moroni first hoisted the banner and placed the initial group under covenant, he then “caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower” in the lands of the Nephites (Alma 46:36). A tower in ancient Mesoamerican architectural complexes could represent one of several possibilities. At the Late Classic site of Palenque in Mexico, a four-story tower stands atop House E. Known epigraphically as the sak nuk naah, “white-skinned building” (a unique feature since almost all structures at Palenque were painted red), this building served as the palace for King K’inich Janaab Pakal I. However, the type of tower found in House E at Palenque is unique among Maya sites, and there are currently no known examples of similar contemporary structures in Moroni’s day.

A more likely interpretation of a tower is a high ground designated as a place for banner display. In colonial Yucatec Mayan, one term for tower was hulbil na. The root hul means “pasar una cosa delgada o puntiaguda

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68. I use the term Mayan when referring to a Mayan language and Maya in all other cases.
‘a través de otra u otras’ (to pass a thin or sharp thing through another or others). The term *hulbil na* literally translates as “speared-through building.” If related, this term would be an apt description of a highly visible location where a banner would be “speared,” or planted, into the ground. In this episode in the book of Alma, the Book of Mormon uses the term *tower* as a place where banners were planted into the ground and displayed. In Yucatec the term *hulbil na* (translated as in Spanish *torre* [tower]), is etymologically transparent as a “speared-through building,” which only makes sense as a place where banners were placed. Another term for *tower* given as a synonym for *hulbil na* in Yucatec Mayan is *witsil na* (lit. “hill building” or “hill house”), emphasizing its raised and easily observable location.

An ideal comparison for the tower in Moroni’s narrative is an altar platform that held a stone war banner, known as the Marcador, in the North Plaza of Group 6C-XVI at the site of Tikal. Fialko’s reconstruction of the platform shows the likely position of the banner stone planted in the center of the raised structure Altar 49-sub in the North Plaza (fig. 7). Such a platform corresponds well to the Yucatec *witsil na* (tower) cited above as well as *hulbil na* (a place where banners were “speared,” i.e., erected). The inscription on the monument discusses events from AD 374, which is contemporaneous with late Nephite society, though the text was dedicated in AD 416. The text on the Marcador describes the setting up of the banner stone itself with the verb *tz’ahpaj*, “it was planted/erected.” Significantly, the text further describes the *entrada*, or the entering of a powerful individual named Siyaj K’ahk’ from the site of Teotihuacan into the Maya area by AD 378. Thus, the context of the monument is

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one of war, expressed in the text as *och-ch'een*, “he entered the town”—a metaphor in ancient Maya for warfare. It is easy to envision the title of liberty, a war banner itself, being hoisted on similar raised altar platforms designated as towers in the Book of Mormon translation.

Banners and banner stones among the ancient Maya

In 1998, epigraphic detective work finally led to the decipherment of the term for stela among the ancient Maya, simultaneously yielding valuable insights into the ancient Maya equation of stelae with banners. As I will next show, this decipherment also has important implications for properly contextualizing the title of liberty within an ancient Mesoamerican warfare tradition.

The ancient Maya used the term *lakam* to describe their carved stelae. David Stuart, one of the foremost Maya epigraphers, offered the decipherment based on phonetic substitutions and corroborating linguistic evidence. The phonetic version of the glyph for stela is written *la-ka-ma-TUUN-ni*, or *lakam-tuun* (fig. 9a–b). Stuart provided evidence from both Yucatec Mayan and Tzotzil Mayan for the reading, which has enjoyed wide acceptance among all epigraphers. The principal evidence for the decipherment came from Yucatec, where the word *lakam* has the following meanings and contexts:

- **lakam**: *cosa grande y gruesa* (large and heavy thing)
- **lakam tun**: *piedra grande* (large stone)
- **lakam tun**: *piedra enorme* (enormous stone)

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Thus, the Classic period term for stela, \textit{lakam-tuun}, meant “large stone.” While this name seems “deceptively simple,”\textsuperscript{74} as Stuart himself has acknowledged, he realized it was a perfect description of stelae in the Maya area in more ways than one. Significantly, Stuart also noted that \textit{lakam} had other meanings in Yucatec Mayan: “los pendones o estandartes o banderas” (banners or standards or flags).\textsuperscript{75} Not only does \textit{lakam} refer to a stone stela, but it likewise includes flags, standards, and banners in Yucatec (and many other Mayan languages, as I show below). Stuart then made the following key insight: “The possibility remains that the stela glyph literally reads “banner stone.” That is, stelae were conceived as standards made of stone. We can easily imagine large flags and banners decorating plazas and architecture (as graffiti at Tikal and elsewhere explicitly shows). Stelae may have been originally thought of as a permanent, inscribed version of the same.”\textsuperscript{76} Stelae, therefore, were conceived of as decorated banners, fully akin to decorated quotidian and ritual flags and banners made of perishable materials.


\textsuperscript{75} Barrera Vásquez et al., \textit{Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya}, 434.

\textsuperscript{76} Stuart, “Lakam Sign.”
Thus flags, banners (counting war banners), and standards were designated by the single term *lakam* (variously recorded as *lakam*, *lacam*, *laqam*, *laq’am*, and others in linguistic sources). That the term *lakam* derives from a cloth or paper banner is clear from the cognate forms of the word. In Yucatec, by analogy to the loose, flopping action of a cloth or paper banner, *lakam* also is used for the jowl of various animals, such as the loose skin under the neck of a rooster, or the loose, hanging skin on the neck of cattle.\(^\text{77}\) The term *lakam* likely derives from the root *lak-*-, which has the general meaning of “flap,” or “thing that flaps in movement.”\(^\text{78}\) This is precisely why it is consistently applied to dangling jowls that flop side to side in movement. Thus in Chontal Mayan, *lacac* means the “parte de abajo de la garganta de animales o de gente, papada” (part below the throat of animals or of people, jowl).\(^\text{79}\) Similarly in Tzotzil Mayan, *lakaket* means “flexible,” and the notion of moving from side to side is reflected in *láktelákte*, which means “chapaleando por aquí y por allá (la persona empapada)” (splashing around here and there; a wet person).\(^\text{80}\) Similarly in K’iche’ Mayan *laqam* means both “flag” as

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\(^{77}\) Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 434.

\(^{78}\) Another less likely possibility, however, is that the term *lakam* derives from a verbal root meaning something akin to “hold or grasp a pole.” Evidence comes from the root *lac* in Ch’ol Mayan, which means “agarrado (un objecto largo),” “grabbed (a long object).” H. Wilbur Aulie and Evelyn W. de Aulie, comps., *Diccionario Chol de Tumbalá, Chiapas, con variaciones dialectales de Tila y Sabanilla* (Coyoacán, D.F.: Instituto Linguístico de Verano, 1978), 71. Also in Q’anjob’al Mayan, *lakajoq* signifies “levantar con las manos” Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, *Jiit’il q’an ej yet q’anjob’al = Vocabulario q’anjob’al* (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2003), 95. The term *lakam* in only Yucatec means both “large” and “banner.” I suggest the etymological origins of the term lie first in the perishable object (*lakam* as “banner”), based on the action of “carrying” or on the motion of “flapping,” and the later association with stelae in the term *lakam tuun*, lit. “large stone,” influenced the unique semantic extension to the idea of “large”—that is, spread out widely like a cloth. Cf. note 92 below.

\(^{79}\) Kathryn C. Keller and Plácido G. Luciano, *Diccionario Chontal de Tabasco (Mayense)* (Tucson: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997), 146.

well as “flecos,” or “bangs” of the hair, since they move in the wind with a movement similar to a flag.81

Beyond the evidence offered by Stuart in his original decipherment, there are many other linguistic data that shed light on the origins of the term lakam. The following entries indicate that lakam originally referred to a clothlike banner or a similar object that flaps side to side. In the 1571 Tzeldal Mayan language of Chiapas, Mexico, the term lacam is given as “vela de nave” (ship’s sail), “estandarse” (sp.) (standard), and “bandera” (flag).82 In Tzeldal Mayan lacam also shows the semantic extension to “papada, como de puerco, etc.” (jowl, like of a pig, etc.).83 In K’iche’ Mayan the term can appear with a glottalized medial consonant as laq’am or lak’an, “bandera” (flag),84 at times as lakan for “bandera” (flag),85 though more commonly as laq’am.86 In the sixteenth century Thomás de Coto87 also recorded the term lakam for “bandera, estandarte o pendón” (flag, standard, or banner) in Kaqchikel Mayan, a form likewise attested in modern Kaqchikel sources for “bandera” (flag).88 Also in Poqomchi’ Mayan, the cognate form alaq’an means “bandera” (flag).89 However, one

81. Mucía Batz, Chajchaay, pelota de cadera, 41.
83. De Ara, Vocabulario de lengua tzeldal, 316.
84. Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, K’iche’ Choltzij, Vocabulario K’iche’: K’iche’-Kaxl’a’n Tzij, Kaxl’a’n Tzij-K’iche’ (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2004), 69.
85. Cecilio Tuyuc Sucuc and Miguel Ventura, Kak’ taq tzij re k’iche’ tzij = actuali-zación lexical idioma maya k’iche’ (Guatemala City: Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, 2003).
86. Mucía Batz, Chajchaay, pelota de cadera, 41.
89. Marcel Dobbels, Diccionario Poqomchi’-castellano (Guatemala: MINEDUC, 2003), 106.
of the best early colonial\textsuperscript{90} descriptions of the meaning of \textit{lacam} comes from colonial Poqom sources.\textsuperscript{91}

Lacam: bandera. estandarte. pendón. Y en símbolo suyo las velas del navío. tambien el pabellón de la cama. Las tiendas del campo . . . ah lacam. alférez. (Lacam: flag. banner. banner. And in symbol of the ship sails. Also a bed canopy. The tents of the camp . . . ah lacam. ensign.)

Notable are the related meanings of flag or banner with tents, a ship’s sail, and a bed canopy, all clothlike materials that flap in the wind. We can therefore confidently posit an origin for the term \textit{lakam} as a flexible, clothlike flap,\textsuperscript{92} most commonly described as a flag or banner.

I have already mentioned flap-staff banners, which are made of cloth and are used ceremonially, such as in dances among the ancient Maya. Remarkably, Stuart notes that the \textit{lakam} sign actually appears at times on flap-staff banners, such as Stela 11 at the site of Yaxchilán. He writes: “It is possible that the \textbf{LAKAM} sign originally depicted a flag or staff with hanging cloth, although this iconic origin may have eventually been forgotten by Late Classic times when it came to be reanalyzed as a vegetation motif.”\textsuperscript{93} The early examples of the \textbf{LAKAM} sign, in fact, show no plantlike motifs whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{94} Thus, the sign for \textit{lakam} can appear on flap-staff banners themselves, confirming their link to the larger \textit{lakam} complex. Additionally, the clear similarity in form of flap-staffs

\textsuperscript{90} Indeed, as Carmack and Mondloch note that the term \textit{laqam}, meaning “bandera” (flag) or “insignia” (insignia), is best known in K’iche’ from older dictionaries. “Título K’oyoi,” 33n89.


\textsuperscript{92} The meaning of \textit{lakam} in Yucatec Mayan as “grande” (large) likely grew out of the notion of a widely spread-out cloth; cf. Barrera Vásquez et al., \textit{Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya}, 434.

\textsuperscript{93} See figure 8b for a clear depiction of the plantlike aspects of the logograph for \textbf{LAKAM}.

\textsuperscript{94} Stuart, “Kings of Stone,” 154n6.
and the title of liberty further strengthens the argument that both are related to the *lakam*.

What is more, the notion of a *lakam* was also closely tied to warfare. For all intents and purposes, based on a preponderance of linguistic evidence, a *lakam* was a war banner par excellence. The military overtones pervade linguistic and ethnographic sources relating to *lakam*. Sixteenth-century Pokom Mayan sources specify *lacam* as “el estandarte de la guerras. La bandera de la *miliaria* [sic]” (the standard of wars. The flag of the military). Colonial Yucatecan Mayan dictionaries refer to *u lakamil katun*, “el pendón de la guerra o del guerrero” (the standard of war or the warrior). In the Xajil Chronicle, a colonial Kaqchikel Maya manuscript, when the Kaqchikel descended from the top of a hill with shouts and battle cries to engage the K’iche’ Maya, the text records: “Kani na pe x’pa’ ru-laqam,” “Immediately the flag (*laqam*) was raised” to lead the charge, affirming *laqam*’s identity as a battle standard.

Classic period texts and iconography also provide further contexts to understand the relationship between *lakam* and warfare. We know from numerous hieroglyphic inscriptions that the term *lakam* was used in the Late Classic period as a title for Maya warriors. Alfonso Lacadena, a Maya scholar who has written a study specifically on this term as a military title, summarized his findings as follows: “Propongo que los *lakam* del periodo Clásico . . . estaban encargados de la gestión de las unidades administrativas a su cargo, con funciones específicas de tributación y leva militar” (I propose that the *lakam* from the Classic period . . . were managers of administrative units charged with specific functions of taxation and military levy). Examples of the *lakam* title with warriors can be seen on a Late Classic polychrome vase (K5763; see fig. 6a).

96. The term *kitun* in colonial Yucatec Mayan meant “soldado, batallón, ejército” (soldier, battalion, army) as well as “batalla, guerra, pelea, combate” (battle, war, fight, combat). Barrera Vásquez et al., *Cordemex: Maya-español, español-maya*, 386.
In colonial times the title *lakam* was still in active use. The sixteenth-century Poqom Maya employed “ensign bearers” known as *ah lacam* to carry banners into war.¹⁰⁰ In short, the military connections to the term *lakam* are everywhere present in ancient and modern sources. There are many obvious parallels between a *lakam* and the title of liberty in their function as war banners, yet even closer links can be posited based on the poetic structuring of the title of liberty’s message.

Paralleled speech: Hoisting and planting

Moroni traveled throughout the Nephite land, setting up the title of liberty in each town or city. The physical presence of the title of liberty in each location in which it was temporarily erected would have served to further inspire people to their cause as well as to serve as an overt symbol of the covenant they were being asked to enter into: “And it came to pass also, that he caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower which was in all the land, which was possessed by the Nephites; and thus Moroni planted the standard of liberty among the Nephites” (Alma 46:36). Within the seemingly benign historical narrative of this verse one of the more remarkable links to ancient Mesoamerican societies in the context of the title of liberty is found. The core underlying structure of the verse is parallelistic, forming a synonymous couplet:

he caused the title of liberty to be *hoisted* upon every tower which was in all the land . . .

and thus Moroni *planted* the standard of liberty among the Nephites.

The paired terms that compose the focal action described in the verse are the synonyms *hoisted* and *planted*. Several points here are noteworthy. First, the verb *to plant* in reference to a banner finds immediate confirmation in ancient Maya texts. As noted before, the word for stela is *lakam-tuun*, which translates either as “large stone” or “banner stone.”

One of the more commonly encountered verbal phrases in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions is “u-tz’apaw u-lakam-tuun” (he planted his banner stone/large stone). The verb tz’ap, first deciphered by Nikolai Grube in 1990, means “to sow (corn), to plant,” “to erect,” or “to hoist,” stemming from the agricultural action of spearing the ground with a planting stick (fig. 10a). Moroni’s use of planted with the title/standard of liberty banner then is another remarkable correspondence with the setting up of banners and stelae in ancient Mesoamerican practice.

Figure 10. (A) tz’a-pa-ja, tz’ahpaj, “it was planted” (drawing by Asa Hull); (B) uhti tz’ap-tu-un wa’wan, “It came to pass the stone [stela] planting, it was raised,” found on Stela A at Copán (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele); (C) tz’apiiy wa’wan, “planting, it was raised,” a couplet from Stela H at Copán (drawing by Asa Hull, after Linda Schele).

101. Cf. Stuart, “‘Fire Enters His House,’” 375. Today scholars regularly translate this phrase as “the planting of the banner stone”; Erik Boot, “Maya Writing: Synonyms and Homonyms, Polyvalency and Polysemy,” in The Idea of Writing: Play and Complexity, ed. Alexander J. de Voogt and Irving L. Finkel (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 272; and Palka, Historical Dictionary of Ancient Mesoamerica, 43. “This is routinely used to refer to the dedications of stelae, as in the oft-repeated phrase ts’ap-ah u-lakamtun, ‘his banner stone (stela) is planted.’” Stuart, “‘Fire Enters His House,’” 375.


103. Note the second synonymous pairing that Moroni infuses this couplet with. In the first line he uses “title of liberty,” but in the second line, in perfect step with Mesoamerican poetic tradition, the head noun is substituted with a synonym, “the standard of liberty” (Alma 46:36).

104. Mark Alan Wright first brilliantly noted the significance of this couplet to me in Antigua, Guatemala. I had just lectured to a group on some of the inscriptions at the site of Copán and had mentioned a similar couplet twice found in those texts when
What is even more significant, however, is that the exact synonymous
couplet used by Moroni is also documented in several Maya hieroglyphic
texts, both cases in reference to the erection of stelae or “banner stones.”
On Stela A at the site of Copán in Honduras, the initial verbal phrase
after the calendrical notations is written as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{uhti tzap-tuun} \\
\text{wa’wan}
\end{align*}
\]

it came to pass the stone [stela] planting,
it was raised. (fig. 10b)

The root of the second verb in the couplet is \textit{wa’}, a positional verb meaning
“standing upright,” “stood up,” or “raised” in numerous Mayan languages.
The very same couplet also appears on Stela H at Copán, also referring
to an action related to the stela itself: “tz’apiiy wa’wan” (planting, it was
raised) (fig. 10c). The presence in the Book of Mormon of the precise
terminology\textsuperscript{105} and couplet structure\textsuperscript{106} associated with the erection of
banner stones in Late Classic Maya society is extraordinary.

There are yet further direct linguistic links between \textit{lakam} and the
text of the Book of Mormon. After the people of Zarahemla and the
people of Mosiah were united, a curious carved stone was presented to
Mosiah: “And it came to pass in the days of Mosiah, there was a large
stone brought unto him with engravings on it; and he did interpret the
engravings by the gift and power of God” (Omni 1:20). The seemingly
uninspiring description of the monument as simply a “large stone” may
actually be significant. As noted above, for the ancient Maya the word
for “stela” was \textit{lakam-tuun}, literally translated as “large stone.” While

\textsuperscript{105} The verb in modern Mayan language is \textit{wa’}, meaning “stand up.” The form of
the verb in Alma 46:36 is the transitive “hoisted.” The \textit{wa’} root is also readily transitivized,
such as \textit{u-wa-b’u “he hoisted it”} in Ch’orti’ Mayan.

\textsuperscript{106} The reverse order of the constituents in Book of Mormon (“hoist—plant”) and
Mayan texts (“plant—hoist”) is standard practice in Mayan poetics where there is
almost never a fixed order in the couplet terms.

Mark approached me and showed me Alma 46:36 and linked it to the glyphic couplets
I had just been discussing—a remarkable insight.
possibly merely coincidental, that the precise designation of “large stone” for a carved monument with writing on it would be given in the Book of Mormon as well as in myriads of ancient Maya texts is further indication of a shared cultural and linguistic origin.107

Conclusion

Moroni pulled out all the stops with the title of liberty. He provided legitimization for the covenant-entering ceremony by hearkening back to an apocryphal story of Jacob with a remnant of his son Joseph’s coat. Since Lehi was a descendant of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14), the archaic nature of the rite by their lineage ancestor would have garnered Moroni additional support. The innovative use of a standard to display the rent garment shows Moroni adapting to the circumstances and culture in which he lived. A banner, well-known as a symbol of warfare, motivation, and leadership in battle in societies around the world, was an eminently appropriate way to rally others to his cause.

As I have shown, many aspects of the title of liberty ceremony are illuminated when placed in a Mesoamerican context. The use of such banners in ritual and warfare settings—often in fact the same thing in ancient Mesoamerica—is remarkably consistent with nearly all the details in the title of liberty story. The ritual context for the raising of the title of liberty is reminiscent of the later Aztec Panquetzaliztl (lit. “raising of the banner”) ceremony that has an underlying military theme. What is more, the close association and parallels with the Maya concept of a lakam to the title of liberty cannot be easily overlooked. The title of liberty was for all intents and purposes a lakam, a battle standard meant to inspire and lead Moroni’s army into victory.

Expressing himself in highly poetic forms, Moroni shows his complete familiarity with several of the key rhetorical devices common to all

107. Mark Alan Wright, in 2006, was the first to note the connection between lakam-tuun and the “large stone” in Omni. Mark Alan Wright, “Gleaning the Glyphs: Textual Tidbits and the Book of Mormon” (presentation, 4th Annual Conference of the Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 13–14, 2006).
Mesoamerican ritual discourse. Furthermore, the precise correspondence between the couplet *hoist—plant* in the Book of Mormon with the title of liberty banner finds a near exact linguistic parallel in Classic period Maya hieroglyphic texts also referring to a banner or banner stone.

Convergence to this degree of linguistic and cultural data is a striking endorsement for the validity of the text as an ancient document and provides evidence of a Mesoamerican cultural background for the Book of Mormon.

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Near the end of his mortal life, Alma leads an expedition to preach among the apostate Zoramites in the land of Antionum in order to “try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5).¹ This decision to try pure doctrine via missionary labor stems from Alma’s faith that “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them” (Alma 31:5).

The intent of Alma’s mission to the Zoramites is clear, but commentators are divided on how they gauge its results. Some declare the mission a success because many Zoramites come back into the church,² while others offer a dimmer assessment, observing that the reclamation of so many believers ultimately triggers a war between the Nephites and the Lamanites (see Alma 35:9–13).³ Neither view accounts for the long-term effects of the Zoramite mission, however.

¹ This is reminiscent of Alma’s earlier quest, upon abdicating the judgment seat, to “pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people” (Alma 4:19).
³ See Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 149; Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical
In Helaman 5, four decades later, guards intent on killing Nephi and Lehi in a Lamanite prison become converted in a remarkable fashion, in part because one of them, Aminadab, exhorts his peers to “have faith in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma, and Amulek, and Zeezrom” (Helaman 5:41). Aminadab’s comrades listen and, after being filled with the Spirit, go forth from the prison as missionaries, soon convincing “the more part of the Lamanites” to embrace the gospel (Helaman 5:42–50). Because the Zoramite mission recorded in Alma 31–35 is the only documented mission that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom undertake together, we can view this mass conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5 as the symbolic fruit of Alma’s own “experiment” on the power of the word (see Alma 32:27).

Viewed in this light, Alma’s mission to the Zoramites is wildly successful. Indeed, the delayed influence of Alma and his brethren on the Lamanites is comparable to that of the sons of Mosiah. While Alma’s far-reaching influence among the Nephites is well understood, appreciating more fully his later impact on the Lamanites demonstrates that Alma’s legacy looms over both nations long after his disappearance.

Additionally, viewing the prison miracle and subsequent conversion of the Lamanites as the harvesting of seeds planted generations earlier by Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom sheds light on the intervening narrative. In particular, the connection between these events further explains Mormon’s decision to include at the end of the book of Alma a lengthy account of a series of wars between the Nephites and the

and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:493.

4. Mormon records that “the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their hearts” (Helaman 5:45). Later, in speaking to the Nephites during the period of darkness following his crucifixion, the Savior taught that the Lamanites “were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not,” apparently in reference to the mass Lamanite conversion described in Helaman 5 (3 Nephi 9:20).

5. Three of the sons of Mosiah—Ammon, Aaron, and Omner—participated in the mission to the Zoramites, of course, but Aminadab only refers to the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom (see Alma 31:6; Helaman 5:41).

6. Mormon himself seems to revere Alma, as he quotes Alma’s teachings extensively (see Alma 5; 7; 9; 12–13; 32–33; and 36–42).
Lamanites and to bracket this war narrative with a pair of unmistakably parallel passages relating to Helaman’s efforts to “declare the word” among the Nephites immediately before and after these wars (Alma 45:20–24; 62:45–51). Read in the context of a longer narrative arc between Alma 31 and Helaman 5, these war chapters throw into sharp relief the supremacy of the word over the sword.

Aminadab’s reference to the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom

Commentators have long taken for granted that Aminadab’s citation to the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom refers to their mission to the Zoramites.7 This article agrees with that conclusion, but it is worth considering the textual support for this inference at the outset, since Mormon does not clarify the point explicitly.

It is possible, of course, that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom went on an undocumented preaching tour together, but Mormon chooses to describe only a single time—the Zoramite mission—that these three preach in the same place. Admittedly, Mormon frequently refers to his inability to document even “a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people” (Helaman 3:14),8 but throughout his record Mormon masterfully weaves together “complex narratives full of multiple strands, flashbacks, and interpretive comments.”9 Because the referenced teachings in


8. Mormon inserts similar caveats elsewhere (see Words of Mormon 1:5; 3 Nephi 5:8).

9. See Grant Hardy, “Mormon as Editor,” in Rediscovering the Book of Mormon, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 27–28. Examples of such commentary include a lengthy explanation of the Nephite monetary system in order to provide context for Zeezrom’s offer to pay Amulek to deny God (Alma 11:1–20), and a reminder, when the event occurs, of Abinadi’s prophecy that Noah’s subjects would be enslaved (Mosiah 21:2–4). A lengthier example occurs with Mormon’s explanatory comments marking the transition between the plates
Helaman 5 are so important to the story Mormon is telling, his failure to refer to another mission undertaken by Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom suggests the absence of one.

In fact, the text all but rules out a separate missionary undertaking by these three men, as it appears that they do not journey together prior to their mission to the Zoramites. Alma heals and then baptizes Zeezrom in Sidom approximately seven years before the Zoramite mission, but their paths diverge afterward. Zeezrom, for his part, eagerly goes “forth to preach unto the people,” while Alma, after establishing the church in Sidom, returns to his own home with Amulek in order to “administer unto [Amulek] in his tribulations, and [strengthen] him in the Lord” (Alma 15:12–18). Alma and Amulek remain together for up to three years with no mention of Zeezrom (Alma 16:1–13), but they eventually go their separate ways. Alma seems to be alone when he meets the sons of Mosiah on his way from Gideon to Manti (Alma 17:1), while Amulek and Zeezrom end up together in Melek just before joining Alma on the mission to the Zoramites (Alma 31:6).

The context of the scene in which the Lamanites in the prison remember the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom also points to the Zoramite mission as the likely reference point of Aminadab. Matthew Roper has identified numerous parallels between the language used to

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of Nephi and his own abridgment (Words of Mormon). In Understanding the Book of Mormon, Hardy examines at length Mormon's prowess as a literary artist, historian, and theologian.

10. As the Zoramite mission comes shortly before Alma's disappearance, it seems even less likely that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom went on a separate mission together after their experience among the Zoramites.

11. Reynolds and Sjodahl note that although we know little about Zeezrom's activities after his conversion, “it is highly probable that... he commenced the building of [the city of Zeezrom],” since “it was the custom of the Nephites to name their cities, towns, and villages, after whoever founded them,” and further that “it would not be unreasonable to suppose that he dwelt in the midst of its citizens as their High Priest or Chief Judge.” Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 5:29. Although this is interesting speculation, no textual evidence supports these theories. What we do know about Zeezrom suggests that he dedicated himself to preaching; after his baptism, “he began from that time forth to preach unto the people” (Alma 15:12).
describe the prison scene in Helaman 5 and the sermons delivered by Alma and Amulek to the Zoramites. For example, Alma instructs the people in Antionum to “cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God” (Alma 33:22), much like Aminadab later urges his comrades to “turn and look” and then to “have faith in Christ” (Helaman 5:37, 41). Similarly, Amulek teaches the Zoramites that mercy “encircle[s the righteous] in the arms of safety,” potentially foreshadowing the fire from heaven that “encircled” Nephi and Lehi in the prison but leaves them unharmed (Alma 34:16; Helaman 5:23–24). The prison onlookers themselves eventually become “encircled about” by the pillar of fire, which effectively informs them that they qualify for the mercy described by Amulek (Helaman 5:43).

These are not the only echoes of the messages delivered to the Zoramites that Roper identifies in the prison scene narrative. Additionally, a “cloud of darkness” descends upon the prison, bringing to mind Amulek’s warning to the Zoramites that failure to repent would lead to a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Helaman 5:28; Alma 34:33). Also, Amulek enjoins the Zoramites to “exercise your faith unto repentance. . . . Yea, cry unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save” (Alma 34:17–18). Aminadab later uses similar language in the prison: “You must repent, and cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma,

12. Although Zeezrom accompanies Alma and Amulek (and the others in the group) to preach to the Zoramites, the text does not provide any information about Zeezrom’s sermons in Antionum. We can presume, however, that Zeezrom’s teachings would have closely tracked those of Alma, not only because his name is also mentioned by Aminadab but because this was standard practice among the Nephites. Years earlier, for example, Alma the Elder had instructed those among his converts who would preach that they “should teach nothing save it were the things which [Alma] had taught, and which had been spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets” (Mosiah 18:19).

13. Additionally, Alma reminds the Zoramites that Moses held up a “type” in the wilderness, “that whosoever would look upon it might live” (Alma 33:19). Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?,” 2.


and Amulek, and Zeezrom; and when ye shall do this, the cloud of darkness shall be removed from overshadowing you” (Helaman 5:41).17

On balance, the textual evidence supports, but does not compel, the conclusion that Aminadab meant to refer to the Zoramite mission and that his listeners were familiar with the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom from that missionary journey.18 Some commentators have suggested that this connection is important primarily because it identifies Aminadab’s comrades as Zoramites.19 But the significance of

18. Gardner has observed, “For these names [of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom] to mean anything to [Aminadab’s] hearers, they would have to be Zoramite.” Second Witness, 5:96. Roper similarly suggests that Aminadab and some of his fellows may have been “Zoramites who as young men had heard [Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom] preach.” “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?” 3. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert Millet write the following with respect to the earlier labors of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom: “Theirs must have been a marvelous ministry, their testimonies of the Christ of immeasurable impact, inasmuch as these witnesses had been borne some fifty years earlier.” Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 3:359. McConkie and Millet do not explore further the connection between these earlier teachings and the conversion of the Lamanites. Given that the Zoramite mission did take place nearly fifty years before the prison scene documented in Helaman 5, it is unlikely that many of the people in the prison remember these teachings firsthand, though for the oldest among them we cannot rule out that possibility. We do know that Aminadab himself is a Nephite by birth (Helaman 5:35), so he may be a first-generation Zoramite. If so, his advanced age may have been one reason the others look to him for wisdom and guidance. It is also possible that the multitude had become familiar with written copies of the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom, as years earlier copies of the records in Helaman’s custody had been “sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land” (Alma 63:12). This explanation is not fully satisfactory, though, because Aminadab tells the multitude to remember what Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom “taught unto you” (Helaman 5:41).

19. See Gardner, Second Witness, 5:96; Ludlow, Companion, 241; and Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?,” 2–3. Ludlow takes his analysis one step further, arguing that identifying the prison mob as a group of Zoramites demonstrates that the Zoramites “have now occupied the land of Lehi-Nephi, which had just been deserted by Limhi and his people,” a textual detail that Ludlow uses to extol the “complex” and “wonderfully consistent” narrative of the Book of Mormon. Companion, 241. But Ludlow’s conclusion that the Zoramites took up residence in Lehi-Nephi on the heels of Limhi’s departure is unsatisfying in that it seems to conflict with what we know about the timeline of these events. Limhi’s people flee Lehi-Nephi—where the prison at issue
the relationship between the Zoramite mission in Alma 31–35 and the dramatic prison scene in Helaman 5 has deeper implications, particularly with respect to Alma’s lasting influence and Mormon’s use of a war narrative to highlight the ascendancy of the word of God in subtle but powerful ways.

Evaluating Alma’s missionary efforts

Throughout much of the book of Alma, which spans nearly 30 percent of the entire Book of Mormon, Alma himself emerges as the dominant figure, as he does much to guide the political and spiritual (and even military) fortunes of the Nephites. For the first eight years following Mosiah’s death, Alma plays the dual role of the first chief judge among the Nephites and the “high priest over the church” (Alma 4:18). During this period, Alma leads the Nephites personally into battle (Alma 2:16–31), and he also oversees a period of explosive church growth—in the seventh year alone approximately 3,500 people “united themselves to the church of God and were baptized” (Alma 4:5). Later, after resigning as chief judge, Alma dedicates himself to preaching “among all the people in every city” (Alma 35:15).\(^{21}\) Alma’s influence among the Nephites is located—in approximately 121 BC (see Mosiah 6:4; 7:1–3), whereas the Zoramites separate themselves from the Nephites nearly fifty years later, in approximately 74 BC (see Alma 30:6, 58–59). See also Joseph L. Allen, “Nephi, Land of and City of,” in Book of Mormon Reference Companion, ed. Dennis L. Largely (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 593–94. During the intervening decades, any number of groups could have taken up residence in Lehi-Nephi.

\(^{20}\) Regarding Alma’s role as a military commander, John W. Welch has written: “Although we rarely think of him in this way, Alma the Younger, the high priest and chief judge, was the man who went out at the head of the Nephite armies in the civil war against the Amlicites and who did hand-to-hand combat himself (reminiscent of the heroic tradition of contests between such luminaries as Achilles and Hector, or David and Goliath).” “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?,” in Warfare in the Book of Mormon, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 4.

\(^{21}\) We know, for example, that Alma preaches in Zarahemla (Alma 5:1), Gideon (Alma 6:8), Melekh (Alma 8:3), Ammonihah (Alma 8:6), and Sidom (Alma 15:1) and
is profound, making him “one of the most compelling figures in the Book of Mormon.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many commentators are generous in their assessment of the mission to the Zoramites undertaken by Alma and his brethren. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, for example, write that “the results of their labors were indeed great, for they had carried the Gospel Message to a great many of the Zoramites who had accepted it.”

D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner go further, observing that “the truth of Alma 31:5 is confirmed” in the acceptance of “the word” by many of the Zoramites.

Such praise is not universal. Brant Gardner argues that Alma clearly fails in his attempt to pursue “a religious solution” with the Zoramites. According to Gardner, Alma 35:15, which recounts that Alma is “exceedingly sorrowful,” underscores Alma’s feelings in relation to “this failure” among the Zoramites.

Grant Hardy offers a similar view, noting that the narrative reveals “the rather awkward truth that Alma’s preaching to the Zoramites not only did not prevent hostilities but was itself a major catalyst for the fighting.” According to Hardy, throughout the first half of the book of Alma, Mormon subtly but consciously emphasizes the contrast between “Alma’s faithful but conventional achievements” and the “extraordinary triumphs” of the sons of Mosiah. Hardy even suggests that Alma’s desire to be an angel (Alma 29) may reveal “a hint of envy” at the success that he is on his way to Manti when he has a joyous reunion with the sons of Mosiah (Alma 17:1). Alma also visits the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi with Ammon after they have separated themselves from the Lamanites and are camping in the “wilderness” on their way to Jershon (Alma 27:25).

22. Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 134.
23. Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 4:133.
27. Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 149.
of the sons of Mosiah, who were treated by their many converts “as though they were angels sent from God” (Alma 27:4).  

These critical assessments raise valid points. Though many Zoramites accept his message, Alma does have real cause for sorrow when the Zoramites take up arms against the Nephites—after all, Alma embarks on his mission in the first place partly in an attempt to prevent an alliance between the Zoramites and the Lamanites that could lead to war (Alma 31:4). Even still, it is not apparent from the text that Alma blames himself for the events that follow. Mormon’s reference in Alma 35:15 to Alma’s feeling “exceedingly sorrowful” is not tied specifically (and certainly not exclusively) to the aftermath of his labors among the Zoramites. Rather, Mormon observes that Alma feels “grieved for the iniquity of his people,” suggesting that Alma is reflecting generally on the growing wickedness of the Nephites.

Although Alma may nevertheless have felt some disappointment in how his mission to the Zoramites turned out, the fact remains that a Nephite dissenter remembers his teachings decades later and employs them in the Lamanite prison, to great effect. Viewing the conversion of the Lamanites as a miraculous epilogue to Alma’s Zoramite mission provides a broader perspective on the results of this mission and on the scope of Alma’s influence generally in the Book of Mormon. For instance, this episode significantly changes how Alma’s labors compare to those of the sons of Mosiah.

Like Alma, the sons of Mosiah see conflict follow in the wake of their missionary labors. Soon after the converts of the sons of Mosiah take upon themselves the name of Anti-Nephi-Lehies, more than a thousand

30. Alma understands that a “correspondence” between the Lamanites and Zoramites could be “the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites” (Alma 31:4). John L. Sorenson explains that the Zoramite city of Antionum offered a potential base of operations to a Lamanite nation eagerly expanding to the south, so Alma realizes that if he could “anchor the Zoramites within the Nephite political and cultural sphere, it might forestall war.” *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 240.
of them are slain by the Lamanites without resistance (Alma 24:20–22). Later, when the group has become known as the people of Ammon and has taken up residence in the land of Jershon, the Lamanites meet the Nephites in “a tremendous battle; yea, even such an one as never had been known among all the people in the land from the time Lehi left Jerusalem” (Alma 28:2). These fierce battles readily compare with the conflict sparked by the apostate Zoramites after many of their brethren are converted by the teachings of Alma and his brethren (Alma 43–44).31

Those whose conversion can be traced to the labors of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, respectively, also ultimately aid the Nephites tremendously. The sons of the people of Ammon, for example, play a pivotal role in the wars documented at the end of the book of Alma under the direction of Helaman, Alma’s oldest son, all without the loss of a single warrior (Alma 56–58). Later, when the “more part” of the Lamanites embrace the gospel in the wake of the prison scene, they “yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession” (Helaman 5:50, 52), which is something the Nephites had desired for hundreds of years (see Omni 1:27).

Toward the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni discusses the mission of the sons of Mosiah alongside the conversion of the Lamanites. In a discourse on faith recorded in Ether 12, Moroni presents three examples of miracles wrought among the people as a result of faith: (1) the prison walls which tumble to the earth without hurting Alma and Amulek (Alma 14); (2) the remarkable “change upon the Lamanites” (Ether 12:14) resulting from the prison encounter of Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5); and (3) the conversion of so many Lamanites by the sons of Mosiah (Alma 17–26; Ether 12:13–15). Moroni does not explicitly give Alma any credit for the conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5—in fact, he cites the faith of Nephi and Lehi—but he clearly views this later conversion as comparable to the “great . . . miracle” wrought by the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (Ether 12:14–15).

31. Hardy acknowledges that war follows the converts of both Alma and the sons of Mosiah, though he argues that Mormon “seriously underplays the political costs” of the relocation of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to the land of Jershon, in keeping with his effort to accentuate the discrepancy between the successes of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, respectively. Understanding the Book of Mormon, 173.
It is fitting that Moroni discusses these stories together. Although we do not have accurate population estimates for the Lamanites at any given time, Monte S. Nyman has observed that the conversion documented in Helaman 5 “was certainly comparable and probably surpassed the thousands brought to the fold of God by the sons of Mosiah.” Hardy seems to agree, noting that this Lamanite conversion is “the most astonishing conversion in the entire book.”

The conversion of the Lamanite guards in Helaman 5 also finds parallels in Alma’s earlier ministry in at least two respects. First, up to a point the experience closely mirrors Alma and Amulek’s experience in Ammonihah. In both stories, the prophet and his preaching companion are mistreated as prisoners for some time, after which their tormenters become frozen with fear when the prison walls begin to shake (Alma 14:18–27; Helaman 5:21–34). In Ammonihah, Alma and Amulek are spared while the walls of the prison collapse on their stunned captors, who are instantly killed (Alma 14:23–27). In the Lamanite prison, by contrast, the guards ultimately qualify for redemption when they remember the teachings of Alma and his brethren and repent accordingly (Helaman 5:40–49). Unlike the prison experience in Helaman 5, the miraculous display of power in Alma 14 does not affect the people in a positive way. On the contrary, the “multitudes” of people who rush to the prison to learn the cause of the “great noise” immediately turn and flee when they see Alma and Amulek emerge from the rubble unscathed (Alma 14:28–29). Perhaps Alma’s desire to be an angel in order to “cry repentance unto every people” (Alma 29:1) can be traced in part to his experience in Ammonihah, where Alma learns firsthand that death and destruction have limited value in leading others to repent.

The Lamanite conversion also contains parallels with Alma’s own conversion. While being “racked with torment” for his sins after a visit

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33. Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 164.
34. Zeezrom eventually repents, of course, but not because of the power his teachers demonstrate—Zeezrom’s heart is pricked by their words, and he comes to believe in Christ (Alma 15:3–11).
from an angel, Alma remembers what his father taught about Jesus Christ—he later recounts to his son, “Now as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (Alma 36:17–18). This faith-filled plea is the turning point for Alma. He immediately is “filled with joy,” which he describes as “exquisite and sweet” (Alma 36:20–21). Aminadab’s comrades are similarly delivered many years later when they remember the teachings of Alma and his brethren and cry out with faith in Christ; they, too, become “filled with that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory” (Helaman 5:42–44).

John W. Welch has described Alma’s teachings as the “doctrinal epicenter” of the entire Book of Mormon and as “the spinal cord that runs through the backbone of Nephite prophetic history.” Our assessment of Alma’s influence only grows when we appreciate Alma’s role in laying the foundation for the later conversion of the “more part” of the Lamanites, which has political and spiritual ramifications for both the Nephites and the Lamanites for years to come. Indeed, Alma’s mission to the Zoramites emerges as a key part of his legacy, the scope of which Alma himself may not even have foreseen.


36. The Lamanites quickly become more righteous than the Nephites (Helaman 6:1) and thereafter, apparently for the first time, Lamanite missionaries take it upon themselves to preach to the Nephites (Helaman 6:4). Within a few years, the Nephites build up and support the Gadianton robbers to the point that this band obtains “sole management of the government,” whereas the Lamanites “utterly” destroy these robbers from their midst (Helaman 6:37–39). A generation later, it is a Lamanite prophet, Samuel, who foretells the signs that will accompany the Savior’s birth—signs that give the faithful hope and that, when manifested, cause the wicked to “fall to the earth” (Helaman 14:7) and to “know that the Son of God must shortly appear” (3 Nephi 1:17; see Helaman 14:1–8; 3 Nephi 1:5–21).
Mormon’s use of the war chapters to highlight the supremacy of the word

Viewing the conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5 as the culmination of Alma’s attempt to “try the virtue of the word of God” among the Zoramites decades earlier adds narrative meaning to Mormon’s editorial choices between these two events. Specifically, we can view the so-called war chapters in late Alma as a unit that dramatically highlights the disparity between the power of the word and that of the sword.37

Mormon’s focus on war is undoubtedly an “explicit editorial shift” in his narrative,38 and it begins rather suddenly. At the beginning of Alma 43, Mormon announces that he will “say no more” about Alma’s preaching and that he will shift his focus to “the wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites” (Alma 43:2–3). Interestingly, though, Mormon is not ready to leave Alma behind just yet, and he describes how Alma, at Moroni’s request, receives a revelation regarding the location of the armies of Zerahemnah (Alma 43:23–24).39

Mormon also recounts a final exchange between Alma and Helaman before observing his pledge to say no more about Alma’s teachings (Alma 45:2–16). Alma’s parting message includes a prophecy that the people of Nephi would “become extinct” four hundred years after “Jesus

37. Michael L. King observes that these chapters on war generally serve as an extension of Mormon’s focus on the power of the word, which is developed throughout the rest of the book of Alma: “Nowhere in scripture is the battle between conversion and compulsion more vividly described than in Alma…. Through its pages, the Lord teaches us the critical lesson that forced compliance is not sufficient to bring about a lasting change and a godly character.” “Sickle or Sword? Conversion versus Compulsion in the Book of Alma,” in The Book of Mormon: The Foundation of Our Faith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 162–63. King does not explore how the war chapters in Alma relate to the events in Helaman 5.


39. In 3 Nephi we learn that the Nephites employ the “custom” of appointing chief military captains “that had the spirit of revelation and also of prophecy” (3 Nephi 3:19). Mormon does not record the source of this custom, but it may trace in part back to Alma’s use of his prophetic powers to track the movements of Zerahemnah’s Lamanite army (Alma 43:23–24).
Christ shall manifest himself unto them” (Alma 45:10–11). Mormon then writes of Alma’s disappearance, explaining that nothing is known “concerning his death and burial” (Alma 45:19).

With Alma out of the way, Mormon is ready to begin his war narrative in earnest. First, though, Mormon briefly describes an unsuccessful attempt by Helaman to “declare the word unto” the Nephites (Alma 45:20–24). Mormon then immediately introduces Amalickiah to the story and begins to describe in detail the years of conflict that Amalickiah sets in motion.40 Mormon marks the conclusion of the Amalickiahite Wars in Alma 62 by recounting that Helaman once again goes forth to “declare the word of God” among the people (Alma 62:45–51).

The accounts of Helaman’s ministry at either end of Mormon’s lengthy war narrative contain unmistakably parallel phrasing. In both passages, “Helaman and his brethren went forth” to declare “the word” unto the people because it was “expedient” that a “regulation should be made” in the church, because of “wars” and other contentions and disturbances (Alma 45:20–22; 62:44–45). These parallels are shown in table 1.

The significant phrasal overlap in these passages, as well as their placement at distinct textual breaking points, suggests that Mormon, who regularly uses repetition in the Book of Mormon for effect, consciously uses these passages to delineate the war chapters as a discrete departure from the rest of his narrative.41

40. Various attempts have been made to specify names for the different conflicts in the Book of Mormon. Welch identifies three distinct conflicts in the latter part of the book of Alma: the Zoramite War (Alma 43–44), the First Amalickiahite War (Alma 46:1–50:11), and the Second Amalickiahite War (Alma 51–62). “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?,” 5–10. By contrast, Ryan W. Davis describes the conflict from Alma 46–62 as a single war because “there is no separation of forces, and because it is explicitly treated as one war [by Mormon] (Alma 62:41),” though he does not suggest a specific name for the conflict. See “For the Peace of the People: War and Democracy in the Book of Mormon,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 16/1 (2007): 50. For the purposes of this article, I refer to the conflicts described in Alma 46–62 as the Amalickiahite Wars.

41. John W. Welch has cautioned against assuming that discernible textual patterns have been intentionally placed in the text by the author (a trap he refers to as the “intentional fallacy”). See “Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence
Table 1. Overlapping passages in Alma 45 and Alma 62

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alma 45</th>
<th>Alma 62</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Helaman went forth among the people to declare the word unto them” (v. 20)</td>
<td>“Helaman did take upon him again to preach unto the people the word of God” (v. 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“because of their wars with the Lamanites and the many little dissensions and disturbances which had been among the people” (v. 21)</td>
<td>“because of so many wars and contentions” (v. 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“it became expedient that . . . a regulation should be made throughout the church” (v. 21)</td>
<td>“it had become expedient that a regulation should be made again in the church” (v. 44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Therefore, Helaman and his brethren went forth” (v. 22)</td>
<td>“Therefore, Helaman and his brethren went forth” (v. 45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“to establish the church again in all the land” (v. 22)</td>
<td>“And . . . they did establish again the church of God throughout all the land” (v. 46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notably, Helaman's attempts to declare the word have very different results before and after the wars. In Alma 45, we read that the people bristle at Helaman's teachings and “would not give heed” to them (Alma 45:23). Rather, they “grew proud, being lifted up in their hearts because of their exceedingly great riches” (Alma 45:24). Helaman's initial

of Chiasmus,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 10. Given the degree of overlap here and the placement of these passages immediately before and after the longest war narrative in the Book of Mormon, it is likely that Mormon did intend to delineate the intervening chapters as a “coherent unit.” See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 107. Richard Dilworth Rust has observed that “although it might be argued that some repetition and contrast in the Book of Mormon is accidental, the accumulated evidence is that such narrators as Mormon and Moroni intended parallel materials to instruct and convince.” *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 24.

42. Years earlier, Alma similarly “made . . . regulations” in the church as he went among the people (see Alma 6:7).

43. At this point Alma has only recently disappeared, so dissatisfaction with the change in ecclesiastical leadership may have contributed to this “dissension” (Alma 45:17–24).
preaching effort appears minimally successful, but his labors at the end of the wars do yield some immediate fruit: “many people” become convinced of “their wickedness,” leading them to repent (Alma 62:45). The people of the church enjoy a period of postwar material prosperity, though they nevertheless “remember how great things the Lord had done for them” and “pray unto the Lord their God continually” (Alma 62:48–51).

The different results do not arise from any change in Helaman’s teachings. Rather, years of war have taken their toll, leading many of the people to soften their hearts and “humble themselves before God” (Alma 62:41). In other words, the sword and its attendant ills do have a powerful effect upon the people. These benefits prove to be short-lived, however. Soon after this widespread change of heart, the Nephites face major dissensions and contentions, including the emergence of Gadianton’s so-called band (Helaman 2:4).

During this period, the Lamanites overrun the capital city of Zarahemla for the first time (Helaman 1). Even when order is restored and the church seems to be making progress again, the people soon become so contentious that Mormon writes, without further explanation, that “there was much bloodshed” (Helaman 4:1). The softening and humility brought on by the Amalickiahite Wars seems to dissipate rapidly. There is no indication, moreover, that the wars themselves lessen the animosity between the Nephites and Lamanites in any meaningful way.

In isolation, it may seem surprising that the book of Alma, which focuses so heavily on the ascendant power of the word of God, reveals at the end that Helaman’s missionary efforts bear fruit largely as a result

44. Later, after Amalickiah leads away a large group of people and Moroni dramatically erects the title of liberty, Helaman is able to “maintain order in the church” for approximately four years (see Alma 46:38).

45. Not everyone reacts this way—some of the people become more hardened as a result of the long wars (see Alma 62:41).

of war-related suffering. But this message takes on new meaning when viewed alongside the more lasting conversion of the Lamanites documented in Helaman 5, which does not stem from war and which produces more lasting change. Indeed, twenty-four years after the “more part” of the Lamanites embrace the gospel (Helaman 6:1), the Lamanites continue to adhere “strictly” to the commandments of God (Helaman 13:1). We do not read about wickedness again among the Lamanites until approximately AD 3, more than thirty years after the events recorded in Helaman 5; even then it is primarily the “rising generation” that begins to dissent from the church (3 Nephi 1:28–30). Thus, the power of the word demonstrated in Helaman 5, which was planted by Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom and later harvested by Nephi and Lehi, does have a significantly greater and more lasting effect than the fleeting humility described in Alma 62 that was brought on by the sword.

Reading the war chapters as a prelude and a foil to the dramatic events that later unfold in Helaman 5 does not contradict other explanations for Mormon’s decision to recount the Amalickiahite Wars at such great length. On the contrary, the variety of explanations for

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47. Hansen also argues, “Mormon uses the drama of war to verify the old promise of prosperity if the Nephites keep God’s word—and of adversity and affliction if they do not.” “The Book of Alma as a Prototype,” 277–78. Hansen does not address Helaman’s differing levels of preaching success before and after these wars.

48. The events recorded in Helaman 6:1 take place in the sixty-second year of the reign of the judges, and those in Helaman 13:1 take place in the eighty-sixth year of the reign of the judges.

49. R. Douglas Phillips, for example, has written that Mormon views war as “an instrument of divine purpose” and that we gain insight into Mormon’s purposes for devoting so much of the book of Alma to discussion of the “Lamanite wars” because this account demonstrates “the hand of God making use of devout and just military leaders and statesmen to preserve the righteous and punish the wicked.” “Why Is So Much of the Book of Mormon Given Over to Military Accounts?” in Warfare in the Book of Mormon, 25, 27. Others take a more apologetic approach to studying warfare in the Book of Mormon, stressing how Mormon’s descriptions of war (in the book of Alma and elsewhere) underscore the complexity and internal consistency of the record. See, for example, William J. Hamblin, “The Importance of Warfare in Book of Mormon Studies,” in Warfare in the Book of Mormon, 484; Welch, “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?” in Warfare in the Book of Mormon, 17.
the purpose of these chapters highlights Mormon’s masterly ability to weave a narrative tapestry with seemingly endless layers of meaning.

The war narrative in late Alma is just one way in which the dichotomy between the power of the word and that of the sword shines through during the years between the Zoramite mission and the mass Lamanite conversion. In Helaman 4, Mormon recounts a military campaign that also subtly highlights this theme. Nearly a generation after Moroni’s death, Nephite dissenters once again succeed in inciting Lamanite aggression, and the Lamanites attack the Nephites. The Lamanites enjoy immediate success and soon overtake much of the territory held by the Nephites, including the land of Zarahemla (Helaman 4:1–5). Moronihah, the son and military heir of Moroni, leads the Nephite armies and eventually manages to recapture half of the Nephite lands, but no more. The remaining Lamanite forces are so powerful that Moronihah and the Nephites “abandon their design” to retake any more lands (Helaman 4:19). The power of the sword, in other words, is exhausted, even when wielded by a righteous leader. Only a short time later, after the Lamanites are converted en masse, Mormon specifically notes that the Lamanites “did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession” (Helaman 5:52). The “virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5) thus literally breaks down barriers that a military leader as capable as Moronihah would not even attempt to overthrow by force.

50. Other examples of this contrast abound in Mormon’s narrative. Consider, for example, that Moroni gathers followers by writing a concise but powerful message on a piece of clothing and raising it up on a pole for others to see (Alma 46:11–21), whereas Amalickiah ascends to the Lamanite throne and “gained the hearts of the people” after his servant stabs the king of the Lamanites to death (Alma 47:22–35). Moroni, of course, emerges victorious, while Amalickiah, ironically, himself dies at the point of a javelin (Alma 51:33–34).

51. As Gardner notes, it is unclear just how much territory the Lamanites “yield up” to the Nephites—it may be that they simply give back the lands conquered in the most recent military campaign (rather than also abandoning the land of Nephi, which had been in Lamanite hands for approximately two hundred years). Second Witness, 5:98–99.
Conclusion

Viewing Alma’s mission to the Zoramites as laying the foundation for the mass conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5 has many implications.\(^{52}\) This connection sheds light on Mormon’s unique editorial decision to document war in unprecedented detail at the end of the book of Alma and also helps explain why he framed those war chapters with twin passages relating to the preaching efforts of Helaman, the significance of which otherwise seems to counteract the focus on the supremacy of the word developed throughout much of the rest of the book of Alma. Understanding this connection also provides the perspective necessary to declare Alma’s mission to the Zoramites a resounding success and to appreciate more fully Alma’s profound and lasting influence on the spiritual and political fortunes of both the Nephites and the Lamanites.

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\(^{52}\) There is undoubtedly more to explore regarding the narrative significance of the connection between Alma 31 and Helaman 5 than this article addresses.
Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon:
A Textual Exegesis

Ethan Sproat

The Book of Mormon and the King James Version of the Bible (KJV) are peppered with straightforward descriptions of (animal) skins being used as clothing or as some other sort of covering. Roughly the same number of passages also unmistakably refer to skins as human flesh. Yet the use of the word skin (or skins) is ambiguous in six specific Book of Mormon passages that refer to changing skin color or the cursing of skins. These latter have all traditionally been interpreted as referring to human skins, with traditional racial implications. Notably, though, five of these passages lack immediate contextual clues as to what sort of skin each passage describes (see 2 Nephi 5:21; Jacob 3:5, 8, 9; 3 Nephi 2:15), and the last (Alma 3:5–6) contains a description of Lamanite skins that suggests the possibility of a significant, nontraditional interpretation of these six passages—one focused on how the skins referred to in these texts may relate to Nephite temples and issues of covenantal inheritance.

1. See, for example, Enos 1:20; Alma 3:5; 43:20; 49:6; 3 Nephi 4:7; Genesis 3:18–21; 27:16; Exodus 25:5; 26:14; 35:7, 23; 36:19; 39:34; Leviticus 13:48, 51; Numbers 4:5–25; 31:20; Ezekiel 16:10; and Mark 1:6. Other passages refer to a “leathern girdle” or “girdle of leather” (see, for example, Mosiah 10:8; 2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:4). Still other passages refer to skins as animal hide in other non-clothing contexts (see, for example, 1 Neph 17:11; Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 7:8; 11:32; 15:17; 16:27; Numbers 19:5).

2. See, for example, Mosiah 17:13; Alma 20:29; 44:18; Exodus 34:29–30, 35; Job 2:4; 7:5; 10:11; 16:15; 18:13; 19:20, 26; 30:30; 41:7; Psalm 102:5; Jeremiah 13:23; Lamentations 3:4; 4:8; 5:10; Ezekiel 37:6, 8; Micah 3:2–3; and much of Leviticus 13 (which addresses how to ceremonially treat diseases of the skin).
Alma 3:5–6 is comprised of two sentences, in each of which the word skin(s) appears. Commentaries handle the two sentences in one of three ways: (1) by treating both of them independently, as if two very different things were at issue; (2) by commenting on only the second of the two sentences, remaining silent about the first; or (3) by failing to comment on either sentence. All three of these approaches miss the fact that, when read in context, the use of skins in the second sentence appears to form part of a historical explanation of the use of skin in the first sentence. Here is the text:

Now the heads of the Lamanites were shorn; and they were naked, save it were skin which was girded about their loins, and also their armor, which was girded about them, and their bows, and their arrows, and their stones, and their slings, and so forth. And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion against their brethren, who consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, who were just and holy men. (Alma 3:5–6)

According to a reading I will defend in the course of this article, this passage suggests the possibility that “the skins of the Lamanites” are to be understood as articles of clothing, the notable girdle of skin that these particular Lamanites wear to cover their nakedness. Significantly, these are the only two references to skins in Alma 3, which contains the Book of Mormon’s most thorough explanation of the Lamanite curse.

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3. For representative studies embodying these three approaches, see, respectively, Brant Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:70–73; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume III—Alma through Helaman (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 17; and Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 342. I should note that of over thirty book-length and article-length commentaries I’ve read spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to now, every single one has treated Alma 3:5–6 in one of these three basic ways.

4. Any emphasis within Book of Mormon quotations has been added.
and the curse’s relationship to skins. Thus situated, Alma 3:5–6 might serve as an interpretive Rosetta stone. If both instances of skins in Alma 3:5–6 refer to clothing, then the other five references to various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon could also refer to clothing and not—as traditionally assumed—to human flesh pigmentation.

Such a nontraditional interpretation garners additional support from the critical textual work of Royal Skousen. In his nigh-exhaustive Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Skousen claims that the Book of Mormon uses the indefinite article a with the singular skin to refer to animal skins. Skousen specifically points to the use of the indefinite article a in Enos 1:20 (“a short skin”), Alma 43:20 (“a skin”), and 3 Nephi 4:7 (“a lamb-skin”).

Intriguingly, this same syntactical pattern also holds true in the KJV, in which the only passages using the indefinite article a with skin are unambiguous references to clothing (see Leviticus 13:48, 51; Mark 1:6). However, Skousen fails to note that other than those three Book of Mormon passages he cites, the only other instance of the indefinite article a preceding skin in the Book of Mormon appears in 2 Nephi 5:21 in which “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon [the Lamanites].” Skousen’s comparison of Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7 would appear to suggest that when the text of the Book of Mormon describes “a skin of blackness” in 2 Nephi 5:21, it is referring to something made of animal skin.


6. Interestingly, Skousen does not read 2 Nephi 5:21 this way. Rather, he treats the singular phrase a skin in 2 Nephi 5:21 as a textual anomaly when compared with plural instances of skins in the Book of Mormon, which he interprets as referring to human skins: “Generally speaking,” he asserts, “the current Book of Mormon text uses the plural skins to refer to the skin color of peoples.” See Royal Skousen, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 980–81. However, Skousen’s systematization of the plural/singular distinction seems forced in a number of ways. For example, the reference to Abinadi’s skin (singular) being scourged in Mosiah 17:13 is an unmistakable reference to human flesh, as are the references to the injured human skins (plural) in Alma 20:29 and Alma 44:18. Inversely, Skousen overlooks the plural animal skins referred to in 1 Nephi 17:11 and the plural garments of skins mentioned in Alma 49:6, plural references to animal skin that seem
In light of these textual observations, I find myself asking a beguilingly simple question: what might be discovered if we follow the contextual lead of Alma 3:5–6—and the syntactical hint in 2 Nephi 5:21—and assume that the other four references to various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon narrative also refer to certain types of clothing made of animal skin and not to flesh pigmentation at all? It turns out we can discover quite a bit. In this article, I will argue that if the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon can be understood coherently as certain types of clothing, then two other interpretive observations follow. First, the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon can be interpreted as a type of garment associated with the Nephite temple. Second, the mark of the Lamanite curse would seem to be self-administered, removable, and inherited in the same way that covenantal vestments in the KJV are self-administered, removable, and inherited.

Traditional interpretations

Before I develop my alternate interpretation further in the subsequent sections of this article, I want to first acknowledge the ways that my conclusions fly in the face of over a century and a half of traditional interpretations.

at odds with the singular references in Enos 1:20; Alma 3:5; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7. And even among the ambiguous passages that refer to skins of various colors, two are singular references (2 Nephi 5:21; 3 Nephi 2:15), while four are plural (Jacob 3: 5, 8, 9; Alma 3:6). The single/plural distinction in these passages simply does not affect the basic meaning of the skins in these passages. Instead, it is ultimately the aggregate of textual evidences that determines what sort of skin or skins is being described—whether it is human flesh, animal hide, or clothing.

The longest-held and most widely circulated interpretive tradition follows the lead of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints who understood colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon to refer to human flesh pigmentation. This strand of interpretation holds that, in some circumstances, God causes a darker flesh pigmentation to come upon certain iniquitous peoples as a sign of a curse. Some commentators have made concerted efforts to mitigate these traditional interpretations of races and divine curses with less ethically troubling theological perspectives. More recently, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution has distanced itself from all such interpretations and now officially “disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin [that is, darker flesh pigmentation] is a sign of divine disfavor or curse.”

But more importantly than any ethical motivation, I find a traditional racial interpretation unsatisfying for a simple textual reason: nothing in the text of the Book of Mormon itself positively or unambiguously indicates that the various-colored or cursed skins are definitely human flesh. Instead, a racial interpretation apparently relies


10. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Race and the Priesthood,” http://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood (accessed December 8, 2013). In its disavowal of earlier theories, the LDS Church’s “Race and the Priesthood” essay does not cite any of the six ambiguous passages in the Book of Mormon that mention various-colored or cursed skins.

11. It should be noted how frequently skins refers to animal skins in the Book of Mormon and the KJV. In addition to already-cited Book of Mormon passages referring
on the textual ambiguity that it is possible for the term *skins* to refer to human flesh (as opposed to clothing or animal hide). At most, some surrounding passages indicate that a curse can be generationally perpetuated through mingling or mixing seed (see, for example, 2 Nephi 5:23; Alma 3:9, 14–15). But to read descriptions of transgenerational curses and then conclude that the associated skins are descriptions of human flesh is to rely on the inference that transgenerational curses can be interpreted racially (as opposed to culturally or ideologically).

Such inference was perhaps ostensibly sensible and self-explanatory to the Book of Mormon’s initial Euro-American, nineteenth-century audience. In a recent article in the journal *American Literature*, Jared Hickman acknowledges the pervasiveness of racial inferences among early Book of Mormon audiences. According to Hickman, although Joseph Smith “never referred to the Nephite-Lamanite division in explicitly racial terms, it is clear that most early readers apprehended ‘Lamanite’ as an ethnoracial category that corresponded to contemporary nonwhite, specifically Amerindian, peoples.”

Hickman, for his part, proceeds with the same fundamental racial inference and (as an extension of that inference) builds a compelling analysis of the Book of Mormon as an “Amerindian Apocalypse [that] not only undoes the white supremacist apocalypse of many Euro-American biblicists; it opens onto a global apocalypse whose standard of judgment is truly ecumenical.” Hickman’s reading is grand and sweeping in its complexity and is arguably the most sophisticated treatise to date on the supposed racial aspects of

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12. Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86/3 (September 2014): 455–56. Hickman specifically cites an 1830 example of this racial inference by German Reformed pastor Diedrich Willers and an 1887 example by David Whitmer, who had an insider’s perspective during the early days of the Latter-day Saint movement.

the Book of Mormon. But in terms of interpretive traditions, Hickman’s reading (by his own admission) is also the most recent development in a long line of racial interpretations that rests on the Euro-American inferences articulated by the Book of Mormon’s first audiences.

The dilemma is that a long-held and widely circulated inference is still only an inference—not a definitive observation. While most any textual interpretation (including my own) incorporates inferences, some interpretive inferences have more textual support than others. A striking aspect of racial interpretations of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon is the absence of any definitive internal textual support. I am not suggesting that the immediate context for every ambiguous passage contradicts traditional racial interpretations. But without more exploration into the contextual evidence, traditional racial interpretations seem to proceed from the subtle but significant assumption that the various-colored skins refer to human flesh.

Traditional racial interpretations thus face a textual burden that is at least threefold. First, should we assume that the skin referenced in Alma 3:5 be interpreted differently from the skins referenced in the very next sentence in Alma 3:6? Second, should we assume that the use of the indefinite article *a* with *skin* in 2 Nephi 5:21 be interpreted differently from all other similar uses in the Book of Mormon and KJV, including Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; 3 Nephi 4:7; Leviticus 13:48, 51; and Mark 1:6? And third, should we assume that the other four ambiguous references refer to flesh pigmentation without examining their contextual implications beyond the assumptions of nineteenth-century readers of the Book of Mormon? In the end, although a wealth of secondary literature and scholarship spanning from 1830 to 2015 assumes a racial interpretation of the Book of Mormon’s talk of skins, I see nothing in the text itself that privileges a racial interpretation.

Other more recent interpretations have suggested that color differentiation in the Book of Mormon is best understood metaphorically. Such interpretations suggest that white represents a righteous person while black represents a wicked person, perhaps in the same symbolic sense that we might describe an envious person as green, a sad person
as blue, or an embarrassed person as red. However, these newer metaphorical interpretations also face some basic textual difficulties.

A metaphorical interpretation of color in the Book of Mormon may stem from ancient Near Eastern cultural associations. Some have argued that since the story of the first-generation Nephites asserts ancient Near Eastern origins, then it follows that the Nephites could have carried with them the tradition of metaphorically labeling their enemies as black and their righteous people as white.14

Other editorial changes to the Book of Mormon would seem to support metaphorical interpretations. For example, consider the editorial change in 2 Nephi 30:6 from “white and delightsome” to “pure and delightsome” and the addition of a footnoted cross-reference from “skin of blackness” in 2 Nephi 5:21 to “scales of darkness” in 2 Nephi 30:6.15 Some of these changes go back to Joseph Smith.16 Taken together, they seem to imply that references to various-colored peoples in the Book of Mormon refer to varying levels of spiritually symbolic darkness (wickedness) or lightness (righteousness) rather than to flesh pigmentation.

There are certainly several internal textual supports for these sorts of metaphorical interpretations. Consider the first-generation Lamanites in 2 Nephi 5:21 who are described as “white” and “fair” before they receive “a skin of blackness.” Traditional racial interpretations have understood the terms white and fair in this verse as referring to human


flesh pigmentation. However, the only other three passages in the Book of Mormon that describe people as *white* and *fair* lend themselves to understanding *white* and *fair* in a metaphoric or spiritually symbolic sense (see 1 Nephi 11:13; 13:15; Mormon 9:6). In 1 Nephi 11, for example, Mary is described as “fair and white” as she holds an infant Jesus while being directly compared to the white tree from Lehi’s dream, which represents “the love of God” (see 1 Nephi 11:8–13, 22). Also, a specific group of latter-day gentiles are described as “white” and “fair” after being clearly described as having the “Spirit of the Lord” upon them (see 1 Nephi 13:15). Perhaps the most clearly metaphoric use of *fair* and *white* comes in a pronouncement in Mormon 9:6 that declares that those who “cry mightily unto the Father in the name of Jesus . . . may be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, at that great and last day.” According to the pattern suggested by this passage, people become “spotless, pure, fair, and white” by being “cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.” This passage particularly lends itself to a metaphoric interpretation because describing something being made “white” through “blood” is clearly a symbolic description. The list of near-synonyms “spotless, pure, fair, and white” thus emerges as a string of spiritually symbolic descriptions.  

More intriguingly, the combination of the terms *spotless*, *pure*, and *white* in Mormon 9:6 brings this metaphoric interpretation back to other Book of Mormon passages involving garments. Specifically in Alma 5:24, holy prophets from the past are described as wearing “garments [that] are cleansed and are spotless, pure and white.” Similarly, in Alma 13:12, another group of righteous people is described as “being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being pure and spotless.” From these observations, we face what looks like a simple poetic rephrasing: skins that are white are analogous (if not equivalent) to garments that are white, pure, and spotless. Thus, when

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17. In the 1828 edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* the entry for the word *fair* begins with “1. clear, free from spots.” By connecting “fair” with “free from spots,” this Webster’s definition from 1828 indicates how these specific words may have been used at the time Joseph Smith was preparing the Book of Mormon for publication.
read alongside other passages using similar terms of color, the Lamanite color shifts in 2 Nephi 5:21 and later in 3 Nephi 2:15–16 take on a more clearly metaphoric edge. From such a metaphoric stance, we might reasonably read 2 Nephi 5:21 this way: As the Lamanites had previously been close to the love of God (or had had the Spirit of the Lord upon them, or had previously been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb), “that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a [garment] of blackness to come upon them.”

Furthermore, metaphoric color shifts (and not literal flesh pigmentation changes) help explain why visual distinctions between Nephites and Lamanites are sometimes awkwardly absent in the Book of Mormon narrative. For example, as Brant Gardner points out, the events in Alma 55:4–15 do not necessarily rely on flesh coloring at all and even suggest that Nephites and Lamanites look a lot alike. In this passage, a descendant of Laman—who is also, coincidentally, named Laman—leads a squad of Nephite soldiers pretending to be escaped Lamanite combatants in order to infiltrate past some Lamanite guards. If flesh pigmentation were the cultural determiner in this narrative, then the mission should fail right when the Lamanite guards see Laman’s Nephite companions—who, traditional racial interpretations suggest, supposedly have paler flesh pigmentation than the Lamanites. Instead, the ruse succeeds based on how Laman speaks to the Lamanite guards (Alma 55:9)—not on how Laman looks. Based on this and other readings, Gardner therefore suggests that color differences between Nephite and Lamanite are best understood as metaphorical and not literal descriptions of flesh coloring.18

However, as compelling as these metaphorical interpretations are, they also tend to face some basic textual difficulties. The foremost advocates of these metaphoric interpretations (as referenced in footnotes 14, 15, and 18) still seem to accept that the skins of various colors in the Book of Mormon ostensibly refer to human flesh but that references to such skins are yet still symbolic in some way. But this sort of assumption

suggests further unaddressed questions. If the color differentiation of skins refers to human flesh coloring (even symbolically), why would the Nephites be culturally concerned with human flesh coloring (even symbolically)? And if skin is symbolic (as, for example, “scales of darkness” is symbolic), why would the Nephites be culturally concerned with skin as a symbol?

In brief, there appear to be significant textual difficulties for both racial and metaphoric interpretations. On one hand, the assertion that the text of the Book of Mormon describes a literal change in flesh pigmentation lacks any explicit internal textual support but relies instead on a long-standing, nontextual traditional assumption that the various-colored or cursed skins definitively refer to flesh pigmentation. On the other hand, the assertion that the text of the Book of Mormon uses color to describe metaphorical spiritual states overlooks other specific textual references to skins, thus leaving unaddressed what those skins might be.

In an effort to move beyond these textual quandaries, my interpretation in this article proceeds from the basic premise that in the question of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon narrative, the best arbiters of meaning are the Book of Mormon itself and its closest literary analog, the KJV. While scholarly due diligence is always necessary when grappling with any textual dilemma, sometimes an experimental reboot as an interpretive exercise may prove fruitful. In this effort, I am reminded of the critical methodology frequently employed by the philosopher John Searle: “Try to forget about the . . . history of a problem and remind yourself of what you know for a fact. Any . . . theory has to be consistent with the facts. Of course, something we think is a fact may turn out not to be, but we have to start with our best information.”

Thus in this article, I’m taking an experimental step back from the varied and complex interpretive history surrounding the terminology of skins in the Book of Mormon. Instead, I’m proceeding with my best information, which can be summarized in four basic textual observations.

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First, a terminology of skins is pivotal in six ambiguous passages in the Book of Mormon dealing with color and curses. Second, most of those six ambiguous passages lack immediate or otherwise definitive contextual clues as to the exact nature of such skins. Third, the word skin(s) is used in a straightforward manner to refer to clothing in several Book of Mormon passages—including one of the six ambiguous passages (Alma 3:5–6). And fourth, the initial ambiguous passage (2 Nephi 5:21) uses a syntactical maneuver (“a skin”) that is only replicated in the Book of Mormon and KJV when used in a straightforward manner to refer to clothing (Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; 3 Nephi 4:7; Leviticus 13:48, 51; Mark 1:6). These textual observations compose my investigative springboard—the starting point of the textual exegesis that forms the basis of this article. In what follows I will closely examine how the Book of Mormon and KJV lend themselves to interpreting skins in ways that go beyond pigmentation and metaphor.

Skins and the Nephite temple

To proceed in earnest with such an exegesis, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Nephite temple in everything that follows. As will become clearer in the course of this article, textual evidences suggest that the Nephite temple served not only as a physical metaphor for “the presence of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:17–20), but also as the ideological backdrop to the deep cultural and religious conflicts between the Nephites and their various enemies. Indeed, the Nephite temple emerges as the central theme in the question of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon.

Such realizations begin with a basic textual observation: four of the six ambiguous passages related to skin color or skin curses have the Nephite temple as their context. For instance, 2 Nephi 5:21–25 is bookended by the building of the first Nephite temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16) and the consecration of Jacob and Joseph as priests (see 2 Nephi 5:26). The next three ambiguous passages appear in Jacob 3:5, 8, 9 within the context of a discourse delivered in the first Nephite temple. A fifth passage, Alma
3:5–6—while not explicitly referring to the temple—notes that certain skins were darkened because of the conflict that took place at the time of the first Nephite temple as described in 2 Nephi 5:16–26. This overarching temple context suggests that garment-skins may somehow have been associated with the Nephite temple and (more specifically) that the Nephites may have used skins as an item of temple clothing.

According to the text, the Nephite temple was built—and, likely, presumably operated—after the manner of the ancient Israelite temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16). Among the major components of Israelite temple worship were special clothing or garments.\textsuperscript{20} Most significantly, a recurrent item of ancient Israelite temple garments described in the KJV is an embroidered coat, or \textit{kthnth} in Hebrew. This same word is used to describe Adam’s and Eve’s coats, made of skins, from the Eden narrative. The literary parallel between these two uses of coat (or coats) is significant. In Genesis, God uses coats of skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 3:21), and in Exodus, God directs Moses to use a coat (among other garments) to ceremonially cover the nakedness of Aaron and his sons after they are washed at the tabernacle (see Exodus 40:12–15). Thus in these two Mosaic books, Adam’s and Eve’s original coats of skins are rhetorically converted via synecdoche into, simply, coats when associated with the temple.

Synecdoche, in the sense just mentioned, is an ancient rhetorical trope closely associated with metaphor. Definitions of synecdoche vary somewhat from theorist to theorist, but Kenneth Burke’s definition is most useful here, according to which synecdoche is a functional rhetorical device for describing “part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made, cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc.”\textsuperscript{21} Burke further suggests that “all such conversions [via synecdoche] imply an integral relationship, a relationship of convertibility, between the two

\textsuperscript{20} Important passages on temple clothing can be found in Exodus 28, 29, and 39, and Leviticus 6, 8, and 16.

We see uses of synecdoche all around us, particularly in terms of materials and the objects made of those materials—for example, “glasses” can refer to spectacles, “irons” to handcuffs or shackles, “silver” to fancy cutlery, or “pigskin” to an American football. In a similar way, the name of the Israelite temple coat functions as a synecdoche that harks back to Adam’s and Eve’s coats of skins. In a parallel manner, the garment-skins of the Nephite temple could also be read as referring to Adam’s and Eve’s coats of skins in some sort of synecdoche relationship.

The plausibility of this literary association between the Israelite temple coat and the Nephite temple skin is further reinforced by the use of coat/kthn th in Genesis 37 to describe the token of covenantal inheritance that Jacob gives to his favored son Joseph—namely, the coat of many colors. Joseph’s coat and Adam’s and Eve’s coats are the only two uses of the English word coat or the Hebrew word kthn th in the KJV before the Israelite temple coat/kthn th is described in Exodus 28. Consequently, the Israelite temple coat likely recalls both Joseph’s coat as well as Adam’s and Eve’s coats, thus serving as an emblem of inherited covenants. Readers of the Book of Mormon know that the story of Joseph’s coat and its relationship to inherited covenants is one with which the Nephites strongly identify themselves—evidenced especially in Captain Moroni’s specific reference to Joseph’s coat when Moroni marshals Nephites to defend the title of liberty (see Alma 46:23–24). The fact that Moroni’s title of liberty is made of his own coat (see Alma 46:12–13, 23–24) or garment (see Alma 46:19) is perhaps the primary

23. Hugh Nibley makes a similar observation in his lecture series transcribed in Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 3 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 60–63. Nibley references the eleventh-century Islamic scholar Tha’labi in support of the claim that the coat that Israel gives Joseph is the exact same coat that the Lord gave Adam in the Garden of Eden. Nibley concludes that this coat was the primary emblem of Israel’s covenants from the beginning through the tabernacle and First Temple eras. Nibley further concludes that Captain Moroni is drawing on the same Hebrew tradition Tha’labi draws on when speaking about Joseph’s coat in Alma 46. However, Brian Hauglid has since revealed some serious translation errors in Nibley’s treatment of Tha’labi, which considerably weaken Nibley’s Alma 46 argument. See Brian Hauglid, “Garment of Joseph: An Update,” FARMS Occasional Papers 4 (2003): 25–29.
reason the title of liberty is so striking to the faithful Nephites who rally to it. Moroni’s title of liberty illustrates Marshall McLuhan’s observation that “the medium is the message.” Moroni’s coat or garment—as the medium that conveys the message—may be more important to the nature and power of the message than anything written on the coat or garment. Crucially, just as Joseph’s coat represents Israel’s covenantal inheritance, the Nephites who rally to defend the title of liberty identify their garments as representing their covenants—claiming that to abandon and desecrate their garments is symbolically and rhetorically equivalent to abandoning and desecrating their covenants (see Alma 46:22).

The Nephites’ strong affinity to the story of Joseph and his coat likely arises because Lehi is a descendant of Joseph (see 1 Nephi 5:14; 2 Nephi 3:4). Also, notable parallels with the biblical story of Jacob and Joseph are written into the Nephite story of origin: Jacob and Lehi both live in a promised land in which their families are strangers (see Genesis 37:1; 1 Nephi 18:23); both set apart a younger son as favored (see Genesis 37:3; 1 Nephi 2:22); the younger, favored son in both narratives has visions concerning the future of his family (see Genesis 37:5–7, 9; 1 Nephi 12); the older sons in both narratives resent having a younger brother rule over them (see Genesis 37:4, 8; 1 Nephi 16:37–38); and the older brothers in both narratives plot the destruction of the favored son (see Genesis 37:18–20; 2 Nephi 5:3–4). These literary parallels are so notable and the Nephites’ affinity to Joseph’s coat of many colors so profound that the apparent lack in the parallel Nephite story of any comparable article of clothing is puzzling. Yet if the skins of various colors in the Book of Mormon refer to a type of garment, we then have a parallel garment among Lehi’s sons, inextricably connected to matters of inheritance, ruling, and covenants.

This feature of the Nephite story emerges specifically in 2 Nephi 5. At the beginning of that chapter, Nephi’s eldest brothers Laman and Lemuel complain about him: “Our younger brother thinks to rule over

us, . . . [but] we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people” (2 Nephi 5:3).

The issue here is inheritance: Who will rule in Lehi’s branch of the house of Israel? God had earlier appointed Nephi to be the “ruler” of the family (1 Nephi 2:22), something Laman and Lemuel resent from the start. When the situation becomes unmanageable, Nephi takes his followers and settles in a different land (see 2 Nephi 5:5–7). Only a few verses later, Nephi and his people build their first temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16–17). The presence of that temple is vital to the next several verses. Only after it is built is Nephi anointed king (see 2 Nephi 5:18). The temple also seems to legitimate Nephi’s status as a ruler and teacher (see 2 Nephi 5:19). And perhaps because the Lamanites do not have access to the Nephite temple, they are “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:20). Thus, the lack of the Nephite temple appears to constitute the essence of the “cursing” that comes upon the Lamanites, for it is in this context that Nephi then states that “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon” the Lamanites, along with various curses (see 2 Nephi 5:21–25).

Lest any reader think this skin and curse have nothing to do with vestments or the temple, Nephi immediately juxtaposes the curse bestowed upon his wicked brothers with the blessings conferred on his righteous brothers: “I, Nephi, did consecrate Jacob and Joseph, that they should be priests” (2 Nephi 5:26). As God instructs Moses in Leviticus, consecrating priests and clothing them in “holy garments” was necessary to have them perform temple sacrifices for ritual atonement (Leviticus 16:32–33). As a people who follow the law of Moses, it would be odd for the Nephites to consecrate priests without similar holy garments. In parallel, the text of 2 Nephi 5 appears to report on the cursed skins (or garments) of his older, rebellious brothers and the holy garments (or coats of skins) bestowed upon his younger, obedient brothers. If references to the black Lamanite skin refer to a type of garment, it is evidently a sort of garment with powerful rhetorical signals for the Nephites. That is to say, when Nephites see Lamanites wearing particular non-Nephite garment-skins, the Nephites can know
that such Lamanites are cursed, that they are cut off from the temple ("the presence of the Lord"), that they are not rightful priests, and that they are not rightful kings who can rule and reign in Lehi’s branch of the house of Israel.

The association between garment-skins and the temple is subsequently solidified in the temple address delivered by Jacob, one of the consecrated temple priests mentioned above. He opens his address by referring to his clothing: “I, Jacob, according to the responsibility which I am under to God, to magnify mine office with soberness, and that I might rid my garments of your sins, I come up into the temple this day that I might declare unto you the word of God” (Jacob 2:2). This focus early in Jacob’s discourse, associating its temple setting with ritual clothing, suggests that a reference later in the discourse to skins provides context for it to be read in a similar fashion. Still speaking in the temple, Jacob admonishes his Nephite audience:

> Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you. . . . O my brethren, I fear that unless ye shall repent of your sins that their skins will be whiter than yours, when ye shall be brought with them before the throne of God. Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins. (Jacob 3:5, 8, 9)

If readers can assume continuity in rhetorical strategy across Jacob’s address, the skins to which Jacob refers might well be a kind of garment. At any rate, Jacob’s reference to garments being rid of sin, as perhaps his reference later in the same discourse to skins being white, follows a consistent symbolic theme of Nephite religious rhetoric in which certain clothing is made spiritually clean or is made metaphorically white.²⁵

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Beyond such rhetorical themes, this reading of Jacob’s reference to skins suggests that the Lamanites may be understood as having had garments and ceremonial practices similar in form to certain Nephite garments and ceremonial practices. The text indicates that Nephites and Lamanites shared ritual practices—even ritual practices associated with the temple. Given the Nephite temple as a site for consecrating Nephite kings (see Mosiah 1–6, especially Mosiah 1:10; 2:30; and 6:3), some sharing of ceremonial practices would seem to be indicated by a note later in the Book of Mormon when a Lamanite king “put forth his hand . . . as a token of peace, which custom they had taken from the Nephites” (Alma 47:23). It seems reasonable to suggest that, in a similar manner, the Lamanites imitated or adapted Nephite ceremonial practices and authoritative garments associated with the temple in an effort to legitimize their contested claims to kingship.26

From this perspective, it may also be significant that Laman and Lemuel assert Israelite heritage more strongly than Nephi. For instance, Laman and Lemuel proudly proclaim that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were actually “a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses” (1 Nephi 17:22). Regardless of future deviations from the law of Moses, Laman and Lemuel emphasize in the beginning that they want to keep the law of Moses—including, presumably, temple practices that confer kingship. In this sense, the various-colored Lamanite skins can be understood as Laman’s and Lemuel’s authoritative clothing

that specifically supports their claim that they ought to rule over the Nephites.

This interpretation of garment-skins in the earlier parts of the Book of Mormon finds further confirmation in later Nephite stories. If Laman and Lemuel wore authoritative garment-skins, it would easily follow that they passed down authoritative garment-skins to succeeding generations—heirs who also believed that they had the right to rule over the Nephites. Indeed, every single reference in the Book of Mormon that unambiguously describes animal skin as clothing also refers to people who set themselves as would-be conquerors over the Nephites: (1) Enos describes the girdle of skin as common clothing among his Lamanite cousins who “were continually seeking to destroy” the Nephites (Enos 1:20); (2) the Lamanite warriors who attack Zeniff’s Nephite colony in part because they claim that the Nephites have unjustly “taken the ruling of the people out of their hands” are “girded with a leathern girdle about their loins” (Mosiah 10:15, 8); (3) Lamanites combining with an army of Nephite dissidents wear a girdle of skin in their efforts to overthrow the Nephite government (see Alma 3:5); (4) Zerahemnah, whose goal is to “gain power over the Nephites by bringing them into bondage,” leads an army of Lamanites, Zoramites, and Amalekites also wearing a girdle of skin (Alma 43:8; see v. 20); (5) Lamanites and Amalickiahites clothe themselves in “garments of skins” when attempting to “overpower and subject their brethren to the yoke of bondage” (Alma 49:6–7); and (6) dissenter Giddianhi’s Gadianton robbers similarly “had a lamb-skin about their loins” as they try to take over the Nephites’ cities, lands, and possessions (3 Nephi 4:7; see 3 Nephi 3:6).

In some of the examples just cited, a garment-skin is clearly worn with other defensive armor as a kind of personal shielding or protection (see Alma 3:5; 49:6; 3 Nephi 4:7). The ceremonial nature of these garment-skins is nevertheless driven home in four of the passages above in which these garment-skins are used specifically to cover nakedness, in another allusion to the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve (see, for example, Mosiah 10:8; Alma 3:5; 43:20; 49:6). From all these examples, it would seem that Lamanites, Zoramites, Amalekites, Amalickiahites,
and Gadianton robbers all understood certain articles of their clothing to be connected to their claim that they should rightfully rule over the Nephites. From the Nephite perspective as represented in Jacob’s sermon and thereafter, however, those same articles of clothing seem to serve as a clear mark of a curse that separates corrupted traditions from the righteous practices of a covenant people.

Giddianhi’s army of Gadianton robbers is a particularly stark example of corrupted tradition. During the chaotic conflicts just prior to Jesus’s visit to the Nephites, the Gadianton robbers wear “a lamb-skin about their loins, and they were dyed in blood” (3 Nephi 4:7). There is, of course, narrative precedent in the KJV for this sort of drastic battlefield attire. In an Israelite conflict over which side of the family would rule Israel, King David’s nephew Joab “put the blood of war upon his girdle that was about his loins” and eventually seeks refuge at the altar in the tabernacle before being killed by one of King Solomon’s men (1 Kings 2:5; see vv. 28–34). In both Joab’s bloodstained girdle and the Gadiantons’ bloodstained garment-skin, it is not difficult to see a direct mimicry of an Israelite temple ordinance in which Moses sets apart Aaron and his sons as priests and leaders in Israel. Moses sacrifices the “ram of consecration” and then takes “the blood which was upon the altar, and sprinkled it upon Aaron, and upon his garments, and upon his sons, and upon his sons’ garments with him; and sanctified Aaron, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons’ garments with him” (Leviticus 8:30). In ancient Israel, when the temple priest emerged from the temple after this ordinance, his bloodstained ceremonial clothing conveyed even to distant viewers outside the temple that ritual atonement had been performed. Thus when the Gadianton robbers present themselves to the Nephites in battle array, given the latter’s adherence to the law of Moses, it would indeed have been “great and terrible” for the Nephites to see them wearing garment-skins “dyed in blood” (3 Nephi 4:7).

All these details suggest a consistent tradition running through the Book of Mormon, according to which garment-skins were associated with the temple, as well as with the biblical narratives of Adam and Eve, of Jacob and Joseph, of Moses and Aaron, and of David and Solomon.
This in turn suggests the real textual possibility that references to skins changing color in the Book of Mormon mean something rather different from what is traditionally assumed. In order to make this possibility still more plausible, however, it is necessary to turn from temple context to some specific narratives that help illustrate how the mark or the curse associated with skins operates in the Book of Mormon.

The cursing of skins

Especially important to understanding the Book of Mormon’s conception of skins being cursed or marked is the account of the Amlicites in Alma 3. This narrative clearly illustrates how a mark of the Lord’s curse can be self-administered and also indicates how such a curse could have nothing to do with race or flesh pigmentation. As early as the 1950s, in fact, Hugh Nibley argued that 2 Nephi 5:21 should be interpreted in light of the Amlicite story, such that the reference to God’s causing “a skin of blackness to come upon” the Lamanites actually “describes the result, not the method, which is described [in Alma 3].” 27 This point deserves extended attention.

As mentioned earlier, Alma 3 contains the Book of Mormon’s most thorough explanation of the Lamanites’ mark, curse, and skins. It begins by describing the aftermath of a horrific (but successful) battle between the Nephites and a combined army of Lamanites and Amlicites. The text goes on to describe how the Amlicites (Nephite insurrectionists) distinguish themselves from the Nephites, their former kinsfolk: “the Amlicites were distinguished from the Nephites, for they had marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4). Apparently, just as the Lamanites mark themselves, so do their new Amlicite allies mark themselves. The next verse describes other ways the Lamanites mark themselves—including, crucially, a description of their distinctive girdle-skins (see Alma 3:5).

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In Nibley’s interpretation of this situation, the Amlicites “set the mark upon themselves,” thus following a process “so natural and human” that “it suggested nothing miraculous to the ordinary observer,” even though “it was none the less God who was marking them.” Key to Nibley’s interpretation is the text’s statement that “the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God when they began to mark themselves in their foreheads; nevertheless they had come out in open rebellion against God; therefore it was expedient that the curse should fall upon them” (Alma 3:18). Nibley concludes, “God places his mark on people as a curse, yet it is an artificial mark which they actually place upon themselves, . . . which makes the difference between Nephite and Lamanite a cultural, not a racial, one.”

Nibley further relies on the text of Alma 3, according to which,

> whosoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites was called under that head, and . . . whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, who believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites. (Alma 3:10–11)

The difference between the Nephites and Lamanites described in this passage is all the more clearly rhetorical and ideological—not racial. Grant Hardy observes in connection with this passage that “belief in the correct traditions of the Nephites seems to have been the most important criteria in deciding who was or who was not a Nephite (apparently this acceptance of tradition was more significant than actual lineage).”

Neither Hardy nor Nibley connects their observations to the matter of Lamanite skins. Nibley, for instance, places a limit on his conclusions by stating simply that the “cultural picture may not be the whole story of

the dark skin of the Lamanites.”31 But if the Lamanites’ cursed skins are a type of garment with rhetorical and ideological associations, then the Lamanites can put on and take off the mark of their curse just as easily as the Amlicites can put on and take off theirs. The Lamanite curse thus seems to fit well into a larger theological scheme in the Book of Mormon, according to which “it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished” (Mormon 4:5). God is the one who marks and curses the wicked, but he uses the wicked as the instrument of their own marking and cursing.

The interpretation I offer here also speaks to the curious descriptions in the Book of Mormon of the curse and mark being removed. Traditionally, the account of the converted Lamanites in 3 Nephi 2:15 (whose “skin became white like unto the Nephites”) has been read in racial terms. However, if the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon narrative indeed refer to a certain type of garment, we discover a different possible meaning of the text. Right around the same time that Giddianhi’s army of Gadianton robbers was harassing the Nephites, “all the Lamanites who had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren, the Nephites,” and they embraced the principles that Captain Moroni had earlier written on his coat or garment, namely, “to maintain their rights, and the privileges of their church and of their worship, and their freedom and their liberty” (3 Nephi 2:12). Consequently, the converted Lamanites are numbered among the covenant people (see 3 Nephi 2:14). It is at this point that the converted Lamanites’ “curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites; And their young men and their daughters became exceedingly fair, and they were numbered among the Nephites, and were called Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:15–16). If the lack of the Nephite temple lies at the heart of the Lamanites’ curse (see 2 Nephi 5:16–21), and if separation from the Lord’s covenant people thus concerns authority-granting clothing (skins or garments or coats), then when Lamanites unite themselves with the covenant people and gain access to the Nephite temple, it is presumably their clothing that is symbolically made white.32

32. It might be noted that no change concerning skins is explicitly mentioned in connection with the Lamanites converted by Ammon and the other sons of Mosiah in
Up to this point, nothing here yet fully explains how such curses can be passed down generationally. In other words, how can a curse (due to separation from the temple) and its related mark (apparently the use of an apostate garment) come upon people when they mix or mingle their seed with someone who is cursed (see 2 Nephi 5:23; Alma 3:9)? Yet when the Lamanite converts’ curse is lifted in 3 Nephi 2:15, they gain access to Nephite temple rites, and their sons and daughters become “exceedingly fair,” with the consequence that those “fair” children are “numbered among”—that is, presumably, they marry—the children of the Nephites (3 Nephi 2:16). There seems to be a suggestion here that mingling in marriage among children has something to do with whether parents share temple rites. Actually, from the very first generation of Lehi’s children, the curse laid on the Lamanites focuses on perspective and marriage—that is, on how covenant people perceive those outside the covenant in terms of possible marriage relations. According to Nephi, God symbolically darkens the Lamanites’ garment-skins specifically so that the Lamanites “might not be enticing” to the Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21–23). Presumably, God does this because those who do not marry in the covenant will bear children outside the covenant.

Additionally, the KJV contains further narrative precedent for this sort of curse in the postexilic concern over marriage with non-Israelites. In Nehemiah, Israel enters into a covenant with God with the following characteristics: (1) Israelites separate themselves from all other peoples in the course of making a covenant into which they are “sealed” (see Nehemiah 9:2, 28, 38; 10:1); (2) Israelites covenant to obey the law of the Lord and agree to face an associated “curse” should they prove disobedient (see Nehemiah 10:29); and finally, (3) Israelites also covenant to keep their children in the same covenant by preventing them from...
marrying outside the covenant (see Nehemiah 10:30). Thus, like the Nephites, postexilic Israel makes significant covenants in connection with temple building, agreeing to a “curse” if they prove unfaithful, and working to protect their children from the curse by preventing them from marrying outside the covenant. For postexilic Israel, this process explains a loosely “genetic” way that curses are passed down from generation to generation—that is, through marrying outside of, or apostatizing from, the covenant. Such apostasy has nothing to do with flesh pigmentation or with genetics in the biological sense; instead, it has everything to do with perpetuating the covenant status.

In providing a narrative precedent, Hebrew biblical texts show how certain Israelite practices and covenants are passed from one generation to another through authoritative garments—*and* participation in temple ordinances. In connection with the Israelite temple, blessings are passed down from generation to generation in the form of sacred clothing. After detailing the washing, anointing, and clothing of Aaron and his sons, the account in Exodus asserts, “And the holy garments of Aaron shall be his sons’ after him, to be anointed therein, and to be consecrated in them. And that son that is priest in his stead shall put them on” (Exodus 29:29–30; see 40:12–15). When Aaron later died, Moses made sure that exact thing happened: “Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them upon [Aaron’s son] Eleazar,” who then became the high priest in Aaron’s stead (Numbers 20:28).

Other biblical narratives appear to follow this same pattern. The prophet Elijah is described as wearing “a girdle of leather about his loins” as his prophetic mantle (2 Kings 1:8). In an analysis of the Hebrew text, David Stec suggests that Elijah’s “hairy mantle” of animal skin may be the same authoritative garment that Elijah passed to his pupil Elisha as a mark that Elisha was to become the prophet in Elijah’s stead (see 1 Kings 19:13, 19; 2 Kings 2:8, 13–14). Furthermore, several scholars have long held that John the Baptist specifically imitates Elijah by also

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wearing “a girdle of a skin about his loins” (Mark 1:6; see Matthew 3:4). It is reasonable to infer from biblical narratives that John the Baptist, as the son of the temple priest Zacharias, received his Elijah-like mantle of animal skin the same way Elisha did—as a bestowed mark of authority from one generation to the next. Even though Aaron’s garments (and perhaps Elijah’s animal skin mantle and John the Baptist’s leather girdle) are inherited, transgenerational marks of authority, such inheritance is completely tied to custom and ideology and not to racial features at all.

Ultimately, the text of the Book of Mormon lends itself in many ways to the interpretation that the skins of various colors have nothing to do with flesh pigmentation but are rather ritual garments of some sort that can accommodate a whole range of textual data. Not only are there textual motivations for thinking that marks associated with curses were self-applied and removable in a nonbiological sense, it is also possible to explain strictly in terms of comparable biblical narratives how such marks and curses might have been passed from generation to generation in the form of ritual garments or authoritative clothing made of animal skin.

Conclusion

The overarching significance of garments in the Book of Mormon is evidenced in the Nephites’ use of garment-skins as focal totems in their decisions about who can rule (see 2 Nephi 5:19–21), in their divisions of ethnicity (see 2 Nephi 5:21–24; Alma 3:5–11), in their temple discourses

(see Jacob 3:3–9), in their marriage customs (see 3 Nephi 2:12–16), and in their public squares (see Alma 46:11–36; 51:20; 62:4). This significance is also markedly evidenced among the Nephites’ various enemies who wear garment-skins while contesting Nephite sovereignty (see Enos 1:20; Mosiah 10:8; Alma 3:5; 43:20; 49:6; 3 Nephi 4:7).

Consequently, passages in the Book of Mormon that have traditionally appeared to lend themselves to racial interpretations need not be read that way. If the textual observations I have laid out in this article are sound, it may in fact be preferable to find in such passages rather different possibilities. In the end, I find in the Book of Mormon a remarkable silence regarding flesh pigmentation. Of course, in spite of all the direct and indirect textual evidences to the contrary, the belief that flesh pigmentation is still a major part of the Book of Mormon narrative may be difficult to overcome. But if we look directly to the text of the Book of Mormon for indications of flesh pigmentation, the only passages we find that overtly refer to skins of different colors are the six passages, ultimately ambiguous, that I believe can be responsibly (and richly) read as referring to a type of garment instead. As far as internal textual evidences go, the Lamanites and Nephites could be understood to have had any possible flesh pigmentation, or both groups might have had wide ranges of flesh pigmentation among their populations. The text need not be read as addressing these questions.

35. Arguably, this possibility undergirds a certain strand of LDS thought that seeks to situate the Book of Mormon in a limited geography model in ancient Mesoamerica. Foremost in this tradition is John Sorenson, who points out that early European explorers of the New World evidently recorded encounters with various Mesoamerican inhabitants who ranged in flesh pigmentation from very pale to very dark. Interestingly, Sorenson’s book also identifies ancient Mesoamerican cults that used animal skins as personal symbols of power. See Sorenson, Ancient American Setting, 89–90, 301. It should also be noted that color descriptions in ancient Mesoamerica (as with most other ancient cultures) reflected extensive semiotic schemes that drew on complex social and symbolic associations. For recent studies, see the collection of anthropological articles assembled under “Color in American Prehistory,” RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics 61/62 (Spring/Autumn 2012): 279–366. Nonetheless, as with comparisons to ancient Near Eastern cultural attitudes toward color, such historical observations of ancient Mesoamerica also ultimately originate outside the actual text of the Book of Mormon or KJV.
Nevertheless, I suspect some may worry that my interpretation harbors an attempt to make the Book of Mormon more palatable to sensibilities of our day, to make the Book of Mormon politically correct. Such concerns are understandable. Yet my worry is that traditional interpretations that have appealed to prevailing sensibilities were precisely what led nineteenth-century Euro-American readers to assume that the text of the Book of Mormon was somehow referring to flesh pigmentation. Rather than attempting, like earlier interpretations, to make the Book of Mormon cohere with current sensibilities, I mean here to examine the text itself more closely to suggest a different interpretive model that is more internally coherent than previous models. As with any new contribution to any larger conversation of textual interpretations, I look forward to seeing how those who adhere to previous interpretations might respond to the interpretive model I’ve articulated throughout this article.

More to the point, those who want to claim that the Nephites are white and the Lamanites are black in a racial sense must especially justify their position through careful reanalysis of the relevant texts. Specifically, such critics will have to argue against the possibility or likelihood that the various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon are kinds of garments. Whatever the ultimate conclusions will be about skins in the Book of Mormon, I expect the interpretive model I offer here will bear serious engagement.

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36. For the most current overview of the racial sensibilities of nineteenth-century Euro-American Latter-day Saints, see Reeve, Religion of a Different Color. Pages 52–105 are most helpful in exploring early LDS attitudes toward Amerindian peoples and the supposed racial aspects of the Book of Mormon (see especially 55–57, 77–78, and 81).
Review Essays

Why the Book of Mormon Deserves More Twenty-First-Century Readers: A Question of Complexity

J.B. Haws


Alan Tyree’s Millions Call It Scripture is a short book that will leave readers thinking for a long time.

Readers, almost reflexively, might begin to make some assumptions as to what type of book they hold in their hands when they start into a book on the Book of Mormon that does not use the words angel or plates until well into the second chapter—and Alan Tyree’s Millions Call It Scripture is just such a book. From the opening pages it is apparent that Tyree wants to move conversations about the Book of Mormon away from Joseph Smith’s personal testimony, away from questions about the historicity of the gold plates, and more toward pragmatism. That is, Tyree wants to make the case that if the Book of Mormon functions as scripture in your life, then that is good enough for him. What this book does, perhaps as well as anything, is that it forces readers to ask themselves, “Is that good enough for me?”
Some books lend themselves better than others to interrogation based on clues about intended audience. Again, *Millions Call It Scripture* is such a book. Beyond publication hints (the book is published by Community of Christ Seminary Press) and the author’s biography (he is a retired Community of Christ apostle), the direction that the text takes repeatedly reminds readers (1) that Tyree is speaking to his own church community first; (2) that he is always aware of Latter-day Saints who might be listening in; and (3) that he wants other Christians (and more readers generally) to give the Book of Mormon a chance. That is part of what makes this book such a fascinating read. It offers a glimpse into the soul and psyche of many contemporary Community of Christ members and their wrestling with the Book of Mormon.

Readers with even a general awareness of some of the ways that the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ) has fractured in the past generation over a number of issues—certainly not the least of which is the place of the Book of Mormon in church life—will see that history as the subtext of Tyree’s book.¹ He introduces his book as an attempt “to assist in developing a center ground of understanding for those who accept the Book of Mormon, as to what kind of scriptural values it holds for us and for our witness” (p. viii).

Importantly, the book settles persistent rumors about Community of Christ’s disavowal of the Book of Mormon. Tyree cites repeated official church statements (most recently from 2006) that affirm that “the Community of Christ uses the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants as scripture” (p. 134). In his introduction Tyree himself “personally affirm[s]” “the book as scripture and uphold[s] it as useful to the faith of those who believe, or who are open to belief, that Jesus is Christ, the Son of the living God” (p. viii). But at the same time, Tyree acknowledges that not everyone, even among his active coreligionists,

¹ For a recent book that examines the trajectories and denominational developments (including attitudes toward the Book of Mormon) of different Latter Day Saint movements through the lens of their shared interest in the Kirtland Temple, see David J. Howlett, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of Shared Mormon Sacred Space* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
might—or needs to—feel the same way: “If it is useful to people, they will make that decision for themselves. But let us not make that decision for them, by making it a test of faith and fellowship that they must believe in the book” (p. 136).

Inescapable throughout Millions Call It Scripture is the proverbial tightrope that Tyree must have negotiated as he imagined his church audience. On the one hand, it is clear that Tyree wants the Book of Mormon to be part of the devotional life of his church. Reading between the lines, one detects subtle discontent—and subtlety characterizes the whole book—with the common Community of Christ approach of benign neglect of the Book of Mormon in its (especially overseas) evangelizing work; instead, Tyree recommends against “depriving [others] of the privilege to make their own decision [about the Book of Mormon] by neglecting to share it with them, and thereby depriving them of an important scriptural legacy” (p. 136). “The Book of Mormon as scripture is a resource for teaching the gospel,” he asserts, “and therefore can be useful as a missionary tool” (p. 134). He even offers vignettes where he has personally seen that missionary usefulness in places like Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), Haiti, and Jamaica.

On the other hand, one senses Tyree’s awareness that many of his ecclesiastical colleagues do not share his enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon because of a litany of problems (which Tyree details throughout his book) with Book of Mormon historicity. It is likewise apparent that Tyree himself feels a degree of frustration with Book of Mormon believers who are fixated on evidence of its historical authenticity or reliability; indeed, most of Tyree’s book is really an exercise in arguing against historicity. He begins his book with the Community of Christ motto: “all truth” (p. 1). Near the end of the book, he strongly suggests that those who “cling tenaciously” to arguments about Book of Mormon proofs might be “less than honest with [themselves]” (p. 124). It is as if Tyree is saying to the opposing camps in his church that if Book of Mormon enthusiasts would stop naively arguing over historicity then there might be more space for Book of Mormon reconsideration by those who are currently indifferent or even hostile to it. “Our credibility is at stake,” he reminds his audience (p. 126).
This denominational lens is one aspect of the book that readers outside the Community of Christ should find repeatedly intriguing. Because, Tyree says on his opening page, “detractors still persist in making various charges against [the Book of Mormon’s] authenticity as scripture,” and because “a uniformly sound, thorough, and even-handed approach to resolving these issues has never been undertaken,” those “who embrace the Book of Mormon as scripture [are] open to the old attacks” (p. vii). Tyree offers his book as a take at that even-handed approach.

In a number of ways, that aim at even-handedness offers new possibilities for fractured religious communities. For one thing, it is obvious that Tyree is a gifted teacher. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter are worth the price of admission, and one can almost picture lively Community of Christ Sunday School classes working their way through the book. The questions are thoughtful enough and provocative enough to work against polarizing dogmatism from either camp—and they are questions about the role of scripture generally, and the Book of Mormon specifically, that every serious reader should consider.

Those questions—and the book itself—mostly revolve around four theories “about the provenance of the Book of Mormon”: (1) plenary revelation, (2) conceptual revelation, (3) human authorship, and (4) Joseph’s extrasensory gifts as a seer or mystic (p. 22). Tyree reminds readers, again in what feels like a nod to even-handedness and a middle way, that “there is no majority opinion within the membership or leadership of Community of Christ that would hold any one of these options as the sole means of revelation involved in producing the Book of Mormon” (p. 28). Tyree succeeds in creating a sense of openness in terms of Community of Christ official positions, so much so that this book is likely, I would think, to draw in from that community new Book of Mormon readers who are more comfortable with diversity than with perceived conformity. As the book progresses, Tyree offers himself as a sympathetic fellow traveler to would-be skeptics. His intent seems to be to persuade Community of Christ members (and other Christians) that the Book of Mormon can still be considered scripture, even if that means giving up claims of the book’s ancient origins.
In other words, Tyree plants himself squarely on that middle road. He presents himself as someone who thinks that DNA evidence convincingly shows that the inhabitants of the Americas have no ancestral connections to the Middle East; that wordprint statistics confirm that Joseph Smith was the author of the Book of Mormon (but disprove Solomon Spaulding’s involvement); and that anachronisms like “Bible” or “church” fit a nineteenth-century Christian worldview rather than an ancient Israelite one. Still, Tyree unequivocally asserts that for him, “the Book of Mormon is a resource provided by divine intervention through a process we do not clearly understand” (p. 136).

Tyree’s position is most clearly stated in several related passages in the middle of the book: “I believe that such anachronisms do not invalidate the Book of Mormon, but illustrate the degree and nature of Joseph Smith Jr.’s inspiration as he produced the book ‘by the gift and power of God’” (p. 76). “I believe this discovery [of the multiple authorship of Isaiah] does not invalidate either Isaiah or the Book of Mormon as part of our valuable scriptural heritage. It only causes us to rethink how the Book of Mormon came to us, and the relevance of the various theories as to how it was revealed by God through the prophet Joseph Smith” (p. 78). And finally, “I think we can explain [anachronisms] logically if we suppose that the author of the Book of Mormon introduced concepts of his time [nineteenth-century America] into a narrative about people of another time and place. This does not diminish the scriptural quality of the Book of Mormon, but it does impinge on its historicity, its historical character. It suggests a narrative that is fictional, though it could have some elements of history interwoven into it as most novels do” (p. 81).

Thus it seems that Tyree is trying to help his denominational fellows reconsider ways that the Book of Mormon could—and in Tyree’s view, should—function as scripture, even divinely inspired scripture, at the same time that it is (probably) fictional. On that basis, Millions Call It Scripture aims to create more space for readers from various religious traditions to maneuver as they, Tyree hopes, give the Book of Mormon serious reconsideration.

And yet, in the end, Millions Call It Scripture seems to fall short in successfully creating that space, because it falls short in making the case
for why readers should give the Book of Mormon that consideration. For all that it does well in inviting readers to rethink their assumptions, the book will likely leave readers of various stripes vaguely dissatisfied—and not just more-committed believers in the Book of Mormon either. To be sure, believers will have their own sets of concerns, and those concerns will probably be different based on denominational points of view. It seems safe to assume, of course, that many Latter-day Saint readers would take issue with Tyree’s insistence that the Book of Mormon does not imply “proof of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, nor the rightness of the denominations that resulted from his founding efforts” (p. 134). In arguing against this thesis of Book of Mormon-as-signifier, Tyree implicitly seems to discount the way that the Book of Mormon has functioned as “sacred sign,” to use Terryl Givens’s words, for believers from its earliest appearance. Even more important, this point of view does not seem to do justice to the internal logic of the Book of Mormon itself. Take, for example, Moroni’s words: “Blessed is he that shall bring this [record] to light; . . . and it shall be done by the power of God” (Mormon 8:16). Or even more pointedly, Lehi’s words about the future “seer” who will “bring forth my word”—that “the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by [the seer’s] hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation” (2 Nephi 3:11, 15). To be fair, those passages could be read other ways, and Tyree does assert that “both the church’s value and Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling can and do stand on their own quite well” (p. 134). Still, it is difficult to escape the challenge that the Book of Mormon presents for those who want to separate too starkly the product from the producer. Tyree himself admits that his decision to “choose a bias in favor of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon rather than against them” has, “to a great degree,” been “influenced by my having received the ministry afforded by the Book of Mormon as scripture” (p. 95).

But there is an undercurrent in Millions Call It Scripture that wants to move the Book of Mormon away from its almost-trademark connection

with Salt Lake City Mormonism and its place in the LDS Church’s proselytizing. Tyree, for example, mentions that when he introduced the Book of Mormon to Community of Christ investigators in Haiti, “they thought we were in fact Mormons, and therefore racists, and all the rest,” since in those pre-1978 days “general knowledge in Haiti was that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . was racist” (p. 108). Frustrations over mistaken identity are detectable in the book—and certainly understandable; again, these perspectives offer telling insights into current Community of Christ thinking about its distant LDS relatives.

Yet I suspect that Latter-day Saint readers will not be the only ones who, in the end, will be left wanting with Tyree’s book. His “eye of the beholder” analogy about scripture immediately locates the book at a flash point where conversations about conservative and liberal views of scripture (specifically the Bible) always get heated (pp. 5–6). Tyree’s repeated turns to William James and a scripture-as-pragmatically-valuable paradigm are helpful in their phenomenological inclusiveness, but such will likely leave many readers wishing for something more on which to evaluate the question “What is scripture?” The book seems to lack conversations about Book of Mormon Christological truth claims, about soteriology, about divine endorsement—especially in Tyree’s almost offhand observation that “most [but by implication, not all] who believe [the Book of Mormon] to be scripture also believe it was given by God, to serve humankind as divine guidance for their spiritual good” (p. 6). At the same time, however, the way Tyree’s book challenges easy assumptions about what is scripture and how one decides what is scripture is one of the key contributions of the book. We as scripture readers need to be challenged to think about these things, and Tyree’s analogous discussions about the persistent value of biblical books with dubious historicity (Job or Jonah, for example) should call for serious reflection from readers who have dismissed the Book of Mormon out of hand for similar perceived historical problems.

However, what many readers will likely wish for from Tyree is more attention to why he considers the Book of Mormon spiritually valuable—more attention to his answers and not just his questions. With the
exception of a brief, but poignant, testimonial about a spiritual confirmation of a biblical truth that came from his reading the Book of Mormon (and significantly, that story focused on a transcendent spiritual witness of the Book of Mormon’s scriptural value), Tyree does not offer enough of his reasoning as to what exactly makes the Book of Mormon valuable as “guidance for . . . spiritual good”—at least not enough of his reasoning, it seems, to entice outside readers to pick up the Book of Mormon.

And that, ultimately, is at the heart of this review. Granted, Tyree is speaking to his church audience first, and so he has a specific group of readers in mind that are likely already coming to the Book of Mormon with some base knowledge. But his invitation for other Christians—as well as his own fellow congregants—to give the Book of Mormon an honest chance would be better served, simply, by *more* Book of Mormon. In Tyree’s attempt to push his coreligionists out of an obsession with Book of Mormon historicity, he seems to protest too much against the book’s remarkable complexity. Tyree sees apologetics and polemics as obscuring the role that the Book of Mormon-as-scripture can play in the life of a believer, and his perspective on this would likely resonate with many who want the Book of Mormon to have a wider readership. Yet in Tyree’s almost-impatience with what he sees as the overemphasis on historicity, and with advocates who refuse to look at “all truth,” he himself seems to pick and choose his evidence to undermine the positions of these imagined interlocutors.

For example, in his discussion of chiasmus, he observes that “there are many instances of chiasmus in both of these books of scripture [the Bible and the Book of Mormon]. But are they the only places where it is found? Of course not, since it is a form that has been used in various ages and is in contemporary use as well” (pp. 61–62). The complaint here is not that Tyree discounts the significance of Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon as evidence of its ancient origins; in some ways, that is beside the point. The complaint here is that the examples of chiasmus from the Book of Mormon that Tyree chooses are so simplistic as to make it seem that he is stacking the deck against the Book of Mormon as even worthy of study, be that study devotional or literary. Of all the
rich, poetic, intricate passages he could have chosen, this is his sole illustrative example from the Book of Mormon: “The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul” (Alma 40:23). Tyree then spends two pages breaking down, into chiastic notation, a prayer that was offered by a Community of Christ mission center president in 2002. Tyree uses the prayer to argue that for religious people, Hebraic poetic forms become as natural as breathing; they are integral to the native language of Christian worship. However, the prayer as an example of chiasmus is not persuasive—especially if it were to be set up next to a well-known example from the Book of Mormon like Alma 36.

A useful comparison at this point might be to juxtapose Millions Call it Scripture with Grant Hardy’s Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide. The scope and aim of the two books are of course different, yet one can see a resonance in both. Both seek to broaden appreciation of the Book of Mormon, and to do so while setting aside or downplaying longstanding pro/con arguments about the Book of Mormon’s miraculous origins. Both authors offer approaches that believers and skeptics might find palatable.

Yet contrast the way that Grant Hardy deals with the chiastic structure of Alma 36. Hardy also acknowledges that scholars have debated about just how much stock should be placed in chiasmus as evidence of ancient Hebrew influence in the Book of Mormon. But Hardy sees past that to point out that, regardless of where one stands on the chiasmus count, Alma 36 undeniably represents “a careful, deliberate arrangement of the story. The reversing, balanced halves indicate that Alma had spent some time and effort organizing his memories of an event twenty years earlier into a rhetorically compelling, aesthetically pleasing form.” Hardy’s approach is to analyze the Book of Mormon from the standpoint of the book’s narrators, bracketing for the sake of discussion the question of whether or not those narrators are real or simply the products of Joseph Smith’s mind (or inspiration), so in Hardy’s analysis, “Alma” could be read either way. The real point is that the structure of Alma 36 highlights that “just as [Alma’s] conversion to Christianity marked a major turning point in his life, so also his appeal to Jesus in
verse 18 is, quite literally, the pivotal moment in his narrative.” High-
lighting the pivotal (in this case, literally so) importance of Jesus in 
Alma 36 would have only served to bolster Tyree’s central contention, 
that the Book of Mormon is worthwhile for its Christ-centered message.

Joseph Spencer’s recent book, An Other Testament, offers an even 
more intricate examination of Alma 36. Spencer, too, agrees that some 
analysts of Alma 36 have made the verse-by-verse chiasm feel artificially 
forced in places, but at Spencer’s hand the structure of the entire chapter 
demonstrates a more sophisticated chiastic arrangement: opening and 
closing verses that are tightly and chiastically parallel (vv. 1–5; 26–30), 
with a central narrative built on the structured repetition of “thought” 
and “memory” (vv. 13–22) that is immediately flanked by less struc-
tured story-line passages (vv. 6–12; 23–25). Spencer’s exegesis of the 
chapter also highlights another significant marker of Book of Mormon 
complexity: its remarkable intertextuality—in this case the ties between 
Alma 36 and 1 Nephi 1.4

In another important contrast, Tyree is fairly dismissive of word-
print statistical analysis as offering any persuasive evidence of multiple 
authors in the Book of Mormon text. To be fair to wordprint advo-
cates, Tyree’s dismissal is of cited studies that are mostly two and three 
decades old—Tyree even concedes that one of the studies he refers to 
(from 1976) is “somewhat dated” (p. 58). Still, many readers would be 
sympathetic to Tyree’s position that wordprint analysis in the Book of 
Mormon is simply too problematic to be very reliable because of larger 
questions about the translation process, what diction is inspired, and 
so forth. But here again Grant Hardy’s book can add another layer of 
authorial complexity and variability. Hardy aptly points out that “Ne-
phi’s recurring attention to the overall history of the House of Israel—a 
story that takes in several thousand years—gives him a distinctive voice; 
no one else in the Book of Mormon shares his obsession to place the

3. Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: 
Oxford University Press, 2010), 141.

4. See the first chapter of Joseph M. Spencer, An Other Testament: On Typology 
(Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012). I am indebted to Shon Hopkin for suggesting this point.
Nephite experience in a world-historical perspective. . . . Similarly, no one else is so focused on ancient Hebrew texts.” That means that the next generation of Book of Mormon writers—Enos, for one—is “nothing like [Nephi]”; “Enos never quotes or even refers to scripture.”

A turn in Tyree’s book to citing this kind of textured analysis of narrative would only serve, it seems, to strengthen his case that the Book of Mormon is worthy of attention on a number of fronts.

Tyree clearly and concisely identifies the problem of “second Isaiah” in the Book of Mormon, yet, as Hardy again shows, there is so much more to say about the complexity of the way Isaiah appears in the Book of Mormon: Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah, for example, or the way that Nephi seemed almost oblivious to Isaiah passages that New Testament writers later saw as foreshadowing Jesus Christ. Tyree writes, “I believe that to misrepresent [the Book of Mormon as] such a potentially powerful witness for Christ could only diminish its authority and effectiveness in influencing persons toward the faith in the Lord” (pp. 1–2). What many readers of Tyree’s book might feel, though, is that he himself has misrepresented the Book of Mormon in his attempt to point out weaknesses in the arguments on which he sees traditional Book of Mormon apologetics built.

All of this is to say that what might leave students of the Book of Mormon vaguely dissatisfied by Millions Call It Scripture is essentially a bibliographic problem. There is no mention of Grant Hardy or Joseph Spencer or Terryl Givens or Brant Gardner or the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies. Thomas O’Dea is quoted about American “anachronisms” in the Book of Mormon but not Richard Bushman on the unanticipated absence of republican themes in the Book of Mormon (nor, even more surprisingly, is Richard Bushman cited as a source for

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5. Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 61–63. See also Joseph Spencer’s intriguing discussion about what he calls Jesus’s “return to Nephi,” in terms of Nephi’s covenantal focus, in Jesus’s 3 Nephi discourses. See Spencer, An Other Testament, 164–69. Again, I’m grateful for Shon Hopkin’s insights on this.

6. Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 68–69.
Joseph Smith’s biography). The bibliography seems surprisingly dated, and there is what feels like a conscientious avoidance of Latter-day Saint sources, not wholly unexpected because of the aforementioned concern about the “Book of Mormon-as-sign” of both Joseph Smith’s prophetic call and the identity of the “true Church.” But when readers consider those sources from the Latter-day Saint tradition that Tyree does quote, it is not unlikely that some readers might suspect that Tyree is worried about bringing in the work of scholars whom he sees as claiming too much for the Book of Mormon, in terms of its richness. Giving full recognition to that richness, though, is just what is necessary, it seems, for Tyree’s wish to be realized: “Whether we are devotees of the Book of Mormon, or mainstream Christians with an unquestionable loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ, it is our unavoidable stewardship as his disciples and servants to become as knowledgeable as possible about the truth of all aspects of the Book of Mormon. . . . If we conclude that we believe it holds scriptural value for humankind, we will want to represent it well” (p. 2).

Thus Community of Christ readers should know about Latter-day Saint approaches, and vice versa, something that seems to be happening with recent conferences and academic exchanges between groups from

7. See, for example, Richard L. Bushman, “The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution,” BYU Studies 17/4 (1976): 3–20, as well as Bushman’s commentary on the writing of the article—and the exercise of apologetics generally—in Richard L. Bushman, Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 26–27. It is worth noting that calling the Book of Mormon’s Christocentric worldview “anachronistic” (a point made by Thomas O’Dea that Tyree quotes and then expands upon—see pages 74–76 of Millions Call It Scripture) again downplays the internal logic and consistency of one of the Book of Mormon’s central theses: that knowledge about Jesus Christ among Lehi and his descendants came by special, disruptive, and repeated revelation that put this group of preexilic Israelites on a unique religious path, one they self-consciously recognized as unique. See, for example, 1 Nephi 1:8–11; 11:13–34; 2 Nephi 10:3; Jacob 4:1–15; and Mosiah 3:1–18, among other passages. And, at the very least, staying at the level of “anachronism” feels like an opportunity missed in Tyree’s book to highlight the significant theological components of the Book of Mormon surrounding things like agency and atonement; compare Givens, By the Hand of Mormon, 198–208.
BYU, for example, and Community of Christ and other Restoration Branch congregations. In fact, in the spirit and aims of this journal, one would hope that all parties who see the Book of Mormon as worthy of more attention would stay abreast of the variety of works, from a variety of perspectives and venues, that “represent it well.” Because of Tyree’s discussion questions, because of his provocative and open-ended queries about the nature of scripture, and because of his insistence that readers from all sorts of religious backgrounds will benefit from the Book of Mormon, Millions Call It Scripture is a book that deserves to be read. In terms of persuading people of the possibility of such benefit, though, the hope of this reviewer is that it is not the only book on the Book of Mormon that people read.

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8. See Howlett, Kirtland Temple, 192–93: “As self-described fundamentalists, Restorationists separated from the Community of Christ in the mid-1980s over the ordination of women to priesthood offices. For Restorationists, women’s ordination was simply one of many issues that they protested, including the Community of Christ’s . . . declining use of the Book of Mormon.”
The Self-Critical Book of Mormon: Notes on an Emergent Literary Approach

*Joseph M. Spencer*


The names of Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman have quickly become associated in the past couple of years with one another by students of Mormonism. In 2013, as essays on the Book of Mormon by these two scholars were being finalized for publication in *American Literature* and the *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, these scholars began circulating a call for proposals for an edited collection of literary essays on the Book of Mormon, then under negotiation with Oxford University Press. In the two years since that time, both scholars’ essays have appeared in print, and the proposed Oxford publication—*The Book of Mormon: Americanist Approaches*—has taken shape, with plans in place for its appearance in 2016. Rather quickly, Fenton and Hickman have come to represent jointly the possibility of a first flowering of literary study of the Book of Mormon produced primarily for a non-Mormon readership.¹

While students of the Book of Mormon have to wait a little while yet to see what the coming collection of Americanist approaches will yield, a taste of Fenton's and Hickman's own work can be had by looking at their already-published essays on the Book of Mormon.

More than just a shared editorial project brings Fenton and Hickman into a single orbit. There are striking similarities between their respective literary approaches to the Book of Mormon. Both understand the book to operate in a deconstructive manner (in the technical theoretical sense of the term *deconstructive*), and both argue that the deconstructive operations of the book lend it a peculiar political forcefulness in the context of its appearance in nineteenth-century America. In the following pages, I wish to explore critically the virtues and potential vices of this particular way of making sense of the Book of Mormon. Summarily put, my argument is that the deconstructive approach to the Book of Mormon is revealing in an essential way but that its usefulness encounters certain important limits. On my interpretation, Fenton's work is somewhat more attuned to these limits than is Hickman's, a difference marked in an important way by the fact that the latter scholar makes certain interpretively problematic moves with respect to the Book of Mormon.

Although both Fenton and Hickman develop deconstructive readings of the Book of Mormon, Fenton's “Open Canons” addresses this point in more overtly theoretical terms. Noting the manner in which the Book of Mormon “is preoccupied with the process of compiling and interpreting records,” presenting “plates within plates and writing about writing,” she argues that the volume “operates both as a history and as an account of history making” (pp. 340–41). Appearing in a geographical place and a historical period characterized by “the impulse to compile and preserve [historical] records” that would attest to the divinely orchestrated history of the young United States (p. 341), the Book of Mormon undercuts such impulses by both presenting the impossibility of recovering from the archives any full account of providential history and laying out a radically alternative conception of America's past, present, and destiny. The key to both of these moves, on Fenton's account, is
the complicated relationship the Book of Mormon establishes between itself and the Christian Bible. Borrowing from the famous allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5, Fenton uses the image of grafting to clarify this relationship: “Though the grafting process aims to produce a new whole, it is as an act of laceration as well as repair, highlighting the incompleteness of both its source and its recipient” (p. 344). The Book of Mormon’s repetition, but “with a difference,” of biblical texts ultimately has the effect of “complicat[ing] the distinction between source material and copy” (p. 345).

Although much of her language is perhaps more suggestive of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Fenton ties her presentation to Jacques Derrida, calling the Book of Mormon “a supplement of the Derridean kind, adding ‘only to replace,’ highlighting the very gap it would address, and compensating ‘for what ought to lack nothing at all in itself’” (p. 344). This is deconstruction of a rather classic sort, according to which careful attention to the details of a text reveals the impossibility of producing a fully complete and internally consistent system of meaning. Fenton argues first that the Book of Mormon performs a deconstruction of the biblical text—that is, it strategically reveals the instability of the Christian Bible by replacing the supposedly inerrant (because quintessentially original) Word of God with an entire network of volumes of scripture, no one of which can be said to be the pristine original from which others are derived. As Fenton puts it, “through the highlighting of fissures in sacred history, [the Book of Mormon] challenges the very notion of textual sufficiency—even when the texts in question are divinely inspired” (pp. 348–49). Once Fenton has established this first point, however, she turns to a still more striking point: that the Book

of Mormon systematically deconstructs itself just as much as it deconstructs the Bible. The readable text of the Book of Mormon presents itself as suspended between two unreadable poles: the “phantom limb” of the lost “Book of Lehi” on the one hand (p. 349) and the revelatory portion of the volume sealed in “perpetual obscurity” because it remains to be translated (p. 351). And what stretches out between those two poles as the readable text of the Book of Mormon is presented explicitly and deliberately as “a series of incomplete histories” (p. 351). Still more, the Book of Mormon itself claims that it is to be eventually supplemented by still other books of scripture that would call its own sufficiency into question (see pp. 351–52). Thus the Book of Mormon not only contests the total and inerrant status of the Bible, but it also undercuts its own completeness and consistency in its complex self-presentation.

In the final part of “Open Canons,” Fenton brings these several sorts of deconstructive gestures to bear—albeit in a relatively limited way—on the context in which the Book of Mormon first began to circulate. Working against the deep but retrospectively naïve trust evinced by nineteenth-century American historians, the Book of Mormon’s deconstruction of the Bible, coupled with its self-critical regard, made it a profoundly countercultural document when the first Mormon missionaries began to circulate it. But it is Hickman’s “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” more than Fenton’s “Open Canons,” that takes the measure of the possible countercultural force of the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth-century American context (and beyond). Responding to straightforward accusations that the Book of Mormon contains “patent racism” (p. 435), Hickman mobilizes the self-critical nature of the volume to complicate its relationship to questions of race. Fenton finds in the

3. Fenton’s presentation of these two poles presents an unresolved tension between the possibility that the Book of Mormon’s incompleteness is a product of the contingent circumstances of its production (the loss of the manuscript that shaved off the original opening of the volume was anything but intentional on Joseph Smith’s part) and the possibility that the volume’s incompleteness is a necessary feature of its own self-conception (the postponement of the translation of the sealed portion of the volume is deliberate and organizes the purposes of the entire volume). The relationship between these possibilities remains to be investigated deeply.
book both an attempt at presenting history and a complex contestation of every pretension—even its own—to present history in a complete or consistent manner. Hickman, in turn, finds in the book both a text that seems destined to justify racism and a complex contestation of every text—even itself—that seems destined to justify racism.

Hickman works out his reading in two sequences. First he presents others’ attempts to respond to accusations of racism against the Book of Mormon, systematically arguing that every potential relativization or destabilization or problematization of racial categories in the volume is undercut by the persistent racial binary between white (the righteous Nephites) and black (the wicked Lamanites). Moments that suggest otherwise, he argues, are “counterfactual blip[s]” rather than suggestive resources (p. 438), drowned in a sea of rigid racial structures. The only possible exception, Hickman claims, is the volume-wide claim that the white Nephites end up eradicated by the black Lamanites, who live on to receive the fulness of Christian truth. Yet even this fails to excuse the Book of Mormon, according to Hickman, because the means for bringing the dark-skinned Lamanites in the last days to the truth of the Christian gospel is the Book of Mormon itself, written by the white Nephites who, as it were, rise from the dead to continue in their paternalistic superiority. Whatever “providential ascendancy” the Book of Mormon grants to the Lamanites, it is “to be mediated by the white Nephite narrative itself” (p. 443). For Hickman, then, the Book of Mormon should be read as deeply and irreparably racist in nature.

This irreparable racism, however, turns out for Hickman to be a virtue due to the self-deconstructive nature of the book, explored in a second sequence. Hickman claims that “in order to dismantle the kind of theological racism the text features, what must be challenged is the very authority of the narrative that elaborates the framework in the first place” (p. 444)—and this the deconstructive nature of the book actually

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4. Hickman divides his presentation of the Book of Mormon’s relationship to race into three “levels.” Because both the first and the second of his levels achieve the same (negative) results, I group them into a single first sequence here. What I will call the second sequence corresponds to Hickman’s third level.
accomplishes. He explains: “Insofar as The Book of Mormon purports to be scripture, its self-deconstruction draws attention to that which the literalist hermeneuts of Biblicist America were keen to ignore—the contingent human conditions of scripture writing and scripture reading, in other words, precisely the conditions from which might conceivably arise spurious notions of theological racism” (p. 444). Here Hickman refers to the intense antebellum debate, almost always with reference to biblical texts assumed to be inherently and unquestionably authoritative, concerning the moral permissibility of the institution of black slavery. Hickman’s contention is that the Book of Mormon, which presents itself at once (1) as racially problematic scripture (in this way quite like the Bible) and (2) as consciously self-deconstructive text (in this way quite unlike the Bible), had the potential in the nineteenth-century context of its appearance to undermine a crucial presupposition (the inerrancy of scripture, despite its embrace of institutions of slavery) that underlay the defense of American slavery.

The extension of the deconstructive approach beyond questions of providentialist history writing (Fenton) to questions of race and slavery (Hickman) strains this particular literary interpretation in certain ways. It is difficult to disagree with Fenton’s conclusions regarding the

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5. Importantly, Hickman uses the language of deconstruction in two distinct registers. In the course of the first sequence of his presentation, he speaks of the “self-deconstruction” of the Book of Mormon’s narrative, a function of the Nephite authors prophetically anticipating their own people’s eventual eradication. This form of deconstruction Hickman places among those that fail to undercut accusations of racism against the book. In the second sequence, Hickman speaks again of the “self-deconstruction” of the Book of Mormon’s narrative, but there more positively. And it is this second sort that matches up with what Fenton outlines as the deconstructive nature of the Book of Mormon.

6. For a thorough introduction to the basic cultural, political, and religious presuppositions that gave the debate its shape, see Mark A. Noll, America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

7. Fenton actually addresses race briefly in the course of her study (see pp. 354–55), a discussion to which Hickman refers in his own study (see p. 457). Importantly, however, Fenton, unlike Hickman, contextualizes the Book of Mormon’s presentation of racial matters within the larger frame of providentialist history writing.
manner in which the Book of Mormon contests a certain conception of American history (although believers in the book’s historicity will understandably chafe at her suggestion that such contestation locates the volume’s origins in the nineteenth century). It is less difficult by far to disagree with Hickman’s conclusions regarding the manner in which the Book of Mormon undermines its own scriptural authority in a brilliantly subtle attempt to contest the use of scripture to justify the institution of slavery. Fenton’s essay marks the deeply revealing nature of the deconstructive approach to the Book of Mormon; Hickman’s essay presses this approach to a kind of extreme, one that at once suggests the radical potential of the deconstructive reading and makes one wonder whether the deconstructive reading does not in the end go too far.

It thus seems to me necessary, in the last analysis, to distinguish Fenton’s and Hickman’s respective deconstructive gestures, at least in terms of what might be called their tendencies. In effect, Hickman’s argument tends toward the claim that the Book of Mormon as deconstructive text fully undermines scriptural authority, Fenton’s toward the claim that the Book of Mormon simply recasts scriptural authority. Both readers find in the Book of Mormon’s self-deconstruction a rather direct contestation of a certain conception of scriptural authority: that of inerrancy, according to which the scriptural Word of God remains pure despite its passage through the conflicting vicissitudes of history. But where Fenton appears to see this contestation to be aimed at replacing one conception of scriptural authority (inerrant) with another (deconstructive), Hickman appears—at least at times—to see it as aimed at a kind of total (or at least potentially total) dismantling of scriptural

8. Although much of Christian biblical scholarship has for centuries abandoned any strict notion of inerrancy, a certain spirit of inerrancy can be said to have remained alive in it until quite recently, at least in the form of a certain (in part Romantic) assumption that the pure Word of God lies behind or at the origin of the texts that must be said to be impure. The search for the original words of the prophets or of Jesus or of the apostles, assumed to be directly if irrecoverably inspired but then obscured or repurposed in constitutively less inspired ways by editors and redactors, continues in the general spirit of inerrancy. The past few decades, however, have witnessed a partial shift in mainline Christian biblical scholarship away from even this form of inerrancy.
authority as such. Thus where Fenton might be said to suggest that the Book of Mormon calls for a deconstructive conception of scriptural authority, Hickman might be said to suggest that the Book of Mormon directly deconstructs scriptural authority. This distinction might seem overly subtle, but it is essential. On the one reading, deconstruction plays a role in a transformation of what it means to speak of scripture. On the other, deconstruction plays a role in undercutting the very viability of speaking of scripture.

Now, Fenton's interpretation seems to me unquestionably right. On the Book of Mormon's account, the authority of scripture cannot be divorced from its passage through the minds and pens of its many (and often irreconcilable) authors. Not only grace but the word of God is stored in earthen vessels. Indeed, voices in the Book of Mormon find themselves wrestling with the doctrine of grace especially when they confront their own ineptitude at writing scripture. In essence, the Book of Mormon dismisses as entirely unnecessary—and in fact undesirable—the extensive machinery that so much of historical Christianity has constructed to defend the idea that God saw an inerrant text unscathed through history. The Book of Mormon seems intent on asserting that the divine Word sounds always and only as an echo within unmistakably human words. But whether it is possible to push the Book of Mormon further, to find in its humanization of scripture a certain disqualification of appeals to scripture in debates about ethics and politics, seems to me more questionable. Certainly, one must confess that important texts scattered throughout the Book of Mormon aim to work against the kind of secularism that would most naturally approve of what I am calling Hickman's interpretation. And Hickman himself pulls back from the most radical interpretation of his own gesture in the

9. In this regard, see especially Ether 12. For a good theological treatment of this text, see Adam S. Miller, Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 99–105.

10. Especially relevant here is Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 13, where he witnesses the transformation of the Bible into a text stripped of any “purity” (1 Nephi 13:25–28).

11. Such texts have been cataloged most thoroughly in a work that argues for nineteenth-century origins for the Book of Mormon. Whatever its conclusions on this
final paragraphs of his essay: “Paradoxically, The Book of Mormon is a scripture whose successful inculcation . . . demands that we not read it as ‘scripture’ insofar as that honorific presupposes a naive literalist cession of transcendental authority to the narrative voice” (p. 454).12 This caveat marks Hickman’s own recognition that the position toward which his deconstructive reading tends lies outside the scope of what the Book of Mormon presents.

All this makes clear to me that, while the deconstructive reading is immensely productive and revealing, it runs up against a certain limit—a limit that Hickman’s essay especially helps to identify because of the way it works at and—perhaps (at times)—beyond that limit. The Book of Mormon is best read as subtly but intentionally calling its own authority into question, but always and only in the literal sense of “calling into question.” The Book of Mormon, in other words, poses the question of its own authority, insisting that no assumptions—whether naively for or dismissively against—be made too quickly about that question. To trust that the book is simple and didactic, a rather artless pastiche of Christian truisms or even a rather artless container of timeless religious truths, is to miss the volume’s complex self-critical nature.13 Similarly, though, to trust that the book ultimately undoes itself by its own self-critique, dissolving into so many diverse positions that they cannot be critically gathered into a relatively unified project, is to miss the limits the volume imposes on its readers. To embrace the deconstructive reading responsibly is to find a position somewhere between these problematic extremes, to recognize that individual passages in the Book of Mormon—however simple and didactic they might seem on their faces—cannot be interpreted independently of larger structures and frames organizing the volume. Its texts must always be read in the light of their place within an immensely complex, constitutively incomplete, and ultimately self-aware book.

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12. I have added italics only to the final clause here for emphasis.
13. That close interpretation of the Book of Mormon’s narrative strategies can prove rewarding has been abundantly demonstrated by Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
Fenton and Hickman both capitalize on the virtues of the deconstructive reading, demonstrating its real force. Hickman, I have suggested, also illustrates—again, at least in terms of what should be called the tendency of his reading—the potential vices of the deconstructive reading. Unfortunately, exacerbating or at least confirming Hickman’s tendency toward a problematic literary construal of the Book of Mormon are a number of interpretive problems scattered throughout his essay.14 I worry that highlighting what seems to me the more important among these might seem either petty or pedantic—some kind of exercise in dismissive attack. At the same time, I worry that failing to highlight them would be a disservice, since the best literary work—like the best work of any sort—on the Book of Mormon must be grounded on solid exegesis. In the spirit of pushing for an always-more-responsible approach to the text of the Book of Mormon, and fully recognizing the richness of the deconstructive approach Hickman has joined Fenton in promoting (not to mention my admiration for Hickman’s success in bringing literary study of the Book of Mormon into the premier journal in his field!), I want to note some places where I think Hickman has in particular misrepresented the text of the Book of Mormon in weaving his literary account.

A first set of interpretive difficulties arises in connection with Hickman’s critiques of standard defenses against the Book of Mormon’s purported racism. Three of these standard defenses Hickman groups together as attempts at “troubling racial categories” (p. 437). The first concerns the complex place in the Book of Mormon narrative of two peoples of origins quite distinct from that of the Nephites and the Lamanites, the two non-Lehite peoples usually referred to as the Jaredites and the Mulekites. Hickman quite nicely notes that the intersection of

14. So far as I am aware, Fenton makes only one interpretive faux pas in the course of her essay. This comes when she interprets references to the Christian Bible in 1 Nephi 13 as references to the Book of Mormon (see p. 357). This misinterpretation of a passage in the Book of Mormon, however, does not affect her argument, since she might well have made exactly the same point with reference to a text only a few verses after the one she cites, where reference is made to the Book of Mormon, and in a way that would substantiate the claim she makes with regard to the misinterpreted passage.
these two largely marginal nations takes place in the most “conspicuous narrative seam” in the Book of Mormon—namely, in the transition from the small to the large plates of Nephi, between the book of Omni and the Words of Mormon (p. 438). According to Hickman, this narrative seam itself “implicitly interrogates the nature and authority of origins” (p. 438). This seems right, but Hickman overlooks the fact that it is at the non-Lehite intersection of the Jaredite and Mulekite stories that some of the most racially charged elements of the Book of Mormon appear. Hickman suggests that the Jaredite record in the book of Ether might be read as “an additional case study of New World declension in which racial curses do not figure” (p. 437), and yet a close reading of Ether makes clear that the distinction between covenant Israel and noncovenantal peoples with no promises regarding their seed is central to that story—quite as central as elsewhere in the Book of Mormon and with parallel consequences. Still more interesting, it is arguably in the story of the Mulekite encounter with the Jaredites—this supposedly entirely nonracialized story—that the only intentionally Native American element appears in the text of the Book of Mormon. Richard Bushman points out that the Book of Mormon “contains none of the identifying words [associated in the nineteenth century with native culture] like squaw, papoose, wampum, peace pipes, tepees, braves, feathers, and no canoes, moccasins, or corn.” Yet one rather apparent exception is the language used to describe the brief encounter between the Jaredites and the Mulekites: the last-surviving Jaredite lived with the Mulekite settlers “for the space of nine moons” (Omni 1:21). Close reading suggests that the Jaredites and Mulekites are deeply entangled in the larger story the Book of Mormon wishes to tell about peoples and races.

Of course, the objection I have just mentioned in no way vitiates Hickman’s larger thesis, since he himself goes on to undercut the


potency of his own suggestion regarding the alternative histories of the Jaredites and Mulekites. Only slightly more problematic are some interpretive issues that arise in the last part of his essay, where he reviews the Book of Mormon as a whole, attempting to show the consistent racism of its white authors—interrupted only occasionally by marginalized Lamanite voices and by the visiting Christ of the book's climax. His summary interpretation of Nephi's record is more than a little heavy-handed, especially clear when he claims that the deliberate narrowing of the scope of Nephi's record to “spiritual things” indicates primarily “the profane imperatives of ethnocentrism” (p. 448). Hickman is right that Nephi “unabashedly filters his historical chronicle through that which is ‘expedient to [him]’” (p. 447), but he expends no (obvious) effort in uncovering what rather apparently is expedient to Nephi, according to the text. More egregious is Hickman's later citation of what he calls “a rare Lamanite primary document” (p. 449), Ammoron's letter to Moroni contained in Alma 54. After quite rightly noting “the traces of something like a ‘Lamanite view of Book of Mormon history’”
Hickman quotes Ammoron’s letter at length in order to illustrate “a sophisticated Lamanite worldview” (p. 449), but this drastically misrepresents the text. Ammoron is not a dark-skinned Lamanite but a light-skinned Nephite who has (through his brother) usurped the Lamanite government. That Hickman calls the letter’s writer “the Lamanite Ammoron” (p. 449) seems to indicate that he is unaware of the racially problematic status of Ammoron and the voice he provides to readers of the Book of Mormon.

In these last-mentioned cases of interpretive difficulty, Hickman mingles interpretive acuity (recognition of Nephi’s vexed relationship to the story he tells, attention to occasional traces of the Lamanite view throughout the Book of Mormon) with misleading suggestions (that Nephi’s “spiritual things” are primarily racial in nature, that the most deplorable instance of Nephite paternalism represents a quintessentially Lamanite perspective). These interpretive mistakes again do not strongly affect Hickman’s thesis, though perhaps they weaken it in certain ways, suggesting that there is complexity that Hickman’s reading does not accommodate. But one interpretive move in particular, made right at the end of Hickman’s essay, is more problematic than these, and it threatens his thesis in a serious way. Essential to his apocalyptic reading of the Book of Mormon is the way in which a racist element supposedly remains operative in the volume’s claim that the light-skinned Nephite scriptures will eventually play a paternalistic role in the latter-day redemption of the dark-skinned Lamanites (see p. 443). Yet this very aspect of the Book of Mormon Hickman makes central to his deconstructive reading in the end, finding in the Lamanite prophet Samuel’s presentation of this same paternalistic redemption of the Lamanites an indication that “the Nephites [are] mere instruments in the hands of the Lord to restore the Lamanites to their rightful place” (p. 453). Are we to understand that one and the same aspect of what the Book of

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Mormon has to say about Nephite-Lamanite relations serves as both the last indication of its patent racism at one level (when presented by the Nephite narrators) and the first indication of its metacritical rejection of racism at another level (when presented by a Lamanite prophet)? However important the actual bearer of the voice is in each case (first Nephite, then Lamanite), the message is unmistakably the same, and there is real inconsistency on Hickman’s part when he takes that same message to indicate ineradicable racism in one instance and inventive antiracism in another. Here if anywhere, Hickman’s tendency to make the text of the Book of Mormon work to his own deconstructive ends, rather than to trace what genuinely and unmistakably is deconstructive in the text, makes itself known.

These criticisms are, I think, important. Recent academic work on the Book of Mormon has often suggested that little of value (apparently because little of a nonapologetic nature) has been written on the Book of Mormon, but this is simply untrue. For the still-young field of Book of Mormon studies directed primarily to non-Mormon readers to do its work the best way possible, it will be necessary to learn from all the essential exegetical work that has been done on the Book of Mormon over the past century. Only with the most responsible readings possible will literary work of real genius—like that of both Fenton and Hickman—receive a ready reception.

I sincerely hope it does.

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Reviewed by Michael Austin

Avi Steinberg’s new book is the second-best travel narrative I have ever read in which a young American intellectual becomes fascinated with another culture’s sacred text, reads the text obsessively, and undertakes a journey—part pilgrimage and part anthropological tourism—to the locations identified therein.

The best such book that I know, Jonah Blank’s *Arrow of the Blueskinned God* (1992), weaves a fascinating tour of modern India together with a brilliant retelling of *The Ramayana*, the great epic poem at the center of Hindu culture. Blank’s book is excellent—deeply learned, engaged with the text, and aware that many of the most difficult issues facing the modern nation were anticipated by a great poet 2,500 years ago. It is one of the best books I have ever read about anything. If you have never read it, you probably should.

Avi Steinberg’s new book, *The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri*, does not quite rise to this level. For one thing, it gets some fairly basic stuff wrong. Joseph Smith was not lynched in the Carthage Jail, as Steinberg reports (p. 8); he was shot. Lehi is not depicted as “a Jerusalem prophet 580 years before the birth of Jesus” (p. 16). Steinberg is twenty years off. Lehi and his family left Jerusalem 600 years before the birth
of Jesus, and the whole city was destroyed in 587 BC—an event of some importance to the Book of Mormon narrative. And finally, Christ’s visit to the American continent does not occur “at the center of the book, almost exactly halfway into the story” (p. 243), but about 80 percent into the book, in chapter 11 of 3 Nephi.

These gaffes are annoying, but they do not disqualify The Lost Book of Mormon from serious attention. More problematic, perhaps, is the book’s lack of narrative cohesion. It is not quite the journey that it bills itself as. Rather, it is three confessional set pieces united by a common fascination with the Book of Mormon. In the first piece, Steinberg recalls living in Jerusalem and trying to find a copy of the Book of Mormon. In the second, he describes a two-week trip through Guatemala and Mexico with a Mormon tour group investigating Book of Mormon sites. And in the final section, he recounts the four days he spent rehearsing, under an assumed name, in the cast of the Hill Cumorah Pageant before officials discovered his duplicity and sent him packing. These three set pieces are sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion that frame the book, not entirely convincingly, as a long meditation on the Book of Mormon.

And it is supposed to be a humorous meditation. The book’s cartoon cover and its incongruous subtitle ( . . . the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri) make it clear that we are supposed to find the book funny. Some of this is found humor, like calling Kansas City a “mythic land.” But Steinberg also tries to be funny by crafting a kind of folksy-neurotic-urban-sophisticate persona that is two parts David Sedaris and one part Woody Allen. And like most people who try to be funny when writing about serious things, he often pushes too hard and ends up sounding silly instead.

So now, having described all of its warts and rough edges, I can finally say that I liked the book. In fact, I liked it a lot. I didn’t want to like it, and I was fully prepared to be entirely nonplussed and, if necessary, deeply offended. I can think of all kinds of reasons why the book shouldn’t have worked. But in spite of all the errors and the forced humor, it did work, at least for me. I enjoyed it immensely and found it full of insights about my own religious tradition that I have never seen anywhere else. And
this has nothing to do with the travel narrative that supposedly constitutes the plot. The various destinations simply provide platforms for the author’s stream-of-consciousness musings on Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, writing, religion, literature, and faith. I would have enjoyed *The Lost Book of Mormon* just as much if it had told the story of Steinberg lying in his bed at home and thinking about all of these things for a few weeks. The journey through the author’s mind makes the book work; the trips to Jerusalem and Mesoamerica merely provide the wallpaper.

One thing that makes the book work is Steinberg’s attitude toward the Book of Mormon. Let’s acknowledge up front that he does not consider it a genuine historical record of early inhabitants of the Americas. He is not a believer. But he never mocks the book or those who do believe in it, and he consistently ranks it with the greatest productions of any human mind. To pull this off in a humor book requires a delicate dance, since it is really hard to be funny about something without making fun of it. Here, at least, the book is pitch perfect. Steinberg may delight in telling readers that the name Abinadi rhymes with “a big hog pie” (p. 217), and he certainly gets as much mileage as he can from describing Moroni as a good-looking Jewish-Mayan ghost. But these are not malicious jokes (though, as I suggest above, they are not particularly funny ones). Steinberg makes it clear that, while he does not accept the Book of Mormon as history, he respects it deeply as literature. And in his view, great literature is all that any sacred text ever can or need be.

It is no small trick to praise the Book of Mormon in unqualified superlatives while rejecting its historical claims. It is possible, of course; most people today have no problem praising the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* while rejecting the historicity of Troy and the divinity of Poseidon. But the current rhetorical climate leaves very little space for such views of the Book of Mormon. Nearly everybody who thinks that the Book of Mormon is great also believes it to be historical; and nearly everybody who denies its historicity also denies its greatness. One of the few major scholars who agrees with Steinberg—Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Daniel Walker Howe—sums it up nicely. The Book of Mormon, he writes, “should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but
has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph Smith’s authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the work as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than read it.”

Steinberg, too, considers the Book of Mormon one of the greatest achievements of American literature:

As far as I was concerned, American literature got serious at Hill Cumorah. The discovery of the gold plates at the hill in 1823 can be seen as a founding myth for American letters: Joseph, a frontier peasant boy—a restless Puritan—unearchs a book from deep in the soil of the country, the promised land, and discovers a story written in the language of the Old World but shaped by the landscape of the New, an American epic about Indians who came from Jerusalem. If Joseph, or his protagonist, Nephi, was a picaresque hero, an American Don Quixote, he was one of the earliest—a generation or two before Melville’s Ishmael or Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. Joseph was one of the first, and arguably the most successful American, to take up Emerson’s challenge to renew the ancient literary tradition in the New World. (pp. 8-9)

This is a pretty big claim. If the Book of Mormon is the founding document of the American literary tradition, then six generations of scholars and critics have completely missed the boat. Non-Mormon critics have published thousands of books and articles on American Romanticism, Puritan Literature, American epics, Native American literature, Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Thoreau without as much as a footnote acknowledging the existence of Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon. If Steinberg is correct, then the entire field of American literature is party to a fraud.

In defense of my colleagues in American literature, Steinberg’s evidence is nowhere near sufficient to prove his thesis. He does not make a case as much as he simply suggests that a case could be made. He vaguely identifies elements of the Book of Mormon that may (or may

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not) anticipate *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*, but he does not connect these dots. Nor should he. That sort of scholarly project requires a different kind of book—one with lots of footnotes and very little humor. Steinberg’s job is to go to strange places and use them as jumping-off points for his own observations about the Book of Mormon from the perspective of somebody reading it for cultural, but not religious reasons.

I should mention here that, for Steinberg, the Book of Mormon is a narrative that includes both the record of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and the narrative of Joseph Smith translating that record and bringing it to publication. He presents this as one great epic story that began in Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity and concluded in a Palmyra, New York, print shop in 1830. And the main theme of the epic—indeed, the only thing that holds the various parts of the book together—is the narrative of how all these stories came to be part of a single book:

> In a narrative with scores of characters and plots and subplots, the one constant is the story of how this book became a book. Its narrative arc follows the real-world physical process of creating manuscripts, of how the book was written, preserved, edited, and archived and passed along through history, usually under the worst of conditions. . . . The one steady character throughout the story is the record itself, the book, the various manuscripts that Mormon edited down into the gold plates, which Joseph eventually excavated and translated. (p. 6)

This is a formidable insight, at once deeply material (because it focuses on the production of a tangible item) and dizzyingly abstract (because it suggests the possibility of a book being primarily about its own creation). And it supports a fertile reading of the text. In Steinberg’s narrative, the book of the Book of Mormon begins when Nephi kills Laban to get the original brass plates, thereby letting readers know that they are about to read a book that was important enough to kill for (p. 20). All of the book’s authors comment on the book they are making, and some of them do little else (I’m talking to you, Chemish). In fact, the only thing that the
various authors and editors of the Book of Mormon have in common is that they are authors and editors of the Book of Mormon—and this binds them narratologically to the final editor and translator, Joseph Smith.

Steinberg’s definition of the Book of Mormon suffers from some definitional creep as the narrative progresses. Along with being the story of the Nephites combined with the story of its own coming forth, the Book of Mormon eventually includes nearly everything that Joseph ever said about the American continent—including his statements that the Garden of Eden was, and the New Jerusalem would be, in Jackson County, Missouri. The fact that Mormons attach great theological significance to a Kansas City suburb is a long-running joke. In 2007, Mitt Romney became the first presidential candidate in history to be asked where he thought the Garden of Eden was—with the clear implication that “Missouri” was weird and “Northern Iraq” was perfectly acceptable. But the construction of the American frontier as a sacred space attracted many early converts to the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith broke the Old World’s monopoly on biblical sites. He told people that their lives and their country could be part of the most important narrative in their culture. This, more than anything else, causes Steinberg to elevate the Book of Mormon to the level of great art:

Joseph spent his life digging into the soil and finding artifacts, footnotes to his Book of Mormon. He was one of the first ravished souls to take on the big American literary project, the call to writers of the New World to venture deep into the interior, to blaze a trail, to describe the land, its rivers, its political and natural histories and myths, its tribes and wars and tragedies, and to collect all of it, the whole of this giant continent, and synthesize it into a single, bulging narrative filtered through the energetically deluded first person, to create America in words and deliver it to the people in a book as big and shameless and unruly and haunted and deeply problematic as the country itself. (p. 9)

For Steinberg, the fact that the Book of Mormon occurs in America is one of the things that makes it great. By expanding the biblical narrative to the American continent, Joseph used the raw materials of his
own culture to create a new mythos capable of effecting a cultural shift. This is the sort of thing that world-historical writers forge in the smithies of their souls—Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Joseph Smith. Books that shake the world almost always do so by reworking major cultural narratives for new generations. If such a work makes a claim to divine revelation that we accept, we call it “scripture.” Everything else we call “literature.” Steinberg does not try to place the Book of Mormon into one of these categories; rather, he tries to collapse the distinction until it no longer matters. Most writers claim some kind of inspiration for their work. And all writers, at some level, want to shake the world. “From the day he burst onto the literary scene with his debut bible,” Steinberg muses, “Joseph was condemned for fostering a cult around his book. But isn’t that what literature has always done? . . . Is Joseph’s crime that he succeeded?” (p. 80).

From this observation, Steinberg proceeds to frame Joseph Smith as a stand-in for all writers and the Book of Mormon as a symbol for every book. In this conceit, the gold plates become that hidden nugget of truth or experience that writers always try to recover in pure form but which can only ever be understood in imperfect translation. Writing is the act of digging into one’s native soil in search of these golden stories and translating them into a common tongue. “All stories begin as gold plates,” he insists, and “all gold plates are lost forever. . . . The stories we tell about ourselves are always some kind of translation, a flawed rendering” (p. 192). As readers, he suggests, we must recognize that “every book we read is really a translation, an imperfect copy, of those unseen and ultimately untouchable gold plates. All stories are approximations of some lost story” (p. 166).

Joseph Smith was a successful writer, not only because he found and translated the gold plates, but also because he wrote himself, and the people and places he knew best, into the story. At some point—and he is not at all clear about when—Steinberg determined to do the same thing and write himself into the ever-evolving text of the Book of Mormon. Perplexingly, though, Steinberg hides the production of his own book from his readers in ways that, according to his own argument, none of
his predecessors did. He asks us to believe, for example, that he signed up for an expensive Book of Mormon archaeology tour and then misrepresented himself to join the cast of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, simply because he was compulsively fascinated by the Joseph Smith story—not because he was gathering material for a new book. This is not unusual or deceptive; very few writers reference the books that they are writing in those books themselves. But one of the most important points that Steinberg makes is that all the writers of the Book of Mormon did reference their book. By keeping the fourth wall firmly in place, when it would have been very easy to give readers glimpses of the book in progress, Steinberg becomes the odd one out in the very narrative tradition he is trying to write himself into.

But almost everything about *The Lost Book of Mormon* is odd, or at least unique, when compared to other books about the Book of Mormon. It does not fit into any of the prefab categories. It is neither pro- nor anti-Mormon. It is not a memoir, a travel narrative, a history book, or a work of literary criticism. Some Latter-day Saints will find it hostile to their religion, while almost everybody genuinely hostile to Mormonism will find it cloying and sentimental. One can think of any number of things that Steinberg could have done to write a different book than he did. But the book that actually got written deserves respect and consideration precisely because it is so unlike any other book on its topic.

The author of nearly every other literary study of the Book of Mormon begins with a religious understanding of the text and moves to a literary one. In *The Lost Book of Mormon*, Avi Steinberg reverses this direction. He offers his experience as a reader who first read and thought seriously about the Book of Mormon as a literary document and then sought ways to experience it in a religious context. *The Lost Book of Mormon* gives Latter-day Saint readers a rare glimpse of something we almost never see: an intelligent, thoughtful reader experiencing our sacred book apart from the theological frames that we usually set it in—the message without the messaging. And we can be pleased that, in the absence of any religious belief, he becomes enthralled by its epic force, its narrative power, and its undeniable significance to the culture that produced it.


Reviewed by Christopher James Blythe

The Book of Mormon’s Witness to Its First Readers is a thoughtful devotional volume written by a member of Community of Christ’s Council of Twelve Apostles, published by the church’s seminary, and designed as much to shape current understandings of the Book of Mormon in that tradition as it is in understanding the past. The handsome 212-page book is divided into fifteen short chapters discussing the purpose and importance of scripture, nineteenth-century historical contextualization, and the content of the text itself. Each chapter is accompanied with somewhere between seven and nine “Questions for Consideration” intended to enhance personal or classroom study.

The purpose of this volume is twofold. First, Luffman is conducting an investigation on how early Mormons would have understood the Book of Mormon text based on the context of their lives. Second, he is exploring how the Book of Mormon could be effectively employed in the twenty-first-century Community of Christ. I think it is important to understand this second facet to truly appreciate the significance of this work. Over the past several decades, as Community of Christ has moved in an increasingly mainline Christian direction, the Book of Mormon has taken a back seat in discourse and devotion. It has not been until more recent times that the church has sought to reclaim its
distinctive Restoration past while continuing to hold onto the inclusive, nonliteralistic, ecumenical theology that it has embraced in the interim.

Luffman explicitly longs for Community of Christ members to again read and ponder the Book of Mormon and this too in response to a prophetic call. He cites the canonized revelations of the two most recent Community of Christ presidents. First, Grant McMurray’s section 162, which states, “Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church” (CofC D&C 162:2d). And again, he cites current President Stephen M. Veazy’s contribution to the Doctrine and Covenants, section 164. In part, the revelation pointed to a renewal of the church’s experience with scripture. It testified of scripture as “an indispensable witness to the Eternal Source of light and truth,” while warning that it was produced by fallible authors. Scripture was not to replace “the Eternal One of whom scripture testifies” as a source of worship. Both of these scriptural admonitions pointed Community of Christ members to take seriously their Restoration DNA without being limited to conservative/literal renderings of the text.

That being said, Luffman is at his best when writing about the text itself. While my reading of the Book of Mormon differs in fundamental ways from his own, I found myself moved at times by his exegesis. Luffman found a good way to bring to life the Book of Mormon’s message in guiding the reader to understand how early Latter-day Saints might have read the text. For example, I appreciated Luffman’s emphasis on the scripture’s critique of capitalism. “This book was to inspire faith and encourage faithfulness, especially among the disaffected and dislocated, the marginalized and the poor” (p. 41). In fact, Luffman refers to the Book of Mormon’s concern for social justice as one of the major themes that twenty-first-century readers might find troubling, in a way that the earliest readers did not. His exploration on the volume’s presentation of the divinity of Christ and soteriology is also strong.

In bringing to life the world of early Mormonism, Luffman depends on the work of a number of scholars. In particular, he draws on the scholarship of Grant Hardy, Nathan Hatch, Robert Hullinger, D. Michael
Quinn, and Mark D. Thomas. Luffman’s discussion of the Book of Mormon as literature is quite fine. On the other hand, while I commend his efforts when he is actually providing a nineteenth-century reception history, there are moments when he seems to be deliberately arguing for a nineteenth-century authorship of the text. This is particularly apparent in his chapter on conversion in the Book of Mormon, which closely follows Grant Palmer’s *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*.

I must admit that I think *The Book of Mormon’s Witness to Its First Readers* falls short—although not entirely—in its effort to understand the manner in which early Mormons interpreted the scriptural text. While Luffman has employed a number of significant scholarly works to demonstrate the practical concerns of the nineteenth-century reader, he has not consulted those readers directly. There is not a single primary source included in this volume. For example, Luffman continues to return to the Book of Mormon’s critique of Deist philosophies concerning the nature of God, continuing revelation, and so forth. I was left wondering if early Mormons saw within their scripture a critique of Deism, or if other interpretations such as a critique on creedal Christianity were just as likely.

I would not recommend this volume to an individual seeking a better understanding of the Book of Mormon text. For this, better options are on the market, some of which were consulted by Luffman in his work. I would, however, recommend this volume for someone interested in how non-LDS Restoration bodies are actively wrestling with the Book of Mormon. Luffman complicates the common (and not entirely misplaced) Latter-day Saint understanding of Community of Christ views on the Book of Mormon—that it has abandoned the text or completely ignored it. Even those, such as myself, who disagree with aspects of Luffman’s understanding of the Book of Mormon should applaud this project for the care and respect with which it treats this sacred volume of scripture. *The Book of Mormon’s Witness to Its First Readers* will easily convince its audience that there is still a place for the founding scripture of the Restoration in Community of Christ worship.
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Reviewed by Rosalynde Frandsen Welch

A seafaring Israelite clan flees Jerusalem to establish a colony in the Western Hemisphere. There a schism between brothers fractures the young society into rival factions, carving out two competing views of the tribe’s history and future. These factions compete for ascendancy across six centuries of political and religious upheaval, until a long-prophesied Messiah arrives to harmonize and heal the rift.

This is the broadest outline of Joseph Spencer’s account of the Book of Mormon, and from high altitude this appears to be an unremarkable summary of the scripture. But it is not the ethnic history of Nephite and Lamanite that Spencer has in view. Rather, he traces a fascinating and novel theological fault line through the Book of Mormon, a split that begins at a subtle difference of emphasis between Nephi and Jacob, and reaches its fullest development in Abinadi’s sharply delineated departure from Nephi’s interpretation of Isaiah. The Abinadite view holds sway in the Nephite church until Christ’s personal ministry closes the chasm.

Spencer’s argument, developed in his book An Other Testament: On Typology, soon to be reissued by the Maxwell Institute, is at once a fresh avenue into Book of Mormon studies and an incremental development of his distinguished forebears in the field. Spencer draws generously on the work of Hugh Nibley, John Welch, Royal Skousen, Noel Reynolds, Kent Jackson, Grant Hardy, Brant Gardner, and other
architects of Book of Mormon scholarship. At the same time, he brings a new set of critical ideas to bear on the text, ideas adopted from the contemporary Continental philosophy in which he is trained. These thinkers, principally Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Marion, and Alain Badiou, will be unfamiliar to many of Spencer’s readers, but he weaves their insights skillfully into his argument; the result is challenging yet stimulating for the motivated nonspecialist.

Despite the exotic whiff of Continental theory, Spencer’s basic analytical technique is the sturdy bread and butter of Book of Mormon studies as the field has developed through the pedigree sketched above—namely, close exegetical reading in constant dialogue with the Hebrew Bible, rhetorical study of parallelism and chiasmus, and structural analysis of the book’s narrative and editorial construction. In Spencer’s hands, though, these tools are used to dense, complex effect. His dazzling style, partly a trace of the high critical theory in which he is steeped, is no cheap pyrotechnic. It is the necessary vehicle for what we might call the “analytical abundance” of his argument: every page, nearly every paragraph, offers a new claim, a new reading, a new vista.

This overflowing of analytic exuberance circles a set of theological ideas—principally law, prophecy, grace, covenant, atonement, and eschaton—that Spencer gathers together under the umbrella of typology. It seems like an odd move: typology, at first blush, is a pedestrian rhetorical encoding technique, hardly a compelling theological heading in itself. It soon becomes clear that Spencer, borrowing the term from Book of Mormon authors, uses it to signify something much richer and deeper, not a mere rhetorical technique, but a complex—and occasionally elusive—theological motif.

For Spencer, theological typology is a pas de deux between past and future, promise and fulfillment, creation and eschaton. At its most basic, typology is simply the scriptural gesture of moving significance forward or backward through sacred time, something that I’m calling here “temporal traverse.” Once identified, this gesture can be seen at work in most theological ideas: in the notion of the eschaton, for example, which gestures forward to redemption and backward to covenant,
and in the related concepts of messianism, prophecy, and fulfillment. Temporal traverse informs ideas of restoration and Zion and, with more complexity, notions of repentance and grace, which refer backward to sin and forward to wholeness. And, of course, temporal traverse is the basic mechanism of ordinary rhetorical typology, which transfers significance from one set of signifiers to a future set.

Indeed the Book of Mormon itself is perhaps its own best example of typological temporal traverse. Spencer quotes Jan Shipps, who, though she does not use the vocabulary of typology, ably captures the scripture’s complex temporality:

Since [the Book of Mormon] was at one and the same time prophecy (a book that said it was an ancient record prophesying that a book would come forth) and (as the book that had come forth) fulfillment of prophecy, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon effected a break in the very fabric of history. (quoted in Spencer, p. 28)

To the Book of Mormon notion of typology, Spencer marries the notion of the event, a central idea in contemporary Continental philosophy. The term carries a specific and rather knotty meaning in philosophy, and while Spencer’s use of the category is fully informed by this substrate, he deploys it here lucidly. A theological event is a moment in sacred time that interrupts the flow of ordinary material history, that closed chain of cause and effect, and in so doing allows the past to be reordered in fidelity to the event and the emerging future it heralds. Thus evental knowledge—an infelicitous but useful adjectival elaboration—describes a spiritual way of knowing that is not fixed in a single trajectory by the closure of history, whether private or collective. Its resonance with Spencer’s notion of typology is clear, as is its relevance to the theological categories in play: the past need not ossify the present and the future, because the theological event reverberates across time. Redemption, repentance, conversion, forgiveness, grace: all promise beauty for ashes, a spiritual reordering of the past that draws forth a living current of creation from cold, dead history.
To distil these theories of typology and event into abstraction, as I have here, is to disserve the delicacy with which the author both extracts and entwines them with the Book of Mormon text. He first introduces the terms in a novel psychological reading of Alma’s conversion narrative in Alma 36. Noting that Alma’s moment of transformation in verse 18 is prompted by a recollection of his father’s prophecy of Christ’s atonement, Spencer wonders what it can mean to have a memory of a future event. Only a history which is open and creative—that is, an evental history constantly traversed by typological significance—can resist closure and thus accommodate the intricate time-travel implicit in a “memory of the future.” And only evental history can accommodate Alma’s radically reordered understanding of his own nature, a reordering that we understand as conversion. The merely historical is replaced by the infinite evental. “Conversion is,” as Spencer puts it, “the process of allowing the new to reorient the old without replacing it” (p. 25).

As the book’s two-part title suggests, Spencer’s aim is double: to explore the suite of ideas he brings together in theological typology and to offer a new account—“an other” account—of the Book of Mormon’s basic theological shape. The Book of Mormon, Spencer argues, has an essentially bifurcate structure, following the distinct hermeneutic traditions developed by Nephi and Abinadi in their readings of Isaiah. Nephi’s approach to reading Isaiah, which he calls “likening the scripture unto us,” consistently interprets the prophet’s words in terms of the eschatological redemption of the covenant people in the last day. Israel’s collective world-historical experience is given shape by Isaiah’s prophetically predetermined template.

Nephi’s characteristically collective and future-oriented interpretation of Isaiah, however, is not the theological typology that Spencer has in mind. He argues, rather, that as Nephi likens the words of the prophet to the future of his people, he discovers in them the typological nature of the law. This is the heart of Spencer’s theological argument, and it is not easy to grasp as it emerges in a complex exegesis of Nephi’s beheading of Laban. Because the law of Moses is given to Israel as a self-justifying gift—not as transaction or reward—it points only toward its promise of
eschatological redemption, not toward present-day expediency or merit based in the economic order. As Spencer puts it, “If a law is only fully a law when it is received as a gift, then the law of Moses—particularly in that it was given—orients itself, by its very nature, to its messianic fulfillment” (p. 96). In other words, law is justifiable only on the basis that it was given by God, and this givenness is a kind of grace. Grace is sovereign, beyond cause and mere history, the child of cause, without compulsion and without instrumental aim. Understanding the law typologically thus reveals the crucial truth that law is not set against grace, in the way justice is often set over against mercy. On the contrary, typology shows that the law is inherently graceful because it is given; indeed, law names, precisely, the graceful fulfillment of God’s covenant.

A note here, before turning to Abinadi’s typology, on the meaning of theology in a Book of Mormon context. In addition to the Book of Mormon scholars with whom he engages his exegetical claims and the Continental philosophers from whom he draws his vocabulary and style, Spencer draws on a third set of sources in An Other Testament, a group of Old Testament theologians including Margaret Barker, Gerard von Rad, Brevard Childs, and Jon Levenson. It is to these thinkers that Spencer’s section of overtly theological work in An Other Testament, the exploration of grace composing the book’s third chapter, is most closely related methodologically. Spencer, that is, wants to do more than piece together an intellectual history of Nephite religion or an editorial history of the Book of Mormon text, fascinating and novel as he shows those histories to be. Rather, he wants to develop in those histories ideas that are explicitly doctrinal in nature, new understandings of grace and law and covenant—ideas that are justified and grounded primarily in the text of canonized scripture itself, rather than by a prior appeal to official doctrine as has been typical in Book of Mormon exegesis to this point. Spencer aims, in other words, to do Book of Mormon theology. Spencer meticulously roots his theological claims in a seedbed of canonized scripture and stakes them to existing scholarly Book of Mormon literature: he is not out there building castles in the sky. Nevertheless, he is doing more than merely offering new flourishes on stable doctrinal understanding:
he is indeed offering us new understandings, and grounding those understandings in a new way.

Nephi’s typology, then, is a theology of grace. What of Abinadi’s? In answering this, Spencer wagers a fascinating conjectural history of the Zeniffite movement. He suggests, following John Welch, that Zeniff’s attempted restoration of the original Nephite monarchy was closely linked to the Nephite interpretation of Isaiah—or an ideological distortion thereof. That is, Zeniff and his people understood themselves to have realized precisely the eschatological redemption of Israel with which Nephi’s “likening” of Isaiah is so preoccupied. Situating themselves thus within the fulfillment of the law itself, Noah’s priests see no need for a prophet like Abinadi to preach the law—indeed, Abinadi’s message challenges their world-historical self-concept. Abinadi, for his part, can break through the priests’ deadening complacency only by countering the Nephite approach to Isaiah at its root. Where Nephi finds in Isaiah collective covenantal theology, Abinadi finds in Isaiah a soteriology focused on individual salvation through Christ’s atonement. Hermeneutic typology for Abinadi thus becomes a matter of identifying in scripture clues to Christ’s mortal advent: Abinadi is concerned with “types of Christ” found in the law, where Nephi is concerned with “typifying Christ” through law. Likewise, Abinadi’s understanding of law and grace departs sharply from Nephi’s: where Nephi sees law as grace, Abinadi sees the law of Moses as temporary, limited, and expedient, set over and against Christ’s merciful atonement. For Nephi, prophets preach the redemption of Israel; for Abinadi, prophets preach personal redemption through Christ.

Abinadi’s radical departure from Nephi’s typology becomes codified in the Nephite church through Alma’s influence, Spencer argues. Mormon is an heir of Abinadi, chronicling Nephite history after the “Abinadite shift” and ever anxious to draw Christological soteriology from his large-plate sources. Yet when Christ himself visits the Nephite people, Spencer points out, he says little about the individual redemption effected by his sacrificial atonement. Rather, he returns to the old Nephite themes of Israel’s eschatological redemption, subtly correcting
Abinadi’s theological errors on matters of baptism and Godhead. Spencer sees in this an implicit privileging of Nephi’s approach to typology, law, and grace. The Abinadite way is not abandoned as a mistaken dead end, however; its “reinterpretation of the small plates may well have been the only way to salvage the [Isaianic] tradition” from the Zeniffite perversion, through “strict anticipatory Christology” (pp. 167, 169).

In reviewing a book that makes claims both sweeping and minutely granular, the reviewer must avoid both Scylla and Charybdis: that is, entangling herself in the underbrush of the argument and overreading its global implications. In any work of such analytic abundance, the reader is likely to encounter novel readings that he finds unpersuasive or overdrawn. I don’t wish to quarrel with any particular interpretive wager, though there were some that struck me as intricate but not necessarily intentional or inevitable readings of the text in question. The sheer breadth of the evidence marshaled in favor of Spencer’s overarching claim about Nephi’s and Abinadi’s distinct interpretive methods, as well as the deep layering of analytic methods, overcome any objections to particular readings.

Similarly, An Other Testament reproduces some of the questions inherent in Book of Mormon studies broadly, particularly questions about translation and authorial intent. Spencer relies on Royal Skousen’s critical text of the scripture and its tight translation model, which assumes that the text of the Book of Mormon, as it was anciently compiled, came through the nineteenth-century translation process with very little alteration. Furthermore, the nature of Spencer’s argument often infers the intention and design of Book of Mormon authors, placing great interpretive burden on particular word choices, sentence structures, and complex allusive echoes—inferences that rely on a tight process of translation. At the same time, Spencer frankly acknowledges that anachronistic scriptural language appears in the Book of Mormon, as in 1 Nephi 10:7–8, which appears to draw on New Testament texts. That Spencer does not resolve the tension between a tight translation model and New Testament anachronism should not be held against his book.
This is an open critical question for Book of Mormon studies, and its persistence need not tether new exploration in the field.

A trickier question is that of historicity. Spencer openly affirms the ancient historicity of the Book of Mormon, not only in explicit avowal but in his every interpretive move, which depends for its coherence on the multiple ancient authorship of the scriptural books he analyzes. Yet he does not wish to alienate readers who approach the Book of Mormon with other assumptions, indeed he wishes to invite them into the investigation, and thus he attempts to disarm the contentious question of the book’s historicity. He does so not by “bracketing” the question in a temporary time-out, but through more audacious attempt to deconstruct the very premise of the question.

The book’s primary analytical categories, typology and evental history, are, as I have shown above, preoccupied with questions of time and historical sequence—and above all with the possibility of breaking free of history’s closed syllogisms through the eruption of grace into histories both personal and collective. Most of the book applies these concepts to the theologies contained within the Book of Mormon, but Spencer briefly turns his lens on the larger historical meaning of the Book of Mormon itself. What can anachronism mean when the very fabric of history is subject to radical reordering? Characteristically, Spencer rejects the question as typically framed and turns it inside out. He writes:

On my argument, the Book of Mormon must be regarded as neither historical nor unhistorical, but as nonhistorical. This is not to suggest that the events it records did not happen. On the contrary, it is to claim that it must be subtracted from the dichotomy of the historical/unhistorical because the faithful reader testifies that the events—rather than the history—recorded in the book not only took place, but are of infinite typological importance. Any enclosure of the Book of Mormon within a totalized world history amounts to a denial of the book’s unique claim on the attention of the whole world. (p. 28)
In other words, because the happenings recorded in the Book of Mormon are not merely historical incidents but sacred events that reverberate through time and reorder spiritual reality, no single historical timeline—whether ancient or nineteenth century—can fully account for the book’s significance. For Spencer, this deconstruction of the question is a satisfactory resolution. “I believe,” he writes, “this analysis clarifies the problem of the Book of Mormon’s historicity” (p. 28).

Spencer’s approach has the advantage of bringing into focus the theological and devotional significance of the Book of Mormon’s complex temporality in a brilliantly novel manner. But I think it is unlikely to permanently clarify the historicity debates, as he suggests. After all, from the perspective of those who defend the Book of Mormon’s ancient historical origin, the reason for that defense—that is, the reason for situating the Book of Mormon in the “closed” historical flow of ancient Mesoamerica at all—is precisely to defend the miraculous, evental nature of Joseph Smith’s midwifing of the book in the nineteenth century and the restoration it heralded. In other words, the apologetic work of historicizing the Book of Mormon narrative is undertaken in the service of “dehistoricizing” its eternal, spiritual significance: namely, the profoundly disruptive and transformative intervention of the divine into world history represented by the events of the restoration. While traditional Book of Mormon defenders likely agree that debates about historicity should not dominate Book of Mormon scholarship, I doubt that Spencer’s critique will persuade many to cease their efforts; on the contrary, they see their efforts as an integral part of illuminating, precisely, the evental nature of the Latter-day Saint restoration. They are already engaged in the work Spencer calls for.

Ultimately, these questions of historicity are only a momentary detour from the textual investigations of An Other Testament. Indeed, the book largely eschews discussion of its own metameaning in favor of intense concentration on the texts at hand—and that concentration is the reader’s primary reward. What of its larger metameaning, though? Does the book implicitly summon a shift in Mormon culture or Book of Mormon studies? Inasmuch as the book sketches a narrative in which
Nephi’s approach to typology is privileged over Abinadi’s, one might draw from it a gentle challenge to contemporary Mormon devotional-scriptural practice, which, heir to Abinadi through Mormon’s editorial intervention, tends to focus on matters of individual repentance, purity, and salvation. A return to Nephi’s typology prioritizes communal spiritual welfare and Zion making over individual spiritual hygiene. It emphasizes covenant, which collectivizes sin, repentance, and redemption, over soteriology, which tends to individualize those categories. Nephi’s emphasis on grace as the substance of divine law, and Spencer’s illumination thereof, contributes to an emphasis on grace that has recently emerged in LDS preaching. Spencer’s work refines and expands that notion of grace by showing that grace is implicit in fundamental notions of spiritual law and ontology, not a localized, post hoc response to sin and repentance, powerful as that response surely can be.

A return to Nephi by way of Spencer represents a return to scripture: an appreciation of scripture as an end in itself, rather than as an index to certain histories and predictions, and of scripture reading as spiritual practice in itself, rather than as a handlist to other devotional practices. This approach to scripture should not be understood to minimize scripture’s influence in the real world: on the contrary, the intense concentration that Nephi applies to Isaiah’s words themselves, and which Spencer in turn applies to Nephi’s words, ultimately yields a more expansive and universally transformative vision of the Messiah than does Abinadi’s application-oriented approach. As Spencer puts it, the Book of Mormon should be “read not only as a gathering of texts about the covenant, but as a singular text intertwined, in its very material existence, with the actual fulfillment of the covenant” (p. 175). A singular text, perhaps, but one that encompasses several voices—An Other Testament shows, through its analysis of Nephi’s and Abinadi’s divergent approaches, that the Book of Mormon is fundamentally polyvocal rather than univocal on crucial matters of doctrine, nudging the reader to consider a more plural, theological approach to the very question of doctrine.

These new and renewed directions are substantive, but I believe it’s a mistake for readers to dwell first on the book’s potential influence
beyond its covers, whatever that might turn out to be. Do not mistake this for quietism: the book is deeply consequential, but it is consequential for what it says and models about scripture, not for its location in any particular institutional or disciplinary landscape. To frame it primarily in those terms would be to trivialize its real potential and power. After all, if we read the book as it teaches us to read it—as Spencer suggests we should approach the Book of Mormon itself—our focus can finally linger only on Isaiah, not on historicity debates, culture shifts, or future directions of the discipline. It is in Isaiah—in the words of Isaiah, in the fissures and echoes between those words, in the larger theology of exodus, redemption, and writing that emerges from Isaiah—that both Nephi and Abinadi work out their prophetic roles and find their prophetic voices. Too often Isaiah is encountered by readers of the Book of Mormon as an impediment to deep engagement with the scripture. *An Other Testament* teaches us that Isaiah not only can but must be the key to understanding the prophetic voices that cry to us typologically from the dust:

Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait upon the Lord, that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts, which dwelleth in Mount Zion. (Isaiah 8:16–18; 2 Nephi 18:16–18)

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Despite the fact that the Book of Mormon contains frequent mention of the Spirit by a variety of names and titles, little attention has been devoted to the pneumatology of the Book of Mormon.¹ This study seeks to identify the broad contours of Book of Mormon pneumatology based on the claims of the book itself.

This piece is offered as an initial, exploratory investigation that might serve as a starting point for a variety of other inquiries that focus on possible backgrounds and comparative studies, as well as assessments as to possible unique pneumatological articulations within the book. But as should be self-evident, such analyses would of necessity at some point need to come to terms with an overview of the book’s pneumatology, articulated as nearly as possible in the book’s own vocabulary.

¹ The most extensive, and apparently only, major study to date is Lynne Savage Hilton Wilson, “Joseph Smith’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit Contrasted with Cartwright, Campbell, Hodge, and Finney” (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2010). The focus of Wilson’s study, as its title implies, is the pneumatology of Joseph Smith generally. However, Wilson offers a helpful starting point for a study of Book of Mormon pneumatology. The study’s primary contribution in this regard is found in a brief overview of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Mormon (pp. 260–62), an overview of Smith’s doctrinal emphases in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants (pp. 272–76), and several helpful appendixes, especially the first portion of appendix 4 (pp. 381–411), which lists all the passages in which one of the terms for the Spirit occurs in the Book of Mormon. This article is part of a forthcoming larger work on the Book of Mormon.
and according to its own emphases and categories. The present study seeks to fill this lacuna in Book of Mormon studies.

The divinity, nature, and form of the Holy Ghost

As one reads the Book of Mormon it does not take long to learn that the Holy Ghost is spoken of, at times, in Trinitarian-type language. On several occasions the oneness of God is underscored with the Holy Ghost receiving explicit inclusion in this description, as is seen in the words of 2 Nephi 31:21, “And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end” (see Alma 11:44; 3 Nephi 11:27–28, 36; Mormon 7:7). In some of these texts a note about the eternality of God is included, which in turn includes the eternality of the Holy Ghost (2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:44). Related to this aspect is the belief that, as is said of God and Jesus, “the Spirit is the same, yesterday, today, and forever” (2 Nephi 2:4). As for the physical form of the Holy Ghost, 1 Nephi 11:11 suggests that the Spirit is as a man in physical appearance. Nephi says of his revelatory experience, “For I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless, I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another.” However, this interpretation is complicated by the fact that a few verses later, in a prophecy of the baptism of the Lamb of God, Nephi says, “And after he was baptized, I beheld the heavens open, and the Holy Ghost come down out of heaven and abide upon him in the form of a dove” (1 Nephi 11:27), suggesting that at the very least the Spirit is not limited to one physical form. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the fact that later the Holy Ghost is again described as descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove (2 Nephi 31:8). The Book of Mormon also records


the words of the Zoramites that God was a Spirit, is a Spirit, and will be a Spirit forever (Alma 31:15), a statement that might be understood as an apostate Zoramite doctrine.

The Holy Ghost and prophecy

In the Book of Mormon there is a close connection between the Spirit and prophecy, with the phrase “the spirit of prophecy” occurring on a number of occasions. This phrase appears prominently as early as the book’s title page, where the book’s contents are said to have been written “by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation.” As the narrative proper begins, Lehi is filled with the Spirit and begins to prophesy (1 Nephi 5:17). The link between the Spirit and prophecy is found in 2 Nephi 25:4 as well, where the spirit of prophecy is also said to make understandable the words of Isaiah, apparently indicating that the Spirit aids in the interpretation of scripture. Another example of the relationship between the Spirit and prophesying is found in Jacob 4:15, “I, Jacob, am led on by the Spirit unto prophesying; for I perceive by the workings of the Spirit which is in me, that by the stumbling of the Jews they will reject the stone upon which they might build and have safe foundation” (see Jacob 1:6; 4:6, 13). Abinadi also emphasizes the connection between the Spirit of prophecy and true understanding when he responds to his accusers, “Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people, and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire to know of me what these things mean?” (Mosiah 12:25). The relationship between the Spirit of prophecy and the (prophetic) preaching of the gospel is made clear in Alma 8:24 where Alma proclaims to Amulek, “And behold, I have been called to preach the word of God among all this people, according to the spirit of revelation and prophecy”—with the fulfillment of his intended activity described in 8:32. The revelatory work of the spirit of prophecy is also underscored in many places in Alma (3:27; 4:13, 20; 5:47; 6:8; 10:12; 12:7; 13:26; 16:5; 25:16; 37:15; 45:10). The spirit of prophecy and revelation also enables the sons of Mosiah to teach with power and the authority of God (Alma 17:3; see 23:6 and 43:2). Thus, not surprisingly,
a major aspect of the work of the Spirit in the Book of Mormon is its intimate relationship to prophetic work.

The Holy Ghost and power

Another major dimension of the work of the Holy Ghost as described in the Book of Mormon is its close association with power. On numerous occasions a variety of things are said to have happened as a result of the power of the Holy Ghost. As early as 1 Nephi 3:20 reference is made to the way in which the contents of the sacred records came about—“the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets, which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God.” In like manner, Nephi testifies that the things his father Lehi spoke were “by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God” and that he (Nephi) was desirous that he “might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 10:17), for “the mysteries of God shall be unfolded . . . by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 10:19). The power of the Spirit of God can also protect God’s spokesperson from physical harm, as when Nephi’s brothers could not lay a hand on him because of the power of the Spirit of God (1 Nephi 17:52). The resurrection of the Messiah will be accomplished by the power of the Spirit (2 Nephi 2:8); in fact, the future Messiah will himself be manifested in the latter days in the spirit of power (2 Nephi 3:5). Further, it is said that Jesus will manifest himself to all who believe in him by the power of the Holy Ghost, working miracles, signs, and wonders (2 Nephi 26:13). The power of the Holy Ghost is especially associated with true precepts (2 Nephi 28:31), so much so that the power of the Holy Ghost enables angels to speak the words of Christ (2 Nephi 32:3). Not only this, but when one speaks “by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost” carries the message to the hearts of humankind (2 Nephi 33:1). The power of the Holy Ghost also

manifests knowledge (Jacob 7:12) and causes one to teach with power and authority (Mosiah 18:26). It is by means of the power of the Holy Ghost that the virgin shall be overshadowed and conceive (Alma 7:10). Alma and Amulek “went forth and began to preach and to prophesy unto the people, according to the spirit and power which the Lord had given them” (Alma 8:32), while the power and Spirit of God leads to the conversion of many (3 Nephi 7:21). The power of the Spirit bestowed on believers will be instrumental in restoring the remnant of the house of Jacob (3 Nephi 21:2). In keeping with the fact that the power of the Holy Ghost is the way by which God works (3 Nephi 29:6), ordinations took place by the power of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 3:4), those baptized were cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 6:4), and the power of the Holy Ghost led the worshippers “whether to preach, or to exhort, or to pray, or to supplicate, or to sing” (Moroni 6:9). The power of the Holy Ghost enables one to confess that Jesus is the Christ (Moroni 7:44). This same power of the Holy Ghost led Mormon to the discovery of why infant baptism is mockery before God (Moroni 8:7, 23). Finally, the truth of the words written in the Book of Mormon will be manifested by the power of the Holy Ghost to those who ask with a sincere heart and real intent (Moroni 10:4–7). Thus, this aspect of Book of Mormon pneumatology underscores the dynamic nature of the Spirit’s role.

**The Holy Ghost’s influence on individuals**

Another major aspect of Book of Mormon pneumatology concerns the way in which the Spirit is spoken of as filling, being poured out on, coming upon, or falling on a variety of individuals. To a certain extent these expressions convey similar realities and might be thought of as functioning synonymously. On over a dozen occasions some form of the phrase “filled with” or being “full of” the Spirit appears. Specifically, compare 1 Nephi 1:12; 2:14; 5:17; 17:47 (“full of the Spirit of God”); 2 Nephi 25:4; Mosiah 18:10–14; Alma 8:30; 18:16; 31:36; 36:24; Helaman 5:45; 3 Nephi 12:6; 20:9; 30:2; and Mormon 7:10. Wilson, “Joseph Smith's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” 275, identifies seven such texts.
are filled with the Spirit, various phenomena occur. Lehi rejoiced as a result of being filled with the Spirit (1 Nephi 1:12, 15). When he spoke to his sons after being filled with the Spirit, his sons did shake before him (1 Nephi 2:14). On another occasion when Lehi was filled with the Spirit, he began to prophesy (1 Nephi 5:17). Significantly, the result of Nephi’s claim to be full of the Spirit of God was as if his “frame [had] no strength” (1 Nephi 17:47). Being filled with the Spirit of prophecy enables one to understand the words of scripture, specifically Isaiah (2 Nephi 25:4), and it is also closely associated with declaring the word of God (Alma 8:30; Helaman 5:45). With the help of the Spirit, Ammon could perceive the thoughts of the king (Alma 18:16). Being filled with the Spirit is closely associated with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper—where those involved cried and gave glory to Jesus (3 Nephi 20:9), with water baptism (Mosiah 18:10–14; 3 Nephi 30:2; Mormon 7:10), and with being born of God (Alma 36:24). On at least one occasion people were filled with the Spirit when Alma clapped his hands upon them (Alma 31:36).

The Book of Mormon also contains nine references to the Spirit being “poured out” on various individuals.6 As a result of the Spirit being poured into his soul, Jacob confounded his adversary, Sherem (Jacob 7:8). Similar to the Spirit filling someone, when the Spirit is poured out it results in joy so great that recipients cannot speak, which was the case with King Benjamin’s people (Mosiah 4:20). Likewise, when Ammon saw that the Spirit had been poured out on the Lamanites, he was overpowered with joy (Alma 19:14). The pouring out of the Spirit revealed no inequality among different peoples (Alma 16:16), for God extends his arm to all (Alma 19:36) and pours out his Spirit on both the Lamanites (Helaman 6:36) and eventually the Gentiles (3 Nephi 20:27). On at least two other occasions the Spirit is described as having fallen upon several individuals, including the twelve (1 Nephi 12:7) and as many as the disciples laid hands on (Moroni 2:3).

A related set of texts speaks of the Spirit being “in” this or that individual. As with other pneumatological expressions in the Book of

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6. See Jacob 7:8; Mosiah 4:20; 18:10–14; 25:24; Alma 16:16; 19:14, 36; Helaman 6:36; and 3 Nephi 20:27.
Mormon, the presence of the Spirit of the Lord in an individual relates closely with the act of prophesying, specifically in the case of Lehi (2 Nephi 4:12), Nephi (2 Nephi 25:4, 11), and Ether (Ether 12:2). Of the latter it is said, “And Ether was a prophet of the Lord; wherefore Ether came forth in the days of Coriantumr, and began to prophesy unto the people, for he could not be restrained because of the Spirit of the Lord which was in him.” The presence of the Spirit in an individual also leads to joy (Alma 7:5), knowledge and power (Alma 18:35; 38:6), discernment about when to speak (Alma 11:22), guidance for the journey (Alma 17:9), and softening of the heart (Alma 24:8).

A final set of passages linked to those surveyed to this point testifies to the ability of the Spirit to overcome or even carry an individual away. Specifically, when Lehi was overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision (1 Nephi 1:7–8), as was Nephi who was “caught away in the Spirit” and taken to an exceedingly high mountain (1 Nephi 11:1). This means of expression is used to describe Nephi’s experience on other occasions as well (1 Nephi 14:30; 15:1; 2 Nephi 4:25). A similar phenomenon occurs when Nephi describes his vision of the virgin mother of God, who is herself carried away in the Spirit (1 Nephi 11:19). Alma describes the sinking down of King Lamoni’s queen because of being overpowered by the Spirit (Alma 19:13). At the end of Alma’s life, a saying went abroad in the church purporting that Alma had been taken up by the Spirit or buried by the hand of the Lord even as Moses had been (Alma 45:19). Finally, Helaman notes that Nephi was taken away from his opponents by the Spirit (Helaman 10:16).

The Holy Ghost and speaking in tongues

The Book of Mormon closely associates the Holy Ghost and speaking in tongues. An explicit connection between the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost and speaking in tongues first appears in 2 Nephi 31:13, where the words of Jesus are prophetically quoted by Nephi with regard to salvation. The final portion of this verse reads:
Yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel.

While other important salvific activity is found within this verse—following the Son, repentance of sins, taking upon oneself the name of Christ, and baptism by water—it is the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost that enables one to speak with the tongues of angels. On the face of it, these words seem to imply that speaking in tongues functions as a proof or witness of having received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. These words may even suggest that the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost prepares one for missionary activity.

Lest the relationship between the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost and speaking with tongues be missed, in the very next verse (2 Ne-phi 31:14), which contains a description of the way of salvation—a via salutis—by the voice of the Son, the connection is made again with a bit of additional information provided with regard to speaking in tongues.

After ye have repented of your sins, and witnessed unto the Father that ye are willing to keep my commandments, by the baptism of water, and have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and can speak with a new tongue, yea, even with the tongue of angels, and after this should deny me, it would have been better for you that ye had not known me.

As before, a strong correlation is indicated between receiving the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost and speaking in tongues with the same implications as the previous statement: it is only by means of the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost that one is now able to speak in tongues. On this occasion, the accompanying glossolalia is initially described as speaking with a “new tongue” before being identified as

7. In Mark 16:17 the phrase “speaking with new tongues” occurs.
the same phenomenon as “the tongue of angels,” suggesting that these descriptions are to be understood as synonyms in the Book of Mormon.

This important connection is again reiterated in the next chapter of 2 Nephi 32:2–3.

Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could speak with the tongue of angels? And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost? Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ.

Several things are conveyed in this short passage. First, it becomes clear that in this verse receiving the Holy Ghost is understood to be synonymous with the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost described earlier. Second, it almost goes without saying that this verse further underscores the firm relationship between speaking in tongues and the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. Third, in this verse the relationship between the Holy Ghost and tongues speech is mentioned three separate times. Fourth, the tongue of angels is also closely identified with the words of Christ, perhaps again pointing to a possible relationship between the phenomenon of tongues speech and missionary activity.

In the Book of Mormon, speaking in tongues also comes to stand with and represent a whole matrix of spiritual activity that demonstrates the continuation of God’s activity in the world—that is, that the activity of God’s Spirit has not ceased among believers. This function of tongues first appears in Omni 1:25, where Amaleki, in transferring the plates to King Benjamin, says,

Wherefore, I shall deliver up these plates unto him, exhorting all men to come unto God, the Holy One of Israel, and believe in prophesying, and in revelations, and in the ministering of angels, and in the gift of speaking with tongues, and in the gift of interpreting languages, and in all things which are good.
The gift of speaking with tongues can also be listed as an example, along with others, of the way in which the Nephites have been highly favored of the Lord. Alma 9:20–21 notes:

Yea, after having been such a highly favored people of the Lord; yea, after having been favored above every other nation, kindred, tongue, or people; after having had all things made known unto them, according to their desires, and their faith and prayers, of that which has been, and which is, and which is to come; Having been visited by the Spirit of God; having conversed with angels, and having been spoken unto by the voice of the Lord; and having the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and also many gifts, the gift of speaking with tongues, and the gift of preaching, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the gift of translation.

Speaking in tongues as a sign of the continuous activity of the Spirit is so significant that Mormon (3 Nephi 29:6) warns that the denial of tongues, along with other items, is cause for judgment by Christ when he returns.

Yea, wo unto him that shall deny the revelations of the Lord, and that shall say the Lord no longer worketh by revelation, or by prophecy, or by gifts, or by tongues, or by healings, or by the power of the Holy Ghost!

Clearly, in these words tongues function as the negative counterpoint to their earlier significance in Omni 1:25. Mormon 9:7–9 continues with a similar warning to those who do not believe in the miraculous.

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, nor healing, nor speaking with tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Behold, I say unto you, he that denieth these things knoweth not the gospel of Christ; yea, he has not read the scriptures; if so, he does not understand them. For do we not read that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and in him there is no variableness, neither shadow of changing?
The rejection of God’s continuous activity in the present, in this case with regard to speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues, indicates one’s enmity to the gospel of Christ.

Conversely, such warnings give way to earnest expectations that tongues speech will accompany those who preach the gospel, as indicated in Mormon 9:24–25.

And these signs shall follow them that believe—in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover. And whosoever shall believe in my name, doubting nothing, unto him will I confirm all my words, even unto the ends of the earth.

The missionary context of these words indicates that speaking in tongues is an expected part of the divine signs that will confirm Christ’s words that are preached. The words “unto the ends of the earth” imply that such activity is to be an ongoing and normal part of the church’s proclamation. Similarly, Moroni includes “all kinds of tongues . . . [and] the interpretation of languages and of divers kinds of tongues” among those manifestations given by the Spirit of God to the church for its profit and within its ministry (Moroni 10:15–16).

Before leaving this topic, perhaps we should examine three additional passages that may have some relevance for the role of tongues in the Book of Mormon. In particular, while no explicit examples of any individuals speaking in tongues appear in the Book of Mormon, Alma 19:29–30 relates the actions of King Lamoni’s queen, who, when she had arisen and stood on her feet and praised the “blessed Jesus” for saving her “from an awful hell,” clasped her hands, being filled with joy, speaking many words which were not understood; and when she had done this, she took the king, Lamoni, by the hand, and behold he arose and stood upon his feet.
While certainty on the topic is perhaps beyond the reach of the interpreter, it should be observed that the reader of the Book of Mormon would not likely be taken aback by such a turn of events given the place of speaking in tongues in the book to this point and might possibly think of tongues speech as the logical explanation for the reason this queen’s words were not understood. While her baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost is not recounted, her conversion is clearly conveyed and leads, through Lamoni, to belief, conversion, baptism, and establishing a church among his people.

Similarly, speaking in tongues might also be inferred in Helaman 5:45, where in response to the intercession by Aminadab on behalf of Nephi and Lehi about three hundred souls experienced the following: “And behold, the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their hearts, and they were filled as if with fire, and they could speak forth marvelous words.” Clearly, these individuals are described as being filled with the Holy Spirit, an event that affected their speech patterns. While glossolalia is not explicitly mentioned, its inference would be quite at home in this passage.

Finally, one wonders if the marvelous words that Jesus prays to the Father in 3 Nephi 19:31–34, words so marvelous that tongue cannot speak nor hand write down, is not a further reference to tongues speech, this time with Jesus as the speaker. On this occasion, the disciples, who “were white, even as Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:30)—a clear reference to their spiritual development at this point in the book—understand in their hearts the words that he prayed. If so, Jesus continues to function as the exemplar for the spirituality of the disciples, as well as to testify of a partial fulfillment of some of the internal promises made to the disciples in the book. That is, perhaps on this occasion the gift of the interpretation of tongues is in evidence.

In any case, perhaps enough definitive examples of the role of speaking in tongues in the Book of Mormon have been offered to give evidence of its significance in the volume and, in turn, its significant role in the theology of the book.

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9. I am indebted to Heather Hardy for this suggestion.
The Holy Ghost communicates

The Book of Mormon also indicates the way in which the Spirit communicates with individuals. In these passages the Spirit is described as speaking, manifesting, or delivering words or messages to someone. There are over thirty such references in the Book of Mormon, beginning with 1 Nephi 2:17, where Nephi makes known to his brother Sam the things the Lord had manifested to him by his Holy Spirit. Ironically, the first words directly attributed to the Spirit in the book come in a series of commands the Spirit gives Nephi to kill Laban with Laban’s own sword (1 Nephi 4:10, 11, 12, 18). In this context, the voice of the Spirit is identified as the source of these commands. Elsewhere, the activity of the Spirit is often closely associated with the revelation of prophetic words or messages (1 Nephi 10:22; 22:2; Mosiah 5:3; Alma 5:46–52; Mormon 3:16, 20; Moroni 8:9).

My Spirit will not always strive with “man”

Another important theme in Book of Mormon pneumatology is that on several occasions the Spirit is said to cease (or will cease) striving with “man.” Such a fate can be the result of the rejection of the prophets (1 Nephi 7:14), procrastination of the day of repentance until the day of death (Alma 34:35), the refusal of the Spirit of the Lord to dwell in unholy temples (Helaman 4:24), the hardness of hearts (Helaman 13:8; Ether 15:19), the presence of wickedness and unbelief (Mormon 1:14), persistence in sin (Ether 2:15), and denial of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 8:28; 9:4). When such an eventuality occurs, destruction follows speedily (2 Nephi 26:11). All of these words serve as warnings to the readers that one must be careful lest one falls into any of these traps. In like manner, the Book of Mormon contains numerous accounts of individuals who have denied or are in danger of denying (2 Nephi 28:4, 6; Jacob 6:8; Alma 39:5–6—the most abominable sin; Helaman 4:12, 23; 3 Nephi 29:6; and Moroni 8:28), quenching (Jacob 6:8), hardening their hearts against (2 Nephi 33:2), rejecting (Alma 13:4), putting off (Alma 30:42), resisting (Alma 30:46; 32:28), or contending against (Alma 34:38) the
Holy Ghost. Such activities would seem sufficient cause for the Spirit to no longer strive with humanity.

Other dimensions of the Holy Ghost

I survey here a few other noteworthy aspects of Book of Mormon pneumatology. The Holy Ghost bears witness to the Father and the Son (1 Nephi 12:18; 2 Nephi 31:18; 3 Nephi 11:32, 36; 16:6; 28:11), is closely associated with baptism by water (2 Nephi 31:12; 3 Nephi 19:13; 26:17; 28:18) and the baptism of fire (2 Nephi 31:13, 14; 3 Nephi 9:20; 11:35; 12:1, 2; 19:13; Ether 12:14), is related to the remission of sins (2 Nephi 31:17; Mosiah 4:3), teaches believers to pray (2 Nephi 32:8), entices individuals to believe in the Lord (Mosiah 3:19), results in individuals being born of the Spirit (Mosiah 27:24), results in believers being sanctified (Alma 5:54; 13:12; 3 Nephi 27:20), and knows all things (Alma 7:13). Individuals are given numerous admonitions to receive the Holy Ghost, descriptions abound of those who received the Holy Ghost (2 Nephi 31:13, 18; 32:2, 5; 4 Nephi 1:1), and special emphasis is placed on the reality and presence of the gifts of the Spirit (2 Nephi 32:2; Moroni 10:9–18).

While scores of other references to the Spirit have not been mentioned in this survey, perhaps enough have been offered to make a tentative exploration of the robust nature and major contours of Book of Mormon pneumatology. Perhaps this initial investigation will invite further, more in-depth future analyses into this aspect of the book’s theology.

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Death, Time, and Redemption: Structural Possibilities and Thematic Potential in Jacob 7:26

Jenny Webb

And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi, wherefore, I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a [wild] wilderness,¹ and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days. (Jacob 7:26)

Readers of the Book of Mormon know Jacob for several things: he is the younger brother of Nephi, born in the wilderness after the family fled Jerusalem; he, with Nephi, served the Nephites as a priest and teacher in the promised land; he provided us with a detailed presentation of Zenos’s parable of the olive tree in Jacob 5; and he is often associated with a sense of sadness and nostalgia. This final characteristic is derived in part from a particular verse in chapter 7 of the book of Jacob—verse 26—in which Jacob reflects both on his own distinct mortal experience as well as on the tenor or tone in which the Nephites

¹. See Royal Skousen, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Two, 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 1069–70, for discussion as to the original appearance of the phrase wild wilderness and reasons for the exclusion of wild in the subsequent published texts.
themselves lived their lives in their new home. While verse 26 is reasonably well known, it has not, as of yet, received any particular interpretive focus in its own right, be it exegetical, hermeneutic, historical, or theological. The following note is designed not to produce the final word on Jacob 7:26 but rather to provide impetus for further engagement both with Jacob 7:26 and with the words of Jacob more generally.

The difficulty with verse 26 appears to be due in part to the poetic nature of the second half of the sentence. Virtually all critical sources, when they treat the verse at all, tend to make the observation that Jacob has used some very pretty words to characterize his sense of loss and nostalgia and that those words are emotionally moving. While such observations are true, the very force of the verse’s lyricism and emotional tone obscures other ways in which the text works. The verse presents a complex set of clausal structures and relationships that ultimately direct the reader toward an individual, reflective interiority that is the first part of a thematic pair, the second being a return to a universal exteriority in verse 27. This tension between the internal and the external provides a useful thematic vantage point from which to view the subsequent book of Enos as well as the entire project of the Book of Mormon itself.

It is important to recognize that the first part of the sentence here contains an unfinished thought: “And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi, wherefore, I conclude this record.” Jacob skips what it is exactly he meant to say about the large plates. Are they also somehow “old” like Jacob? Was this continuation meant to be a comparison between

writer and record? Did he intend to finish the thought by indicating that he was running out of room on the small plates and needed to conclude, only to realize that he mistakenly referred to the large plates, which (possibly) still had plenty of room, and therefore he abandoned the thought altogether and moved toward his farewell? Is there simply something he unintentionally left out, perhaps something indicating that the large plates needed to be finished, so he had to wrap up the small plates? Whatever the author’s original intent, the effect of this incomplete thought is somewhat cognitively jarring and potentially confusing. The problem with such dissonance is that many readers will simply read through the text in an effort to find the concluding thought that would make sense of the text.

To counteract such skimming, let us look more carefully at the structure of this verse. While certain forms of structure are created by unique and interesting words and phrases throughout the verse, and while there is evidence of a carefully woven thematic structuring, let us first take a look at the clausal relationships of the text itself. The following setting of the verse operates on the principle of placing subordinated sections of the text underneath and to the right of the prior or preceding sections. The result gives us a visual approximation of not only the relational structure of the verse, but also the ways in which the logic of the verse both breaks off unexpectedly and begins again.³

1 And it came to pass
2 that I,
   3 Jacob,
       4 began to be old;
5 and the record
   6 of this people
       7 being kept on the other plates of Nephi,
8 wherefore,
9 I conclude this record,

³ I have numbered the lines here in order to facilitate the discussion of specific phrases further on.
10 declaring
11 that I have written
12 according to the best of my knowledge,
13 by saying
14 that the time
15 passed away
16 with us,
17 and also our lives
18 passed away
19 like as it were unto us
20 a dream,
21 we being a lonesome
22 and a solemn people,
23 wanderers,
24 cast out from Jerusalem,
25 born in tribulation,
26 in a [wild] wilderness,
27 and hated of our brethren,
28 which caused wars
29 and contentions;
30 wherefore,
31 we did mourn out
32 our days.

The clausal structure here is both subordinated and relational. It appears that Jacob starts the verse with one (unclear) intention (lines 1–7), falters (line 8) and changes direction (lines 9–12), but is then almost distracted by an increasingly interior and subjective reflection (lines 13–29) before abruptly turning (line 30) and placing the summative coda on his reflections (lines 31–32).

Those final words—"wherefore, we did mourn out our days"—provide a specific thematic orientation for the entire verse: the verse is structured around a triple repetition of the themes of death and time, interwoven with the themes of pilgrimage and solitude. We see this triple repetition of death and time in the phrases "began to be old" (line 4), "and also our lives passed away" (lines 17–18), and "we did mourn out our days" (lines 31–32). In each of these phrases, time is perceived as
in motion—passing, as Jacob says—and that motion is firmly oriented toward the inevitability of the future: the end point of time is death. This forward temporal orientation contrasts strongly with the reflective or backward temporal orientation present in the verse (what is often characterized as the verse’s sense of nostalgia). Jacob is, of course, looking back on his life, and yet his grammar evidences this tension between his looking ahead toward death and his looking back on life as it shifts curiously through present, past, and progressive tenses.

This tension between past and future with its overtones of death’s determined approach echoes another scriptural text concerned with death’s entrance: Adam and Eve, their fall, and their eventual departure from the Garden of Eden. In fact, the effects of the fall itself—entering mortality, being cast out of the Garden, being cut off from God—connect with surprising thematic strength to Jacob’s words in verse 26. Jacob, too, reinforces the certainty of death as we have discussed, but he also speaks of his people’s solitude (line 21) and their pilgrimage (line 23). He even goes so far as to frame their departure from Jerusalem in terms highly reminiscent of the fall itself: they have been “cast out” (line 24) into a “wilderness” (line 26), just as Adam and Eve were made to leave all they had ever known.5

The thematic solitude of Adam and Eve being cut off from God’s presence is further reinforced by Jacob’s forceful description of his familial bonds in line 27: “hated of our brethren.” This phrase demonstrates the deep-seated familial fracturing under which Jacob has lived

4. Several questions regarding the term passing are worth considering here. Is the passing away that occurs with time the same sort of passing away that occurs with lives? The underlying connection to death in both phrases provides a particularly subjective ground from which lived temporality is measured. The phrase “time passed away with us” appears to link the passage of time to the event of a life lived; that is, if there is no life being lived, does time pass? Does it pass away? Consider how temporality and lived experience are related in this passage: does this relationship appear elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, and if so, under what guise and in what context?

5. By recalling the story of Adam and Eve, Jacob’s words align Jerusalem with the Garden of Eden in the Nephite mythos. Thus, it is possible to read the nostalgia that we see expressed throughout the Book of Mormon for Jerusalem (see Sears, “We Came Out of Jerusalem,” par. 6; Nibley, “Time for Reexamination,” 17) in light of the long and varied theological, aesthetic, and philosophical traditions surrounding mankind’s longing for Eden.
his entire life. While this description is, of course, applicable to the Nephites of Jacob’s time as a whole, it is certainly also intensely personal to Jacob. While Nephi knew and lived with Laman and Lemuel prior to their departure from Jerusalem, Jacob’s entire life has been characterized by an ever-widening familial schism. Jacob likely holds no memories of Laman and Lemuel ever interacting with him in a brotherly fashion; it is probable that they always treated Jacob as “the enemy.” While Nephi’s experience was one of wanting to be reunited with his family members, Jacob’s would more likely have been one of wanting acceptance. As a young child, Jacob would not have been able to understand why Laman and Lemuel rejected him so completely; this unprovoked and totally personal family rejection would, I believe, create psychological resonances throughout Jacob’s life and ministry, and perhaps it explains his continued insistence that the Nephites not only find a way to live with the Lamanites but that the religious breach be healed and a family sealed up together again.

The powerful pathos created by Jacob here is due in part to the low point on which the verse ends: “we did mourn out our days” (lines 31–32). The connections between “mourn” and the themes of death and time provide a nice thematic return to and link with the beginning of the verse (Jacob’s old age and implicitly near death) and the middle (the manner in which time and lives passed away). Ending with mourning enacts a third repetition of these main themes. It is also almost jarringly depressing, given the preceding narrative in the chapter, in which Jacob claims an answer to his prayers as something akin to victory (see Jacob 7:22). The power and poignancy of this verse that is so often remarked upon results, I believe, from this concentrated triple repetition of the interconnected themes of time and death. Their power lies in their universality (everyone lives in time, and everyone dies at the end of their time) as well as in their intimacy: Jacob’s mourning is the result of a very specific familial split—a wound that shapes his entire life and which he fails, at least from his perspective, to heal.

When Jacob then passes the plates to his son Enos in verse 27, the text follows the gesture, moving through a series of increasingly external referents (Nephi, the commandments, and so forth). Interestingly
enough, Jacob ends verse 27 oriented toward not just the external but an extreme form of the external: the universal. His final hope is “that many of my brethren may read my words” in some undefined, possibly distant future. In other words, even in the depths of the subjective, internalized mourning that we find in verse 26, Jacob holds faith (and hope and charity) that the sealing power will be enough at some point to allow him to speak to his family and unite them at a later time.⁶ While verse 26 reflects on the past, verse 27 points toward the future, specifically a future of family relationships. These verses encapsulate the journey that Enos will take in the following chapter: an increasingly reflective, subjective, and interior prayer that ultimately turns outward toward the redemption of his fractured family and people.⁷

This reading has (hopefully) only served to heighten our awareness of the complex structural and thematic issues that underlie this well-known verse of scripture. There remains, of course, much work to be done, both on verse 26 and on Jacob’s writings in general. I have pointed toward several additional directions, connections, and questions in the footnotes and am well aware that they are not exhaustive by any means. The lyrical grace of this verse is matched and even exceeded by the theological grace in Jacob’s writings, both here in the book of Jacob as well as in 2 Nephi. It is an enticing invitation—one I urge us not to resist.

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⁶ The thematic connection here between records/reading/writing and sealing/family is one that deserves much more careful consideration.

⁷ Enos’s journey, of course, follows the same trajectory of the Book of Mormon itself: words that will become literally “interior” as they are buried in the earth before becoming universalized in their latter-day translation and dissemination.
On 22 January 1830, editor Abner Cole, who published under the pseudonym Obediah Dogberry, issued an extra of his newspaper the Reflector. This extra included an unauthorized “Extract from the Book of Alma, Chapter XX.”¹ Cole’s pirating of the passages of the Book of Mormon has long been recognized as an example of the persecution heaped upon Joseph Smith because of his experiences of discovering the gold plates and publishing the Book of Mormon. Smith’s own mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recorded this episode in her memoir, offering such an interpretation. She described the culminating confrontation between her son Joseph and Cole, wherein Joseph Smith, as the copyright owner, successfully persuaded Cole to cease publishing unauthorized passages from the Book of Mormon.² Other scholars have treated the episode couched either within a biographical study of Cole or from a study

¹. Book of Mormon. [Extract from the Book of Alma, Chapter XX],” Reflector [Palmyra, New York], 22 January 1830 (hereafter Reflector), 27. Because the Reflector was paginated, this piece will cite the page numbers of the newspaper as well as the date of the issue. The Reflector was published “on such days as may suit our own convenience”; it is assumed the 22 January date represents when the paper was actually published. The previous issue, however, is dated both 13 January 1830 on the masthead and 11 January 1830 within the newspaper itself. (13 [11?] January 1830, Reflector, [17] and 20). Cole published what is currently Alma 43:22–40 of the LDS edition.

². Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, bk. 9, [9]–[11], Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah, hereafter CHL.
exploring the legality of printing the pages.3 This study, however, explores Cole’s publication of the excerpts—particularly the chapter from Alma—and highlights an important insight into the dates of the printing of the first edition of the Book of Mormon. The purpose of this brief article is to alert readers to this new connection, which was gleaned from research and production of the third volume of the Revelations and Translations series of the Joseph Smith Papers.

Abner Cole published his newspaper in the same printing office where the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon was printed, giving him access to proofs of the sheets as they came off the press.4 Cole published the first chapter of Nephi in two consecutive issues beginning on 9 January 1830.5 Cole typeset the excerpt from a completed, unbound sheet of the 1830 edition. Because minor errors or changes of punctuation occur in Cole’s excerpt, it appears that Cole reset the type for the excerpt when he prepared it for publication in the Reflector.6


5. See “The First Book of Nephi” Reflector, 2 January 1830, 9; and “The First Book of Nephi,” Reflector, 13 January 1830, 17.

6. The known differences between the 1830 edition and the 2 January 1830 issue of the Reflector are the 1830 edition’s “his lustre was above that to the sun,” compared with Reflector’s “his lustre was above that of the sun” (emphasis added); the 1830 edition’s “he read, saying,” compared with Reflector’s omission of the comma; 1830 edition’s “faithful and declared,” compared with Reflector’s “faithful, and declared.” The known differences between the 1830 edition and the 13 January 1830 issue of the Reflector are 1830 edition’s “in the borders,” compared with Reflector’s “on the borders”; 1830 edition’s “Sariah,” compared with Reflector’s “Sarah”; 1830 edition’s “river of water. And . . . ,” compared with Reflector’s “river of water; And . . . ”; 1830 edition’s “emptied,” compared with Reflector’s “emtied”; and 1830 edition’s “in the borders,” compared with Reflector’s “on the borders.”
A close comparison between the Alma excerpt and the 1830 edition, however, shows a different set of circumstances. The errors that appear in the excerpt actually indicate that Cole did not reset the type for that portion. Instead, Cole took the type already set for the 1830 Book of Mormon and rearranged those lines, words, letters, and spaces for the narrower column width of the *Reflector*. The excerpt in the *Reflector* has five instances where two words are run together without a space (see underlined words on pages 240 and 242). Each of these five errors occurs when the words that are run together appear on either side of a line break in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon (see underlined words on pages 241 and 243). Cole failed to insert a blank type for the space between the words that spanned a line break when he rearranged the type, resulting in the joined words in the *Reflector*.

In addition to these errors, similarities in nicked or worn type have been identified between the two printed versions, indicating that the type was simply rearranged rather than reset. For instance, the o in...

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7. The words are “thereforethey,” “pre-
paredagainst,” “cameto,” “apart,” and “tocross.”
the people of Nephi, or that Moroni had prepared his people with breast-plates, and with arm-shields; yea, and also shields to defend their heads; and also they were dressed with thick clothing. Now the army of Zerahemnah was not prepared with any such thing. They had only their swords, and their cimiers, their bows and their arrows, their stones and their slings; but they were naked, save it were a skin which was girded about their loins; yea, all were naked, save it were the Zoramites and the Amalekites. But they were not armed with breast-plates, nor shields; therefore they were exceeding afraid of the armies of the Nephites, because of their armour, notwithstanding their number being so much greater than the Nephites.

Behold, now it came to pass, that they durst not come against the Nephites in the borders of Jerushon; therefore they departed out of the land of Antionum, into the wilderness, and took their journey round about in the wilderness, away by the head of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti, and take possession of the land; for they did not suppose that the armies of Moroni would know whither they had gone. But it came to pass, as soon as they had departed into the wilderness, Moroni sent spies into the wilderness, to watch their camp; and Moroni, also, knowing of the prophecies of Alma, sent certain men unto him, desiring him that he should inquire of the Lord whither the armies of the Nephites should go, to defend themselves against the Lamanites. And it came to pass that the word of the Lord came unto Alma; and Alma informed the messengers of Moroni that the armies of the Lamanites were marching round about in the wilderness, that they might come over into the land of Manti, that they might commence an attack upon the more weak part of the people. And those messengers went and delivered the message unto Moroni.

Now Moroni, leaving a part of his army in the land of Jerushon, lest by any means, a part of the Lamanites should come into that land and take possession of the city; and Moroni took the remainder part of his army and marched over into the land of Manti. And he caused that all the people in that quarter of the land, should gather themselves together to battle, against the Lamanites, to defend their lands and their country, their rights and their liberties; therefore they were prepared against the time of the coming of the Lamanites. And it came to pass, that Moroni caused that his army should be secreted
the first instance of “Sidon” in the *Reflector* (line 8) has a worn bottom edge. This worn edge can also be seen in the 1830 edition, indicating that the same type was used for both publications. Similarly, the s in “durst” in the *Reflector* (line 2) is misshapen, just as the s is in the 1830 edition (see outlined words on pages 240–41). The fact that the same type was used for both printings raises important implications, which will be explored only briefly here.

For many years, scholars have wondered about the duration and pace of the printing of the first edition of the Book of Mormon. The only date that can be established with certainty is the date of completion: the volume was complete and ready for purchase by 26 March 1830. A careful letter-by-letter comparison has not been done for this piece. One challenge of comparing any two versions is that there were multiple printings of each version and mid-press changes were known to have happened with the 1830 edition. A comparison of the *Reflector* and multiple states, or versions, of the 1830 edition may answer one question about this episode: Did Cole use this type in the middle of printing that section, or was the printing for the 1830 edition finished for this portion when Cole repurposed it for his own publication?
in the valley which was near the bank of the river Sidon, which was on the west of the river Sidon, in the wilderness. And Moroni placed spies round about, that he might know when the camp of the Lamanites should come.

And now as Moroni knew the intention of the Lamanites, that it was their intention to destroy their brethren, or to subject them and bring them into bondage, that they might establish a kingdom unto themselves, over all the land; and he also knowing that it was the only desire of the Nephites to preserve their lands and their liberty, and their church, therefore he thought it no sin that he should defend them by stratagem; therefore he found, by his spies, which course the Lamanites were to take. Therefore he divided his army, and brought a part over into the valley, and concealed them on the east, and on the south of the hill Riplah; and the remainder he concealed in the west valley, on the west of the river Sidon, and so down into the borders of the land Manti. And thus having placed his army according to his desire, he was prepared to meet them.

And it came to pass that the Lamanites came up on the north of the hill where a part of the army of Moroni was concealed. And it came to pass that as the Lamanites had passed the hill Riplah, and came into the valley, and began to cross the river Sidon, the army which was concealed on the south of the hill, who was led by a man whose name was Lehi; and he led his army forth and encircled the Lamanites about, on the east, in their rear.

And it came to pass that the Lamanites, when they saw the Nephites coming upon them in their rear, turned them about, and began to contend with the army of Lehi; and the work of death commenced, on both sides; but it was more dreadful on the part of the Lamanites; for their nakedness was exposed to the heavy blows of the Nephites, with their swords and their cimeters, which brought death almost at every stroke; while on the other hand, there was now and then a man fell among the Nephites, by their swords, and the loss of blood; they being shielded from the more vital parts of the body, or the more vital parts of the body being shielded from the strokes of the Lamanites, by their breast-plates, and their arm-shields, and their head-plates; and thus the Nephites did carry on the work of death among the Lamanites. And it came to pass that the Lamanites became frightened, because of the great destruction among them, even until they began to
The beginning date and points of progress of the printing of the Book of Mormon, however, have proven elusive. John H. Gilbert, who did much of the typesetting, stated later in life that the work did not commence until after “Harris had promised to insure the payment” and after Grandin “went to New York and bought the type.” Martin Harris mortgaged his farm on 25 August 1829, and it seems reasonable to assume that Grandin would not have purchased new type without having first secured payment from Harris. Grandin went to New York City to buy new type in early fall 1830, so the typesetting for the Book of Mormon likely did not commence until after his return, perhaps sometime in the first half of September.

A letter from Oliver Cowdery to Joseph Smith indicates that printing was actively occurring by November, though it was encountering obstacles. Cowdery reported to Smith that “the printing goes rather Slow yet as the type founder [likely the typesetter or compositor] has been sick but we expect that the type will be on and Mr, Granden [Egbert B. Grandin] Still think[s] he will finish printing by the first of february.”

In addition to recalling the approximate beginning point of printing, Gilbert also leaves important clues regarding the average time it took to set the type for each form (or a series of pages of typeset text). Gilbert recalled that before December 1829, the staff at the printing shop could produce one form in three days. He further recalled that the workers at the printing staff worked on the Book of Mormon four days of the week (the other two days were spent on the local newspaper the

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9. The 19 March 1830 issue of the Wayne Sentinel noted that “the ‘Book of Mormon’ will be ready for sale in the course of next week.” And the next issue announced its availability: the Book of Mormon “is now for sale, wholesale and retail.” Notice, Wayne Sentinel (Palmyra, NY), 19 March 1830, [p. 3] and “The Book of Mormon,” Wayne Sentinel (Palmyra, NY), 26 March 1830, [p. 3].


12. JSP, D1:100.
Wayne Sentinel). By December 1829, Grandin hired an additional press-man to assist in the printing of the Book of Mormon. This increased the productivity of the office staff so that they produced two forms per week instead of one and a third.\textsuperscript{13}

In order to offer a clearer reconstruction of the printing timeline for the first edition of the Book of Mormon, one additional data point is necessary. When Abner Cole rearranged existing type for his newspaper, he was very likely using type that had already been set and used to print the sheets by Grandin, Gilbert, and other workers on the Book of Mormon. Cole may have felt safe in using the type because it was ready to be distributed back into the type cases for a new form. It seems difficult to believe that Cole would have upset the printing schedule of the owner of the printing press on which he also depended. If we assume that by the time Cole rearranged type for the Alma excerpt, it was already set and printed for the 1830 edition and ready for distribution, we can also assume that by 22 January (a Friday), the Book of Mormon publishers were finished with the twenty-second sheet of the Book of Mormon, which also held the same portion of Alma. A reminiscence stated that Wednesdays and Saturdays were spent publishing the Wayne Sentinel.\textsuperscript{14} This would mean that five thousand copies of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth gatherings were printed the week of 25 January, the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth forms were completed the week of 1 February, and so on. At this pace, the thirty-seventh and final form of the Book of Mormon would have been completed during the first part of the week of 15–19 March. This is a week and a half before the books were available for purchase. Given that collating, sewing, and binding of at least some of the books would have had to take place before the announcement stating the book was available, a two-week grace period seems ambitious but not impossible.

Working backward from the 22 January date—the date the Alma excerpt appeared in the Reflector—gives us a similar picture. If we work

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} John H. Gilbert, Memorandum, 8 Sept. 1892, photocopy, CHL; Wayne County Journal, 3 May 1883, in Dan Vogel, Early Mormon Documents (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 2:545n10.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Wayne County Journal, 3 May 1883.
\end{itemize}
from a very generous estimate that the compositors of the 1830 edi-
tion were finished with the twenty-second form during the week of
11 January, Cole would have had an entire week to rearrange the type.
If we allow for a second gathering to be finished that same week (the
twenty-first gathering), the schedule can be worked backward just as it
was worked forward. By the week of 4 January, the workers would have
finished the nineteenth and twentieth forms. Gilbert did not mention
precisely when Grandin hired another pressman in December, but if
we work from a conservative estimate that he hired that person on
31 December, the workers during the months of November and Decem-
ber would have produced twelve forms, and work on the seventh form
would have begun on the week of 2 November. At a rate of one and a
third forms per week, work on the first form would have been begun in
the middle of the last week of September. This final week of September,
however, is well past the time when Gilbert said Harris offered payment
in full and well past the conservative estimate of Grandin’s return with
new type from New York City during the first part of September. But
this extra time could be explained by the delay mentioned by Cowdery
in the November 1829 letter to Joseph Smith.

Other implications arise from this one pirated excerpt of the Book
of Mormon, which are not explored in this short paper.¹⁵ But perhaps
more important than adding an additional data point to the dating of
the timeline of printing the first edition of the Book of Mormon, this
piece introduces and explores the importance of closely scrutinizing all
sources to better understand texts from the past. A full bibliographic
treatment of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, with particular
attention to detail such as typography, binding, differing states, and the
variants between those states, will continue to yield previously unfore-
seen insights into the Book of Mormon. These insights and their reper-
cussions that are not yet fully understood will provide further context to

¹⁵. For instance, the known date of when the twenty-second form was printed
also helps scholars determine when the thirteenth gathering of the printer’s manuscript
of the Book of Mormon would have been finished. See JSP, PMBoM:47.
the Book of Mormon not just as a religious text, but as a material object occupying a frequently contested religious space.

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Mormon’s Question

Candice Wendt

In the last chapters of the Book of Mormon, the volume’s final contributor, Moroni, copies into the text a sermon delivered by his father, Mormon. In the final chapter of the volume, Moroni adds to his father’s sermonic reflections a few of his own, building on the same themes. On my reading, what is sometimes called “Moroni’s challenge,” to come to know God’s mercy through the witness of scripture (found in Moroni 10:3–5), is like the tip of the iceberg of a greater challenge exposited in Mormon’s sermon and Moroni’s further reflections. That challenge is best captured in Mormon’s question addressed to the disciples of Christ in his own day: “How is it possible that ye can lay hold upon every good thing?” (Moroni 7:20). It is by this process of laying hold on every good thing, Mormon taught, that Christ’s followers are to enter his rest, both in life and beyond the grave. And this is the challenge that concludes the Book of Mormon for every reader.

In the following few pages, I’d like to outline a series of theological reflections on Mormon’s question. According to Mormon, the question of how to “lay hold” is essential to discipleship. Considering this and how little this process of “laying hold” is discussed, my aim is to raise it as a needed area for research and writing. I will make two moves in the following reflection on how the Book of Mormon conceives of the life of the disciple. First, I will focus directly on the question Mormon asks, looking at ways in which its very formulation is suggestive. Second, I will look at the answer Mormon ostensibly gives to his question, making clear the ways in which it might surprise close readers.
Mormon’s question proves perplexing, which is the very reason he brings it to our attention. He in fact seems to anticipate skepticism about our task, indicated by the actual wording of the question. To ask *how* something is *possible* is not only to inquire about the steps of the process but to question whether it can be performed at all. The inclusiveness of the goal “every good thing” is weighty and seems to point us in many paths at once rather than the “straight, narrow” path of discipleship. I want to consider a few of the ways in which this inclusiveness or universality is suggestive.

First, geographically and culturally, vast fields await the disciple’s search. The gifts of God, according to Moroni, “are many” (Moroni 10:8). “Every” good thing is included among Christ’s gifts because “all things which are good cometh of Christ” (7:24). There are “divers ways” the gifts are administered (10:8). The gifts encompass all that provides and sustains life and happiness among a multitude of peoples, places, and creations, such that the “earth is full of the goodness of the Lord” (Psalm 33:5). To what extent might disciples need to journey into unknown territory in their searching? While there are limits to our energy and resources, how much more frequently might we need to be prepared to leave our houses, the lands of our inheritance, and our possessions and “[depart] into the wilderness” to lay hold of good things unknown to us (1 Nephi 2:4)? How might we deepen our searching, even without leaving home, by connecting with people of other cultures?

“Every good gift” also points us in a multitude of directions throughout time in relation to Christ’s grace. What is our relation to Christ’s gifts manifested in the past? From the beginning, Mormon teaches, God did “manifest things unto the children of men, which were good” (Moroni 7:24). Do gifts from the past continue to manifest themselves to us—and, if so, how? Are we to lay hold upon these also—and, if so, how? Moroni, among other prophets, taught the importance of laying hold on the words from the past, voices of the dead (see Moroni 10:27). How might we need to more deeply search knowledge from the past in order to open and enter the Lord’s rest? How might family history work play into this? How might remembering Christ’s sacrifice and
God’s mercies to past generations be understood as laying hold of gifts of Christ? A “multitude” of Christ’s “tender mercies” already manifest in the past await us, seeking to bear witness of him to strengthen our faith, as it did for Nephi (1 Nephi 8:8). Likewise, talk of “every good gift” turns us toward the future. How might the gifts we receive in the present be in preparation for the future, even if we “[know] it not” (D&C 35:4)? Gifts are without a foreseeable end; they are, according to Mormon, to continue to manifest themselves “so long as time shall last, or the earth shall stand, or there shall be one man upon the face thereof to be saved” on conditions of belief (Moroni 7:36).

A third point of consideration might focus on the different ways one might go about holding the gifts. What kind of tenacity or flexibility is best? Might different gifts require different handling—a firm grasp or even a cord to bind them to us (see Proverbs 3:3)? Using language similar to Mormon, Isaiah paints an image of lions “laying hold” of prey and bringing it safely home, which to me suggests God’s fierce and trustworthy determination to fulfill covenants (see Isaiah 5:29; 2 Nephi 15:29). Lehi witnessed how tenacious holding to the iron rod is required to remain on the path of discipleship (see 1 Nephi 8:30). Firmness is virtuous. Yet we might wonder whether it is possible to cleave too tightly to certain gifts, deceiving ourselves or making certain gifts into idols. Paul in fact warns us of a danger like this, teaching that certain gifts are of greater value than others (see 1 Corinthians 12:31). Perhaps we should ask why every gift is needful. Is laying hold on Christ’s gifts the only way to lay hold on Christ himself? “Hold me not,” Jesus said to Mary Magdalene on his resurrection day, sending her to testify to others (John 20:17 JST). Are Christ’s lights, words, and gifts like a medium of exchange substituting for himself? Do we wait for him to embrace us only at the end of the search?

To sum up these first points of reflection, considering the breadth of Christ’s gifts and possible challenges to holding them, we might just ask Mormon’s question again: “How is it possible that [we] can lay hold upon every good thing?” How can we cleave to so much during our relatively brief lives, and within our limited spheres of knowledge and
experience? Moreover, we might well be puzzled by how and why the search is the way to rest. These are active, labor-intensive tasks. Is it possible and necessary to rest from searching and holding at times?

Surprisingly, as he attempts to answer his own question, Mormon chooses to pass over anxieties about human incapacities, some of which have motivated these first reflections I’ve offered. Mormon asserts straightforwardly that the process of laying hold on good things is in fact possible—as witnessed by the fact that it has been performed effectively long before us by people belonging to previous generations. The key to laying hold, Mormon says, is faith (see Moroni 7:20–21). Faith is in fact the initial gift offered by Christ to lay hold of. This mustard seed moves mountains; faith bears up and counterbalances whatever the weight of the gifts, buttressing us to hold all others. Let me turn now, then, to a brief reflection on faith in connection with this theme of “laying hold.”

What should we have faith in as we lay hold on gifts? Not in the gifts themselves, nor in our strength to receive them, but in Jesus Christ. As Mormon articulates faith, we hear the words of God and his messengers and then exercise faith in Jesus Christ’s sacrifice according to these words. This idea Mormon describes clearly: “Wherefore, by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing; and thus it was until the coming of Christ” (Moroni 7:25). Laying hold thus begins at our first demonstration of faith in Jesus Christ. Christ offers a central, singular gift, himself—which comes to us initially through the medium of the divine or angelic or prophetic word. All other gifts manifest and extend the sacrifice of Christ’s life, his powers of redemption and resurrection. When we lay hold on faith in Christ’s resurrection and redemption, we effectually lay hold on every good thing Christ brings into the world through his great sacrifice.

As Mormon and Moroni both make clear, laying hold of Christ’s gift through faith opens a focused, continuous sequence in which we are to take his name and divine attributes upon ourselves. Our initial faith in
Christ leads us to hope for redemption. Hope fills us with “great views of that which is to come” (Mosiah 5:3; see Ether 12:4). Hearts softened by hope in Christ are perceptive and desirous of his gifts. Hope in Christ then leads us to charity. Hope’s vistas and joys lift burdens and bondage, liberating us to focus on loving others (see Moroni 8:26). Hope opens our eyes to better know the worth of souls and to receive Christ’s love for them. In its fullness, charity is to provide strength to bear up the full measure of Christ’s gifts and to abstain from all unclean gifts (see 7:45).

Might it be that every good thing manifest on earth is good because it manifests faith, hope, or charity in one way or another? Are these three gifts the only or principal tools we need to examine all things in “the light of Christ” (Moroni 7:18)? If we lay hold on these three gifts, have we already obtained every good thing? Since Mormon’s sermon on “laying hold” is also clearly a sermon on faith, hope, and charity, does it implicitly resolve in this way the problem of how to navigate and lay hold in a world and timeline that is saturated with Christ’s light and gifts? If so, how could we articulate this in detail?

Importantly, Mormon and Moroni warn us of the dangers of lacking faith, but they do so chiefly by warning us against the dangers of misjudging, denying, and rejecting the gifts of God. We need to turn judgments away and “condemn [the gifts] not” to become children of Christ (Moroni 7:19). Are we especially susceptible to denying the gift Mormon is most eager to obtain, namely charity? How often do we condemn or simply overlook charity as we walk the path of discipleship? Does it appear as an ugly or frightening creature? Can we see it at all? How does our incapacity to recognize and embrace charity for all manifest itself?

Could we say, finally, that Mormon’s challenge to lay hold of every good gift is primarily designed to prepare disciples to seek and obtain charity? How might we compare the process of laying hold to “cloth[ing] [our]selves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle” (D&C 88:125)? This connection might produce some answers as to why searching and grasping are to be our rest. Loving perfectly is bond and mantle at once. That is, it is first something that restrains and constrains us to be pure
and to keep working when we need to, but then it is also something that warms, protects, and exalts us. To love others perfectly is to have the cares and burdens of our minds lifted, to be encircled in peace that is resilient during hardship. How might charity lead us into what is now unknown wilderness to us? Is it through loving without bounds that we are to cleave to the multitude of all good things? Is laying hold more a way of being in the world rather than a particular journey?

Hopefully, these are questions enough to provoke interest in closer theological investigation of the concluding sermons in the Book of Mormon. The final appeals presented to readers in the book clearly bear on how this unique volume of scripture outlines the tasks of discipleship. If the Book of Mormon is to be taken seriously as a book of scripture, as a guide for the life of the spirit, these questions deserve closer attention.

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Two Authors: Two Approaches in the Book of Mormon

Brant A. Gardner

The two Book of Mormon authors from whom we have the largest amount of text are Nephi and Mormon. Nephi established the Nephite tradition of keeping records, which Mormon used as his source material for his work nearly a thousand years later. While both similarly wrote to promote what Nephi called the ministry (1 Nephi 9:3), each differed in the way he constructed his narrative about that ministry.

Nephi’s historical framework is thickly interwoven with his declaration of the incarnation of the Messiah (which Joseph Smith translated as Christ). He records that his father “saw One descending out of the midst of heaven. . . . And he also saw twelve others following him” (1 Nephi 1:9–10). When Lehi first related his dream of the tree of life, his explanation led him to declare “a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4). Nephi’s personal experience with his father’s dream and subsequent expansion also led directly to a discussion of the Messiah, but in Nephi’s case the account more explicitly identified that it would be the premortal Jehovah who would descend to become the Messiah.¹ The teaching emphasis of Nephi’s ministry was the atoning

¹ Nephí’s argument for the Eternal God becoming Christ is explicit in his discussion of the meaning of his father’s tree of life vision. See 1 Nephi 11. For a discussion of Nephi’s understanding of the Messiah as God, see Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:214–22.
mission of the Messiah, the premortal Jehovah who would condescend to come to earth.

For Mormon, the title page explicitly declares his intent: “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.” Perhaps reflecting Nephi’s and Mormon’s temporal existence before and after Christ’s earthly ministry, Nephi’s theme declaring that Jehovah (the Eternal God) would manifest himself as Jesus (the Messiah) was reversed in Mormon’s work. Mormon declared that Jesus is the (Messiah), the Eternal God. Nephi emphasized the coming of the atoning Messiah while Mormon emphasized the risen Messiah’s appearance and teaching in Bountiful.

Other subtle differences hide behind the two prophets’ similarities. Each structured his account according to books named after an important individual. Nephi began the tradition by naming his two books “the book of Nephi.” That set the precedent for the tradition concerning the small plates. Each book was named for its author until the book of Omni, which contained multiple writers. The tradition that Mormon employed on the large plates also associated books with names, suggesting that Nephi initiated that custom. However, rather than naming each book for its author, Mormon appears to have named the records in the large plates according to dynastic changes. Nephi might have begun both traditions, but the two separate records developed independently. The small plates became associated with the person inheriting the task of keeping the record, while the large plates, the record of the kings (see 1 Nephi 9:4), used the founder of the dynasty as the collective name for all events pertaining to that dynasty.

Both Nephi and Mormon used other sources as they created their accounts. Mormon drew on the material on the large plates, and Nephi declared: “After I have abridged the record of my father then will I make

2. Our modern designation of 1 and 2 Nephi was added to the manuscript and was not part of the original dictation.
an account of mine own life” (1 Nephi 1:17). Nephi also quotes from the brass plates. The manner in which they utilized their sources differs.

Nephi must have consulted his father’s record at a number of points, but when it is clear that he is referencing that source, the majority of the text is Nephi’s summary, with small quotations used for emphasis. For example, in 1 Nephi 1:5–15 Nephi relates his father’s vision of God and of the descending Messiah. Of the eleven verses describing that event, only two contain a quotation from his father. In the remainder of the verses, Nephi narrates his father’s story.

Mormon interacts differently with his source texts, inserting large quotations that are linked with his explanatory texts, or narrations of the events, which transition to the next quotation. A block of text similar in length to the passage in 1 Nephi appears in Mosiah 1:1–14. This passage as prepared by Mormon has ten verses of direct quotation and four of Mormon’s text. The first two verses set up the quotation, and in verses 8 and 9 Mormon appears to move from the first quotation to the second by bridging over text he intentionally skipped in the source record.

Nephi’s use of the brass plates differs from the way he used his father’s record. Whereas he references his father’s record and quotes a little from it, Nephi quotes extensively from the brass plates. The extensive direct quotations from Isaiah are ample demonstration that Nephi did not hesitate to copy from another source when it fit his purposes. For Nephi, those purposes were doctrinal explication. Nephi presents large chunks of text (very large in 2 Nephi) and then uses those texts to provide themes for his doctrinal exposition.

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5. That Nephi could have quoted more from his father is evident: “He [Lehi] did exclaim many things unto the Lord; such as . . . ” (1 Nephi 1:14). Nephi selected only certain statements from the clearly more detailed information on his father’s record and restates them more often than quotes them.

6. Although Nephi’s text following the quoted Isaiah chapters is often called his commentary on those chapters, Nephi uses Isaiah as a foundation for a more complex
In contrast, Mormon clearly does not hesitate to quote from his sources, but he does not directly quote scripture (the brass plates). The sermons he records may themselves quote scripture, but Mormon himself does not, nor does he comment on scripture. Mormon comments on the quotations from his source text, the collection of large plates. Mormon is the historian/editor who links together the quoted texts in such a way as to demonstrate his larger purpose, but his theological points are made through intermediaries who deal with the scriptures rather than direct citation. We do not see much of Mormon as theologian until Moroni 7 and 8; in these chapters Mormon’s son Moroni includes two letters Mormon wrote that Mormon had never intended to be part of his masterwork.

Lastly, the relationship of both authors to a preconceived outline or concept is similar, but with a complication. First Nephi is very clearly a planned text and was written after Nephi had already created the dynastic record. In 2 Nephi 5:28, he declares that he is writing thirty years after they had left Jerusalem. He certainly had the time to prepare what he would write in this second set of plates. Careful examination of the way Nephi constructed his text shows intricate planning at least during the creation of his first book on the small plates.\(^7\) Mormon certainly worked from at least an outline. The headnotes he wrote describe the information to come in that book. At times he deviates from his outline and then returns to it.\(^8\)

The difference comes in how well both men adhered to their outline. Mormon’s conception of his book drove the writing and his selections


from first to last. His foresight even led him to instruct Moroni how to complete the writing Mormon was unable to finish after Cumorah (Mormon 8:1).

For Nephi, we have the structurally complex book we call 2 Nephi. Even a cursory reading of 2 Nephi shows it to be quite different from 1 Nephi. Although chapters 1–5 appear to follow the model established in 1 Nephi, chapter 6 abruptly changes into something entirely different. Nephi, who had rarely quoted from another source to this point, quotes a sermon from his brother Jacob. There is no transition from the more historical information at the end of chapter 5. In fact, the end of chapter 5 has a tone of finality:

> And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates, which I had made, of my people thus far.
> And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me: Make other plates; and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people.
> Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates upon which I have engraven these things.
> And I engraved that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people are pleased with the things of God they will be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates.
> And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people they must search mine other plates.
> And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren. (2 Nephi 5:29–34)

The addition of the Isaiah chapters is also awkward. Where Mormon displays a consistent control of his purpose from beginning to end, Nephi’s purpose is clear at the beginning but fades to obscurity in 2 Nephi. Nephi certainly continues to write important and inspiring things, but the clear focus of his textual mission fades, and perhaps even changes, after 2 Nephi, chapter 5.
The two great writers of the Book of Mormon were quite different in their approaches to their similar task. Above and beyond the importance of what they wrote for our spiritual welfare, we can see in their writings glimpses into the personalities and intentions of the two men who stand at the beginning and the end of the Book of Mormon.

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**Had there been no Book of Mormon**, the counterfactual historian could argue, there would be no need for a Joseph Smith Papers project. The Latter-day Saint prophet’s first recorded revelation appeared “after he had lost certain writings which he had Translated by the gift & Power of God,” the famous 116 pages.¹ Smith’s gift of translation was suspended for a time, but he would ultimately dictate the majority of the Book of Mormon text to Oliver Cowdery and a few other scribes between early April and late June 1829. Having grown protective of this original manuscript, Smith called for a copy to be made for the purposes of printing—the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. After being stowed away in the cornerstone of a house in Nauvoo, Illinois, over 70 percent of the original manuscript was destroyed—this time not by the hands of “wicked men”² but by the ravages of water. The counterfactual historian could

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². See Doctrine and Covenants section 10, which instructs Joseph Smith to continue his translation without redoing the portion that was lost when early scribe Martin Harris borrowed it.
argue that losing the 116 pages of the original manuscript set the stage for the preservation of almost all of the Book of Mormon in the form of the printer’s manuscript, all of which was published in August 2015 in a two-part volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers* (JSP). “The Book of Mormon,” notes the volume’s dust jacket, “is the centerpiece of Joseph Smith’s documentary record.”

Transcriptions of the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon have been available for over a decade in Royal Skousen’s Critical Text Project.³ Skousen teamed up with JSP editor Robin Scott Jensen to produce this new volume—a significant improvement on Skousen’s earlier publications, especially in terms of aesthetics. For the initial printing of the Book of Mormon in 1830 and through two subsequent editions (1837 and 1840), the printer’s manuscript was emended by several people, including Oliver Cowdery, John H. Gilbert, and Joseph and Hyrum Smith. In contrast to the Critical Text Project’s awkward landscape greyscale style, these emendations are color-coded in the annotation along with significant differences between the printer’s and original manuscript. Best of all, the volume features full color photographs of each page of the printer’s manuscript, thereby offering unprecedented access to this priceless document. Those who can’t afford the modestly priced printed books will be able to examine searchable manuscript images free of charge at josephsmithpapers.org. The transcription is based on Skousen’s earlier publication but follows the Joseph Smith Papers style guide and is thus easier to read. At the same time, this means that Skousen’s massive analysis of textual variants will remain relevant: “Slight mistakes (including extra dots or strokes of letters) or corrections are not transcribed, and deference is given to the scribe’s final intent,” and the manuscript is represented here “more liberally” than in the Critical Text Project.⁴

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³ The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, later absorbed into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, has sponsored Skousen’s quarter-century Critical Text Project, a meticulous analysis of the original and printer’s manuscripts and published editions of the Book of Mormon.

Two other aspects of this publication deserve notice. First, it would have been impossible without the cooperation of the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), who owns the manuscript and has taken care of it for over one hundred years. Additionally, a collection of RLDS photographs from 1923 aided in restoring a few minor words to the aged manuscript. These photographs are available on the Joseph Smith Papers website. This joint effort marks a significant milestone of cooperation between Community of Christ and the LDS Church. Second, the volume’s useful seventeen-page introduction provides a brief overview of the Book of Mormon’s contents, a historical account of Joseph Smith obtaining the plates, an overview of the process of translation, and a summary of the book’s publication and early dissemination. Most striking is the inclusion of full-color photographs of a chocolate-colored artifact that matches descriptions of the seer stone Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon and the leather pouch Emma Smith purportedly made to house the stone. The seer stone passed from Smith to Oliver Cowdery to his brother-in-law Phineas Young (through Cowdery’s widow, Elizabeth Ann Whitmer Cowdery) to Brigham Young to Zina Diantha Huntington Young to Zina Young Williams Card to the president of the Church, presumably John Taylor (though the editors do not specify). The now-dimmed stone is a beautiful symbol of the increasing historical transparency of the LDS Church.

This new publication of the printer’s manuscript suggests that the Book of Mormon’s narrative of the Lamanites, Nephites, and Jesus Christ’s ministry among them isn’t the only Book of Mormon narrative of note, though the LDS Church still promotes that internal narrative as primary. To borrow a famous phrase from media theorist Marshall McLuhan, “The medium is the message.” Important stories can be drawn from the physical manuscript itself. It contains a number of fascinating research possibilities for theologians who are interested in the nature of revelation and translation, for textual scholars who attend closely

to word variants and adjustments, and for those interested in material culture who ask questions about the role this manuscript—its creation, interpretation, and maintenance—has played in the history of Mormonism.

—Blair Dee Hodges