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Author(s): Alan Goff

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Likening in the Book of Mormon

A Look at Joseph M. Spencer's *An Other Testament: On Typology*

Alan Goff

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes¹

Doctrine and Covenants section 84 places Latter-day Saints under condemnation “until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon” (D&C 84:55–57). From the beginning of the Restoration, neglect of the Book of Mormon has been a hallmark of both those who accept and reject it. Before the 1980s, Latter-day Saint readings were often characterized by summary, with little or no exegetical analysis. Readings by Book of Mormon critics were similarly superficial, dismissing the book as not worthy of their attention. The value of capable and close readings of the scripture became more apparent with the work of Hugh Nibley and John W. Welch and continued with the work of FARMS. Quality work continues today with talented readers such as Grant Hardy and Terryl L. Givens. Joseph Spencer’s book *An Other Testament*, published by the Salt Press in 2012, builds insightfully upon the works of those who have gone before and takes Book of Mormon analysis to a new apex, setting the standard very high for any who follow. If anything, the book itself deserves close reading because it teaches the method and results of close reading.

Main Considerations of Spencer’s Approach

At the root of Spencer’s approach to the Book of Mormon is an essential humility; his book comes with a certain sacred discontent. Spencer

1. This quotation is often attributed to both Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

asserts that, if read properly, the Book of Mormon will overturn assumptions, challenge complacency, and mandate a rethinking of the relationship between readers' quotidian practices and the theory by which they live. Being better readers of this scripture impels us to be better people, and conversion is the ultimate result. Our readings will not succeed in corralling and containing the text, but we must try our best. And in so trying, we will be like ancient Jerusalem, a dish that becomes new when it is wiped clean and turned upside down by the divine hand (see 2 Kgs. 21:13; Isa. 29:16).

Spencer forthrightly looks at the evident fissures in the Book of Mormon text. Believers often want to assimilate the scripture to other parts of itself and to other writers within the book, as well as other canonized scripture, as if all scripture is homogenized to say the same thing regardless of the writer's intention, capability, personality, and historical circumstance. As its multiple authorship would suggest, the Book of Mormon is somewhat fragmented and not as unified as its defenders might expect. Spencer refers to rifts in the text (108–9) and speculates that Nephi changes his intention in writing the record partway through his historical task (40–41).

However, the Book of Mormon is no less divine because it is fragmented; it is no less human because it is divinely inspired. Yet it deserves to be treated in all its various aspects. The notion that the book might contain seams and fractures that need to be read in a complex and nuanced way is a useful tonic to both believers and nonbelievers. It is a rather whiggish view to maintain that sacred texts are always consistent, always rising above the fallibility of human interaction with the divine. The idea approximates the contemporary popular image of science as somehow more distanced and objective than the millions of pixels composed of very human scientists who make up the big picture.

Spencer pours a foundation of exegetical excellence in Mormon scripture; his work is characterized by close reading, punctuated by persistent and rewarding intertextual surprises. Biblical textuality is notable for its constant reference to other parts of its corpus; that is the major device through which the Bible acquires its complexity. The Book of Mormon is also noteworthy for its textuality, its constant references to the Old Testament and to earlier parts of its own text. The Book of Mormon, as a branch broken off the Bible and written by Jews exiled to a different land, is as persistently allusive as is the Bible. Any adequate reading must take into account this intertextuality. The casual reader who resorts to dismissing the connections between the Book of

Mormon and the Bible by referring to plagiarism manifests a certain textual illiteracy that is more than compensated for by the new class of readers that I have referred to above.

Spencer also foregrounds his argument with certain theological underpinnings, which he adapts for a Latter-day Saint audience. He notes that his purpose is to explore a particular type of complexity in the Book of Mormon, the “theological complexity” of the scripture (xi). Latter-day Saints tend toward a reflexive reaction against theology, believing it to be something native to Athens but not Jerusalem. Some say that Latter-day Saints do not “do” theology. Conflating all theology with systematic theology is not useful. Latter-day Saints inevitably do theology because they maintain that certain conceptions of God, society, nature, and humanity are all held together in a divine economy. The lessons LDS missionaries offer to investigators are theological. The lessons taught in Primary and Sunday School are theological. The discussions heard in high priests groups are theological (if veering toward speculative theology). Mormons have an understandable reaction against more formal and systematic theology, but we cannot escape doing theology in the way Spencer discusses the matter. We all do theology to some extent.

Noteworthy also, I suggest as a literary critic, is that historical or theological readings so often look to me like literary readings, exploring formal structure and allusiveness, character and narrative voice. Spencer accomplishes this literary-theological mission in all fidelity to the commitment that the Book of Mormon is an inspired ancient text translated by Joseph Smith; in fact, the divinity of the book is magnified by its reliance on literary forms of biblical textuality.

Types of Typology

Spencer begins his Book of Mormon reading by resorting to a concept most often explored as literary analysis in the Christian and biblical tradition: typology. Spencer reads typology to be a certain form of exegesis, and typology is also one version of intertextuality, a theoretical avenue most commonly explored in literary theory but also with a theological dimension. Alma’s own conversion story is told by updating the tradition and showing its relevance to events in Alma’s experience and in the modern reader’s: “Alma’s weaving together of a scriptural text with his own conversion experience exemplifies how the Book of Mormon should be read” (xii). This is a venerable exegetical principle most notably articulated by Leo Strauss: one should read a writer the way that writer reads predecessors. The most important predecessor text for

Book of Mormon narrative generally is Isaiah, so it is important to see how Nephi, Mormon, Abinadi, and the resurrected Jesus update Isaiah, applying the Hebrew prophet's text to contemporary circumstances.

Spencer points out two distinct versions of typology. First is Nephi's version that always reads the past into the present and applies to his community a covenantal, communal relationship with the house of Israel. In his types, the law and the prophets are always fulfilled in Christ. In short, Nephi's typology has two essential elements: first, it is communal, not individual, and second, it has its telos in the Messiah (97). If we modern readers do the same, likening Isaiah and Nephi to ourselves, we read our own experience as connecting in some important way to the promises made to Israel in the past and seeing them fulfilled in our own lives: "Typology is a question of allowing a new thought to rework memory, so that it becomes possible to advance in the knowledge of God" (xii).

The second variety of typology is introduced by Abinadi, who transforms the types so they are more individual, more focused on specifically forecasting events of Christ's advent in the meridian of time, and more about modeling the lives of individual believers on that of Christ—while omitting the covenantal and eschatological filiations of Nephi's typology.

Importantly, both of these versions fall well within the range of what typology meant to New Testament Christians, who borrowed the typological method from the Hebrew Bible, then strengthened it to make figuralism a major feature of Christian hermeneutics. Likewise, both typological classifications fit well within the fourfold senses of scripture developed in medieval exegesis.

Typology and Historicity

Spencer invests considerable space in analyzing the structure of Alma 36 and how its form asserts meaning. Alma reads his own commission through the lens of Lehi's story. Spencer's reading highlights the "strikingly parallel" connections (8) between Alma's and Lehi's experience. Allusions to Lehi's exodus are important, but the central text interwoven into Alma's narrative is that of Lehi's prophetic commission. In fact, Spencer notes that we should refer to the latter passage not as the story of Alma's conversion but as a prophetic commission narrative. Readers can hardly escape the recurrent patterns as Spencer shows how the narrative of Alma's experience looks to Lehi's prophetic commission as a model, with a direct citation of Lehi's experience found in the middle

of Alma's story. The direct quotation (in Alma 36:22 of 1 Ne. 1:8) demonstrates that "Alma's encounter with the angel, along with its visionary aftermath, is *supposed* to be an echo of Lehi's two visions" (9).

It helps to know that prophetic commissions and throne theophanies are seen frequently into the Old and New Testaments (with examples also found in the Apocrypha), with connections often drawn between them. "Luke's accounts of Paul's conversion are deliberately patterned on Hebrew prophecy,"² including the prophetic commissioning of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.³ One biblical scholar notes twenty-seven examples of commission-type scenes in the Old Testament,⁴ and the New Testament contains even more, with thirty-seven such examples.⁵ Spencer's articulation of the typology between Lehi and Alma is even more persuasive when seen as one iteration in a series of recurring commission events binding the biblical and Nephite records together.

Alma's theophany and commission are historical, but the account itself also follows a literary pattern. By drawing upon Lehi's throne theophany it reaches back into the past to foundational experiences, bypassing mundane history to become a vibrant, relevant, and eventual history. Alma's typological connection to past events makes them relevant to contemporary needs. "The act of interweaving a scriptural text with a historical experience allows both to breathe life into each other. The scriptural text, on the one hand, comes to life and reveals its latent universality" (26). Type informs antitype, and both, through figural transformation, impel the reader to the future. Modern readers should be transformed by this chain of figuration—converted as were Lehi and Alma. "Every reader of the Book of Mormon lives out—like Alma and Helaman—a reenactment of Lehi's visionary experiences. One is, without warning and while about one's business, unexpectedly confronted by a messenger who proffers a book and bids one to read" (27).

Modernity is generally not sympathetic to such a notion of eventual history. Historicism dismisses such fluid notions of temporality, and by taking up such a concept of history and the Book of Mormon, Spencer narrows his potential audience. But for him, the historicity question

2. Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 7.

3. Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 9.

4. Terence Y. Mullins, "New Testament Commission Forms, Especially in Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 4 (1976): 603.

5. Mullins, "New Testament Commission Forms," 605.

regarding the Book of Mormon is being asked the wrong way, for the book is neither historical nor unhistorical but rather nonhistorical. The events described in the book happened, but they 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” (28). Regarding outside interventions of forceful grace like Paul on the road to Damascus or Alma on the road to nowhere, the reader comfortably ensconced in a recliner and satisfied with modernity is not likely to be open-minded about such an antique-and-ever-new concept of historical time.

For those receptive to concepts of sacred time and typological figuration, “the historicity of *the Book of Mormon* is not in question. Rather, as Alma makes clear, it is the Book of Mormon that calls the historicity of *the individual* into question” (28) by inviting the reader to step out of profane temporality and into sacred time. The reader is not merely a lone individual but a soul bound into an endless chain of recurrent events joined by covenants and texts.

Challenging modernity is an audacious venture. I wish Spencer well in that struggle; I even offer to enlist. But the prospects of the sacred encroaching into the territory of the profane are not so good, because such a transformation requires adept and perceptive readers, the kind our modern culture and technologies tend to discourage rather than promote.

Likening and Typology in Abinadi and Isaiah

Spencer’s fundamental exegetical approach is to read the Book of Mormon intertextually; the scripture reveals its most important meanings while one text is being read against another. Nephi, Abinadi, the risen Christ: all deepen their message by reading Isaiah. Isaiah is recited and commended so many times in the Book of Mormon, by so many readers, that moderns cannot escape the conclusion that they cannot understand the Book of Mormon without appreciating Isaiah.

Spencer’s detailed reading of the Book of Mormon offers many productive insights for the inclusion of so much Isaiah in Nephi’s record. He also makes a useful distinction between Nephi’s handling of two kinds of recurrence: typology and likening. When Nephi likens Isaiah to the Nephites, he shows how the biblical prophet’s writings are a pattern to apply to his own people’s experience. “Likening is, for Nephi, what one does *with* the Book of Isaiah, while typology is what one learns

from the Book of Isaiah” (99). Nephi’s likening is much like Mormons on Pioneer Day. They dress up in flannel shirts and gingham dresses and reenact the entry of the Saints into the Salt Lake Valley, celebrating the deliverance of God’s people into a promised land. Likening helps communities understand the continuity between their own history and that of biblical Israel. To liken includes taking the hermeneutical principle present in the predecessor text, then updating and applying it to the successor text and to the community that text is designed to bind together. “To liken Isaiah would be to take Isaiah’s writings as a template for creatively interpreting something non-Isaianic, to employ an ‘Isaianic framework’” (76). It should also be remembered that, for Nephi, to liken Isaiah is always to function within a community; likening is a covenantal interpretation, not an individual one (76).

Spencer points out Isaiah’s citation of the common ancient Near Eastern creation myth of the divine battle with the forces of chaos; the prophet notes the Lord’s vanquishing of Rahab and the decollation of the dragon. Nephi’s own experience with Laban in which he too decapitates his foe is an updating of Isaiah’s symbolism (84), all in the service of showing how the Lehite covenant is wrapped up in God’s deliverance and in Nephi’s obedience to divine commandment (89). Isaiah’s citation of the Rahab story connects the first exodus from Egypt to the second exodus that he foresees. “Nephi could read himself into Second Isaiah as the embodiment of the earlier exodus to which the eschatological exodus—which Nephi consistently associates with the eventual gathering of Israel—would look back” (91). All these exoduses are part of the unfolding of the divine pattern in different generations of Israelites.

Spencer provides another essential reading of Isaiah by analyzing the confrontation narrative between Abinadi and Noah’s priests. Spencer shows why the priests pose the question they do, and why they cite Isaiah 52:7–10 as a way to confound the prophet. Spencer’s book is brimming with shrewd and groundbreaking interpretations, but this section is a work of particular genius and of grace. I have read Mosiah 12 many times and have wondered why the priests offer the passage from Isaiah 52 in attempting to ensnare Abinadi. Spencer offers a reading that does what good explanations often do: it blindsides the reader, who responds, “Why didn’t I think of that? It’s so apparent now.”

The background of Abinadi’s confrontation with Noah and his priests is the Zeniffite recolonization of the land of Nephi. Zeniff sees himself as Nephi restored, the first Nephite king who travelled to the promised land to (re)possess it, “right down to gaining superiority over

the Lamanites and claiming the land over which Nephi himself had originally ruled” (131). Along with this return to foundations comes a particular eschatological view of Nephite history. Zeniff and his successor, Noah, interpret Isaiah as prophesying that once they had possessed the land, the people no longer had any need for prophets; they had arrived, been delivered, and achieved salvation (144–45). They quote Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings; that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good; that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth” (Mosiah 12:21). Noah and his priests believe they have brought about the eschaton; their deliverance is secure and permanent. They expect only good tidings, peace, and salvation to be declared, when here comes Abinadi pronouncing judgment and condemnation.

This understanding makes sense of the judicial charge of blasphemy and sedition brought against Abinadi. The prophet must engage the priests’ “orthodox” reading with his “unorthodox” interpretation of Isaiah (135). “Through an audacious reworking of the meaning of the spirit of prophecy, coupled with an interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 that is clearly distinct from Nephi’s much earlier interpretation, Abinadi presents himself to the priests as a radical revisionist” (141). For the priests of Noah, Isaiah 52:7–10 had a plain meaning that could not be challenged (142) and yet was controverted by Abinadi’s very presence and claims of “thus saith the Lord.”

Spencer’s long and involved reading here, which I have only touched upon, makes sense of the Abinadi proceedings in a new way that is likely to become definitive, at least for the foreseeable future. Spencer’s insights into the confrontation between Noah and Abinadi are also a parade example of what close readings of the Book of Mormon demand of the reader. Perhaps we modern readers have become too much like the priests of Noah, misunderstanding Isaiah and therefore too often misappropriating the text. Spencer’s own audacious reading shakes us from our complacency and, in my mind, makes more sense of the Abinadi story than any other since the recovery of the Book of Mormon.

Typology between Abinadi and Alma

The story of Abinadi becomes a type for later events regarding the conversions of Alma the younger and the four sons of Mosiah. After narrating the story of Alma’s encounter with an angel, Mormon quotes Alma as citing the Lord, who says, “Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again”

(Mosiah 27:25). This is an echo of the Isaiah passage quoted by Abinadi that asserts, “The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Mosiah 12:24).

Mormon notes what Alma and his companions did once their hearts had been changed: “Alma began from this time forward to teach the people, and those who were with Alma at the time the angel appeared unto them, traveling round about through all the land, *publishing* to all the people the things which they had heard and seen, and preaching the word of God in much tribulation” (Mosiah 27:32; italics added)—a clear reference to the priests of Noah who, attempting to trap Abinadi, quote Isaiah about publishing peace and salvation (Mosiah 12:21). To punctuate the point and drive the allusion home, a few verses later, the four sons of Mosiah are singled out for “publishing all the things which they had seen” (Mosiah 27:35) to the Nephites. Mormon then alludes again to the Isaianic passage explicitly: “And how blessed are they! For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth” (Mosiah 27:37), thus reaffirming Abinadi’s interpretation of this passage, which points not to the comforts of repossessing the land of promise (as the priests and people of Noah understood) but instead to the declarations of prophets to all people. The story of Alma and the sons of Mosiah ends appropriately, with another citation of Isaiah 52:7, the very passage posed to Abinadi by the priests of Noah (Mosiah 27:37).

The book of Mosiah narrates the blessedness of those who publish peace, returning to the passage of Isaiah 52:7 three times in the story arc that spans from Abinadi’s trial through the commission of Alma. The book also strengthens the typological connection between those who declare the gospel while risking death and persecution to publish good tidings. It seems no coincidence that both the first and second parts of Isaiah have scenes of prophetic commission (Isa. 6; 40:1–11), and while a portion of the prophetic commission in Isaiah 52:7 is to declare good tidings, judgment upon Israel’s actions is part of those tidings, with the cry that all flesh is grass and that the grass withers and dies, but the word of God endures (Isa. 40:6–8).

In refuting the priests’ interpretations, Abinadi connects Isaiah 52 and 53 and quotes Isaiah 53 about the suffering servant; as with Christ, Abinadi, Alma, and the sons of Mosiah are called to suffer “much tribulation, being greatly persecuted” (Mosiah 27:32) in order to bring “many to the knowledge of the truth” (Mosiah 27:36). Christ is the prototype,

and these Book of Mormon emissaries are the narrative antitypes of the pattern. Abinadi challenges the priests' interpretation of Isaiah by pointing not to some fulfilled eschatology but to the work of Christ and his seed (Isa. 53:10). Abinadi declares the Lord's seed to be the prophets (Mosiah 15:10–18). By closely reading the book of Mosiah, we discover that Abinadi, Alma, and the sons of Mosiah are to be seen as the Lord's seed as they risk their lives to publish the good news of salvation through Christ.

Concerning the passages above, I will mention only a couple of possible oversights. As discussed, the conversion of Alma and the confrontation between Noah and Abinadi are part of a unity in the Book of Mormon that uses allusion and exegesis in order to signal emphasis and pattern. However, when discussing Alma's conversion story, Spencer never draws upon Mosiah 27 (taking all his analysis from Alma 36), where Alma's story is also related in detail. Although summarized in the third person by the book's editor, the Mosiah 27 narrative has a direct quotation from Alma (verses 24–31) in the first person. The story of Alma's commission in Mosiah 27 transitions to later discussion in the book of Alma and the missionary journeys recounted there. A major part of that transition is found in Mosiah 27:37, which is an allusion to Isaiah 52, an important passage that could have strengthened Spencer's reading of intertextual connections.

Reading Well the Book

I do not know if the Church is still under divine condemnation for neglecting the Book of Mormon. Clearly, we as a people have recently produced better readers of the scripture; but we also clearly need to move beyond superficial readings of the text. Our private readings, our congregational readings, our Sunday School readings, our Relief Society readings, our seminary readings, our readings for academic journals—all our readings need to improve because they do not yet live up to the text. We still have much work to do in bringing meaning to the Book of Mormon.

Spencer closes his book by asserting, correctly, that “this strange book—this *other* testament—still remains, for the most part, to be read” (175). *An Other Testament* shows how—like the Book of Mormon itself—plainness does not preclude complexity. By his intertextual reading, Spencer gives us a good head start, a first leg in a relay race that will be difficult to match in successive legs. As Adam Miller points out in the book's foreword, Spencer's book “is a primer on all we have failed to see

and the richness of his reading implicitly chastens us for having failed even to look.” But after Spencer, we are now more interested in looking.

Spencer points us to a covenantal reading, not merely likening the book to ourselves, but to a reading more like Nephi’s typological reading that binds us together not only within contemporary congregations but across generations. Spencer shows us how to liken the scriptures to ourselves so we can fulfill the eschatological promise of being a covenant people. “The eschatological fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant—in which the book itself plays a central part—is the unifying center of the Book of Mormon.” A Nephite reading, as opposed to an Abinadite reading, “would thus read and receive the Book of Mormon as a gift” (174–75).

We owe Spencer a debt of gratitude for giving us the gift of his Book of Mormon reading, for of all books, this scriptural text should change its readers. “The Book of Mormon, read this way, will typologically and salvifically rewrite not only the reader’s individual history, but the history of the whole world” (175). The book can do so if we become better readers, which Spencer models typologically for us. In an age of ubiquitous literacy, good discipleship of the Word demands such competent readership.

Alan Goff is Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at DeVry University–Phoenix. He received an MA in English and one in political science from BYU and a doctorate in humanities from the University at Albany. His publications include “Scratching the Surface of Book of Mormon Narrative,” *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000): 51–82, and “The Mormon *Positivismusstreit*: Modern vs. Postmodern Approaches to Telling the Story of Mormonism,” in *Telling the Story of Mormon History*, ed. William G. Hartley (Provo, Utah: Smith Institute, 2004), 49–64. His book on violence in the Book of Mormon narrative and the thought of René Girard will be published in 2014.