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## Exploring the Complex Book of Mormon

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## Exploring the Complex Book of Mormon

Brant A. Gardner

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# EXPLORING THE COMPLEX BOOK OF MORMON

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**Brant A. Gardner**

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**Abstract:** *This volume collects papers published in multiple venues over a wide time span. A diligent researcher might find all of them, but that difficult search has been done. The included papers represent multiple ways of approaching the Book of Mormon and therefore provide the reader with a rounded perspective on how and why a careful reading should be done.*

**A** *Hundredth Part* collects articles and papers that have been previously published under the auspices of the Religious Studies Department of Brigham Young University. The benefit for the reader isn't that this is new information but that it is doubly curated. First, it was originally accepted for publication after peer review. Second, the editors of the volume selected each of the articles from those available. Thus, this becomes a focused look at a range of topics related to the Book of Mormon. The selected articles were published in various books and magazines, from 1991 to 2021. Pulling them into a single volume makes important research available to a much wider audience. With the approaching *Come, Follow Me* year focusing on the Book of Mormon, this volume opens up a deeper and wider vista on the complexity of the Book of Mormon.

The editors declare in their introduction, "The authors' contributions in the present volume approach the Book of Mormon from a variety of perspectives and approaches. This variety, in and of itself, speaks to the richness and the depth of the Book of Mormon record and to the value

that can be found in an in-depth study of this important book” (p. x). The editors categorize the contributions into the following categories:

- Doctrinal Contributions
- Church and Priesthood
- Cultural Contributions and Close Readings
- Post-Book of Mormon Readings of the Text

Prior to the articles that are categorized under these headings comes one that does not fall under any of the categories but deserves its place as the introductory article.

### **“The Historicity of the Book of Mormon” (President Dallin H. Oaks)**

Some read the Book of Mormon as an inspiring collection of wonderful teachings that has no connection to a real people with a real history. President Oaks writes in direct contradiction of that premise. “The historicity — historical authenticity — of the Book of Mormon is an issue so fundamental that it rests first upon faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which is the first principle in this, as in all other matters” (p. 2).

President Oaks does not present evidence of historicity, but rather a discussion of the logic of the investigation and to what ends it might lead. Doubtless a result of his training in law, President Oaks examines positions and possibilities. He provides a useful summary of his important points in his conclusion:

In this message I have offered some thoughts on matters relating to the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

1. On this subject, as on so many others involving our faith and theology, it is important to rely on faith and revelation as well as scholarship.
2. I am convinced that secular evidence can neither prove nor disprove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.
3. Those who deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon have the difficult task of trying to prove a negative. They also have the awkward duty of explaining how they can dismiss the Book of Mormon as a fable while still praising some of its contents.
4. We know from the Bible that Jesus taught His apostles that in the important matter of His own identity and mission they were “blessed” for relying

on the witness of revelation (“the things that be of God”), and it is offensive to Him for them to act upon worldly values and reasoning (“the things ... that be of men”) (Matthew 16:23).

5. Those scholars who rely on faith and revelation as well as scholarship, and who assume the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, must endure ridicule from those who disdain these things of God.
6. I have also illustrated that not all scholars disdain the value of religious belief and the legitimacy of the supernatural when applied to theological truth. Some even criticize the “intellectual provincialism” of those who apply the methods of historical criticism to the Book of Mormon. (pp. 10–11)

The conclusions are important: the details are illuminating.

### **Doctrinal Contributions: “After All We Can Do” (2 Nephi 25:23)” (Jared W. Ludlow)**

Ludlow provides a close and careful reading of 2 Nephi 25:23: “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.” This is a verse that is well known and oft discussed. The typical question revolves around the meaning of “after all we can do.” There is no difficulty in suggesting that we should believe in Christ or that we be reconciled to God. The question becomes the definition of grace and whether or not “after all we can do” is designed to define, clarify, and ultimately limit the concept of God’s grace.

Ludlow specifically responds and reacts to Joseph Spencer’s paper, “What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23.”<sup>1</sup> Spencer’s paper is an important read on the topic. It is sufficiently important that it is worth Ludlow’s interaction with it. Ludlow defines how his examination approaches the text from a different perspective: “[U]nlike Spencer’s article, which is a theological reading of the scripture, this piece will try to focus more on Nephi’s historical situation in an effort to better understand what Nephi’s words meant in their initial context” (p. 15).

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1. Joseph M. Spencer, “What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 25–39.

Where Ludlow's ultimate response begins in earnest is through the examination of the literary content behind that verse. Ludlow's use of "historical situation" does not rely upon an external historical context, but rather the assumption that a real person named Nephi wrote the entire text, and that the text itself provides the historical context in which the concepts are to be defined.

Ludlow makes the astute observation that it is important to read more than the familiar phrases when analyzing a text. 2 Nephi 25:23 is important, but it is followed by verse 24, which provides more context. Ludlow presents that verse in a series of alternating parallel phrases:

A "And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ,  
       B we keep the law of Moses,  
 A and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ,  
       B until the law shall be fulfilled" (2 Nephi 25:24).

Without the arbitrary division into verses, we should see verses 23 and 24 together rather than treat them separately. Thus, verse 24 serves to clarify the understanding of "after all we can do." Ludlow continues to examine the context of "after all we can do," providing elegant exegesis of the phrases in the following verses. Doubtless the idea of "after all we can do" will continue to be discussed, but if it is to be read in the context and understanding in which it was first written, Ludlow's analysis must be consulted.

### **Doctrinal Contributions: "Alma's Chiasmus as Transformative Vicarious Experience" (Stephan Taeger)**

Taeger's introduction contains a paragraph that is relevant for the overall vision of the volume as well as his paper: "[O]ne's approach to a text will determine what stands out when it is read. For example, if scripture is studied as a historical document, the salient features are details about the author, audience, and setting of the text in question. If scripture is studied for application, the reader will notice ways that the text makes claim on their personal life. Obviously, drawing upon a variety of ways to read helps one understand the scriptures more completely" (p. 31). That could easily have been a paragraph pulled from the introduction to this volume, or perhaps easily inserted into the introduction. It is worth restatement before entering Taeger's paper itself.

The relevance to Taeger's paper lies in his insightful reading of Alma chapter 36 not as an example of chiasm, but for the way a reader experiences the events as they are related in a chiastic form. As Taeger

notes, chiasmus in the Book of Mormon has often been seen as a way to demonstrate the text's antiquity. It does that by presenting the whole structure of the chiasm to show that the form truly exists. In such studies, it is more the form that matters than the content. What Taeger suggests is:

Alma 36 is often presented as a whole in order to show its chiasmic structure. Authors or teachers diagram the chiasmus so that readers can see how the ideas in the first half of the chapter are reflected in the second half, with the middle point of the chiasmus being centered on verses 17 and 18. However, when read, Alma 36 is not experienced all at once; it is experienced as an unfolding event in time. One might be able to understand the *structure* of Alma 36, but one would not be able to fully appreciate the narrative-like experience of Alma's chiasmus unless he or she examines its *sequence*. (p. 33)

What Taeger does is read through the narrative of the text to experience the chiasm as it would be encountered by a reader. He examines the way that the language as well as the structure encourage the vicarious experience of the reader as they participate in the way the story is told. Much as Taeger analyzes the vicarious experience of reading through the language and structure of Alma 36, his paper deserves a reading beyond this synopsis that only suggests the outline of the concepts he presents.

### **Doctrinal Contributions: “The Plan of Salvation and the Book of Mormon” (Noel B. Reynolds)**

The Book of Mormon is doctrine in story form. As such, it can easily happen that readers miss some of the important doctrinal contributions it makes. Reynolds's paper attempts to remedy that possible oversight by carefully delineating the way the Book of Mormon represents the plan of salvation in the Book of Mormon.

Reynolds begins by contrasting the more complete presentation of the plan of salvation in the Book of Mormon with the more scattered and diffused way elements of the plan of salvation are presented in the New Testament. Rather than suggest that this is a modern innovation imposed by a nineteenth-century writer, Reynolds suggests that these were elements that were present on the brass plates and therefore formed an elaboration of a teaching that had its roots in the pre-Lehite Old World.



An interesting part of the paper is when Reynolds distinguishes the plan of salvation from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Reynolds argues:

[S]ome Latter-day Saint authors merge the gospel of Jesus Christ with the teachings of the plan of salvation in their discourse, preferring not to draw a distinction between the two. But the Book of Mormon writers kept the distinction clearly in mind. Nephite prophets consistently referred to the means by which men and women in this mortal existence could qualify for eternal life as the gospel or doctrine of Christ, the way, the path, or the word. On multiple occasions, they explicitly cited Christ's gospel teaching to them that any person who would (1) trust in Christ, (2) sincerely repent of their sins by covenanting to follow his straight and narrow path, and (3) witness to the Father that they had so covenanted by being baptized in water, would (4) receive the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost, which would bring with it the remission of sins, a testimony of the Father and the Son, and daily direction as to what they should do. All who would (5) endure to the end of their lives in following these commands of the Lord would (6) receive eternal life at the Judgment Day. In these presentations, they typically referred to key elements of the plan of salvation as context, to explain what the Father and the Son have done and will do to make salvation possible for all those who will embrace their gospel. (p. 50)

Reynolds provides a thorough examination of the topic. While it is doubtful that modern Latter-day Saint readers will find any new insights into the plan of salvation, they should certainly find new insights into the way the Book of Mormon continuously emphasizes that theme throughout the long historical story it tells.

**Doctrinal Contributions: “‘This Is My Gospel’:  
Jesus’s Discourse in 3 Nephi” (Andrew C. Skinner)**

As he begins, Skinner declares:

The statements of Jesus Christ in 3 Nephi 27:13–21 regarding “the gospel” are unique in scripture. Nowhere else in sacred writ does Jesus personally define the term with such power, clarity, and simplicity. Nowhere else does he declare personal ownership or authorship of the gospel he preached and explain it as the carrying out of his Father’s will. And nowhere

else in scripture does he connect so directly and succinctly his Father’s will with the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Final Judgment, and link them to the universal salvation offered to humankind. (p. 71)

The article elaborates on each of these elements. It begins by discussing the concept of the gospel, and notes that:

Though the noun *euangelion* is found in the New Testament gospel accounts, some scholars believe it is “improbable that Jesus himself should have used the [Greek] noun or its Semitic equivalent,” which is *basorah*. Rather, authorities have attributed the first use of the Christian term “gospel” to the Apostle Paul. Certainly Paul spoke often of the message of salvation as “good tidings” and felt its impact deeply. The noun *euangelion* appears sixty times in his writings — in every one of his letters. But the fact remains that the Synoptic gospels say that Jesus used the term *euangelion* — “glad tidings” or “gospel” — when talking about his own mission and message, and it takes a lot of argumentation to explain why we should not take the gospel writers at face value. Thankfully, 3 Nephi 27:13–21 clarifies the picture and prevents error. (p. 74)

This last sentence highlights the basic caution I would add to this part of the paper as well many others. The paper is written from the outside in, that is, it begins with a modern understanding of all of the elements under discussion and discovers that the text replicates the assumed meanings. Without stating it, the whole is dependent upon the unmentioned assumption that the English text must represent the very words of the Nephite text. That is one of the ways in which the translation of the Book of Mormon may be understood, but it is not the only one, and it is falling into lesser favor as more evidence is accumulated about the translation process.<sup>2</sup>

In this case, we have the problem of the word “gospel” in translation, and without any foundational discussion of translation, the idea that “3 Nephi 27:13–21 clarifies the picture” becomes a circular argument. It

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2. See Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020).

is entirely possible that the word “gospel” occurs precisely because it is written that way in the New Testament.

A second example of where the modern Latter-day Saint understanding is imposed upon the text comes when Skinner discusses the relationship of Christ to the Father:

After claiming authorship of the gospel he had been teaching, Jesus described its essence, its core, as carrying out the will of his Father. “This is the gospel which I have given unto you,” he said, “that I came into the world to do the will of my Father, because my Father sent me” (3 Nephi 27:13). By carrying out his Father’s will, he acted as his Father’s agent, seeking only to satisfy his Father’s desire and plan. He had said this very thing earlier during his mortal ministry: “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30). The constant and consistent picture presented by the scriptures from beginning to end is of Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son, seeking only to carry out the will of the Father. (p. 77)

The statement is almost without question — if we read the Book of Mormon only against our modern understanding. What Skinner does not resolve is how the Book of Mormon prophets saw the relationship between Father and Son, a relationship that would provide interesting contexts to what Christ was teaching. The clearest Book of Mormon internal understanding is seen in Abinadi’s teaching:

And now Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people.

And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son —

The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son. (Mosiah 15:1–3)

Combine this with the essential definition of the Nephite God, again from Abinadi:

For behold, did not Moses prophesy unto them concerning the coming of the Messiah, and that God should redeem his people? Yea, and even all the prophets who have prophesied

ever since the world began — have they not spoken more or less concerning these things?

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? (Mosiah 13:33–34)

Thus, the essential Nephite teaching is that the Messiah is God, and that Father refers to God when in the heavens, and when that God appears on earth, he becomes the Son. Where modern Latter-day Saint understanding makes a clear distinction between Father and Son, a distinction Skinner reads into the Nephite text, there is a different context that may color Christ's words. It is not the context in which Skinner describes the text.

None of these issues diminishes Skinner's intent. Viewing the Book of Mormon from our current perspective is encouraged by Nephi's suggestion that we liken scriptures to ourselves (1 Nephi 19:23–24). However, it is in direct contrast to the unfortunate finality of Skinner's statement that "thankfully, 3 Nephi 27:13–21 clarifies the picture and prevents error" (p. 74).

Skinner's article does an excellent job of covering the topics he indicated he would treat. That he treats them from the perspective of the modern understanding of the gospel is a perspective that is well accepted. In that perspective, Skinner's paper is insightful and important. It simply imposes a gospel on the text that is not necessarily different but differently nuanced in the Nephite understanding.

### **Doctrinal Contributions: "Choosing Redemption" (Jennifer C. Lane)**

Lane's contribution makes a comfortable pairing with Reynolds's paper on the plan of salvation in the Book of Mormon. Because Lane is concerned with the idea that "repentance and sanctification become redemption as we are delivered from the bondage of sin and the natural man," her message is under the larger umbrella of the plan of salvation. However, given that Lane is concentrating on a particular aspect of the plan of salvation, it is important in its own right.

The Book of Mormon is focused on the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ from the beginning. Nephi described the aftermath of his father, Lehi's, preaching to those in Jerusalem: "And it came to pass that the Jews did mock him because of the things which he testified of them;

for he truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations; and he testified that the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, *manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world*” (1 Nephi 1:19, emphasis added). Even before there were Nephites, Lehi was emphasizing the redeeming mission of the Messiah.

A people would only need redemption if they were in a situation that would separate them from their covenant or God. Lane ably lays out the Nephite teachings on the ways in which humanity has fallen and is therefore in need of such a Savior. After that long examination, she moves to the exposition of the Book of Mormon’s teaching on Christ’s atoning sacrifice that permits the reconciliation and redemption of the fallen. She declares:

The invitation to accept Christ’s offer of cleansing and redemption is repeated throughout the Book of Mormon. Moroni ends the Book of Mormon with the invitation to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness” (Moroni 10:32). A much earlier version of this final invitation is found in the final words of Amaleki, who concluded the small plates of Nephi. Amaleki, like Moroni, focuses both on what we need to do and what Christ will do for us that is beyond our own power: “And now, my beloved brethren, I would that ye should come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:26). We cannot redeem ourselves. Only Christ has power to do that. But we can choose to “partake of ... the power of his redemption.” We make that choice step by step as we “offer [our] whole souls as offering unto him.” With each choice to give up our sins, Christ’s redeeming power is able to become operative in our lives. Our faith and repentance enable us to be redeemed. (p. 100)

Lane brings these concepts together in her discussion of the modern prophets’ words and teachings on the subject. She notes that this process of accepting Christ’s atonement has the ability to change us from a natural human to a more godly human: “The good news of the gospel testifies that Christ’s power can change our very natures. He does not

impose that power upon us without our will, but when we want him and his righteousness more than we want to keep our sins, we feel his redeeming power” (p. 103).

Lane ends with an appropriate discussion of how our agency enters into the process of redemption. She teaches:

The Lord himself testified that we must individually choose redemption. He told Alma that in the last days there will be those that shall “know that I am the Lord their God, that I am their Redeemer; but they *would not* be redeemed” (Mosiah 26:26; emphasis added). If we are not willing to receive the redemption of having our natures sanctified, then it will be as if there were no redemption made. The hope for each of us is in realizing that the Redemption has been made, the price has been paid, and the power is available. (p. 105)

### **Doctrinal Contributions: “Dealing with Difficulty in Scripture: Divine Violence in the Book of Mormon” (Andrew C. Smith)**

Smith begins his paper with a fascinating question. He sets up the question by noting that we are to search scriptures and become more like Jesus. Then he metaphorically flips the chessboard and scatters the pieces. He asks, “What do we do when we or our students, in following the encouragement of prophets, delve into the scriptures and find actions or words of prophets or even God that are surprising, worrisome, or discomfiting from our modern perspectives?” (p. 109–10).

The terrible reality of ancient scripture is that it is not nearly as well-behaved as our Sunday School lessons make it out to be. For example, he quickly looks at the typically untaught aspects of Jesus Christ:

Challenging issues within scripture become all the more problematic when the one doing the confusing or discomfiting (from our perspective) actions, is our Savior Jesus Christ. From calling a Gentile woman a “dog” (see Matthew 15:21–28 or Mark 7:24–30) to using strong and shockingly angry or violent imagery (see Luke 3:9, 12:49–53, 22:36–38, or Matthew 23:13–36) to statements seemingly intent on driving wedges between families (see Mark 3:31–35, Matthew 8:21–22, Luke 9:62, or Luke 14:26), some of the teachings and sayings of Jesus in his mortal life can be somewhat unsettling. (p. 111)

After laying out many possible unsettling issues, Smith elects to concentrate on the issue of divine violence in 3 Nephi and Moses 7. Third Nephi discusses the destruction in the New World after Christ's crucifixion, and Moses 7 describes similar divinely initiated natural destructive events. In addition to providing a framework for understanding divine violence, Smith also provides a literary analysis of 3 Nephi.

### **Church and Priesthood: “Lessons from the Zarahemla Churches” (Dennis L. Largey)**

Largey begins by quoting President Ezra Taft Benson's admonition that the Book of Mormon was written for our day, and therefore we should read it to understand the challenges, and solutions, in our day. Largey applies that perspective to the stories told in Mosiah 25–27 which discuss issues of apostasy through outside influence and the story of Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah. Largey sees in these chapters four challenges for the modern Church: 1) The challenge of flattery, 2) The challenge of teaching the rising generation, 3) The challenge of persecution, and 4) The challenge of handling transgression in the Church.

Largey states that “flattery, as it is used in the Book of Mormon, is associated with deception, vanity, idolatry, false prophecy, apostasy, bringing souls to destruction, and persuasive speech attributed to the power of the devil” (p. 138). I would disagree with this perception of the nature of flattery, both in the Book of Mormon and in the modern world. I see flattery more as the attractiveness of “the world” where there are enticements to secularism and away from faithfulness to God. Although Mormon paints Nehor and Korihor in pejorative terms, Alma the Younger had also fallen to flattery and had preached flattery. Yet Alma the Younger turned his life around. We need not see the world in terms of the devil. It is simply there and different. It has many advantages that we accept while attempting to hold some of its beliefs at bay. That appears to be more the challenge of flattery, to see the reason for faithfulness while we live within the advantages of a culture that provides so many benefits, but also challenges.

Largey's discussion of the challenge of raising the upcoming generations is sadly less than helpful. Essentially, he reduces the solution to teaching baptism and repentance. This could have been a place for discussing the healing power of repentance and using the experience of Alma the Younger to show any of the upcoming generation that a turn off the path for a time need not be permanent. There is a way back and it

is a way that leads to full fellowship and covenant faithfulness with God. He missed an opportunity to really help parents who are perhaps more in need of such advice than we have ever been.

The challenge of persecution is obvious. Persecution is hard to take, and by its nature, assumes that it is undeserved. Largey suggests, “The message to modern-day persecutors is the same as it has always been, whether the warning voice comes personally from the mouth of an angel, or vicariously through the voice of scripture: ‘Go thy way, and seek to destroy the church no more, ... and this even if thou wilt of thyself be cast off’ (Mosiah 27:16)” (p. 141).

Transgression in the church is handled in a more expanded version of the advice for raising the upcoming generation. Repentance works. Perhaps the original publication date of 1991 suggests the reason that issues of the problems of transgression are handled with simplicity that doesn’t recognize many of the complexities that the Church must deal with only thirty years later. Had the article been written at a different time, perhaps there would have been a more in-depth discussion of this issue rather than the simple assertion that repentance is available.

### **Church and Priesthood: “Priesthood in Mosiah” (Daniel C. Peterson)**

In the footlong words of academia, Peterson’s definition of Church and Priesthood in the Book of Mormon is an exegetical examination rather than an eisegetical one. It reads Church and Priesthood based on what the text says and shows about the Church and Priesthood rather than using modern conceptions to mold the text into a mirror of our modern practices. This is therefore an important article precisely because it creates definitions from the Book of Mormon. There are differences from modern perceptions, and perhaps we can learn from those differences.

As a simple example, Peterson notes:

It seems striking that priests in Mosiah specifically, and in the Book of Mormon generally, only seem to teach and to preside (Mosiah 25:20). The book of Mosiah repeatedly mentions “priests and teachers.” Could this be related to Joseph Smith’s use of the word *priest* for the preachers of his own day? Webster’s 1828 dictionary notes that “in the United States, the word [*priest*] denotes any licensed minister of the gospel.” This is, in fact, much the way that Joseph Smith used the term. For example, the draft of his Joseph Smith-History speaks of “several learned Priests” who visited him to



dispute his theological claims, which, in this context, would certainly refer to Protestant preachers rather than Catholic or Orthodox priests. The same usage is apparent in his account of the religious disputes which preceded his first vision (Joseph Smith — History 1:6). (p. 152)

Most modern religious readers have had their perceptions of what a priest might mean based on either their tradition's use of the term or the biblical use of priests as religious officiators. In the Book of Mormon, they may not have been officiators. Many may have been teachers, and King Noah's High Priests were counselors — but still not officiators.

Peterson suggests that Nephite priesthood must be understood as confluence of religious and political power centered in the king. This is an important aspect of ancient religion. As Peterson points out, the modern separation between church and state did not exist in the Nephite world. He concludes, "This brief glance at the question of priesthood and authority in the book of Mosiah has revealed an intricately complex and remarkably consistent system underlying the many incidental details of its already highly involved narrative. We should be impressed with what the book of Mosiah discloses about the nuanced richness of the Book of Mormon" (p. 164).

Perhaps the crushing power of the present crept into Peterson's conclusion. Where he had been consistently speaking of church and religion, he concludes by tossing in the word "authority," which reflects a modern perception of a religious problem. For the ancient world, that there was a king was sufficient authority. After all, kings ruled through the grace of God and served as his representatives, a fact Peterson also clearly underscores: "Regardless of the method that God used to choose him, the king represented God on the earth, and his actions, when he was righteous and inspired, were God's actions" (p. 151).

### **Church and Priesthood: "The Book of Mormon: A Primer for Priesthood Leadership" (RoseAnn Benson)**

Returning to the footlong vocabulary with which I began the discussion of Daniel Peterson's article, Benson's article is the eisegesis to his exegesis — the yang to Peterson's yin. Dennis Largey began his article with a quotation from President Ezra Taft Benson recommending this approach, and even Nephi declared, "I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23).

In this case, Benson begins with a modern caution for priesthood leadership: "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and

disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:39). This sad tendency can be overcome, and Benson suggests that two Book of Mormon stories (certainly among others) can provide examples of how to properly exercise priesthood leadership.

Two examples from the Book of Mormon illustrate this style of leadership and stewardship in worthy men who bear the holy priesthood. The first example reveals the relationship of patriarch and prophet Lehi with his wife, Sariah, during a time of stress and difficulty; the second shows the future prophet, Nephi, chastising and forgiving his rude and rebellious brothers after their attempt to take his life. From these two examples we learn how to encourage another to develop his or her testimony, how to make a peaceful existence with siblings, and how to resolve conflict when sin is involved. (p. 169)

### **Church and Priesthood: “Two Case Studies on the Development of the Concept of Religion: The New Testament and the Book of Mormon” (Kerry Hull)**

It is so easy to understand what religion is. We have one. We belong to one. We have no idea how difficult it is to really define religion, nor how our understanding of what a religion is has been molded by a long history where it has not really meant what our modern perception suggests it means. The first part of Hull’s paper delves into what might be known of the history of the word *religion*. He examines the Greek and Latin etymologies and notes how they are much more fluid and more difficult to pin down than the modern English use of religion is. That developing concept of religion becomes the backdrop for what more readers (other than those fascinated by etymologies) will find the most revealing aspect of the paper.

After looking at the etymologies of the Old-World languages, Hull turns to the Book of Mormon. While Hull faces the problem that etymologies are no longer useful, as we do not have the exact Nephite words, we still have the Book of Mormon context in which the translated English words are couched. Hull does a masterful job of pulling out meaning from the contextual usages. His discovery of the way the word *religion* is used almost exclusively in semantic couplets (and a triplet)

provides a refreshing way to look at how meaning is constructed in the text.

He concludes, “Thus, the appearance of the word *religion* in the Book of Mormon coincided with political strife and immediate threats of loss of liberty to worship God. Nephite conceptions of *religion* in Alma were not only instrumental in reacting to these conditions, they were ultimately informed by them. The notion of *religion* as such blossomed under the rays of additional liberties and rights granted to the people” (p. 199).

### **Cultural Contributions and Close Readings: “I Did Liken All Scriptures unto Us’: Early Nephite Implications for ‘Others’ in the Land” (John Gee and Matthew P. Roper)**

This is an apt introduction to a section that deals with cultural contributions and close readings. Both are present in this discussion, and it is an important discussion. Latter-day Saints are familiar with Nephi’s declaration that he did liken all scriptures. We use that phrase to understand that we should see ourselves in the Book of Mormon. What Gee and Roper have done is suggest that Nephi originally meant just what he said. He likened scripture to his own people. Thus, there must be times when we should ask what lesson was being extracted from scripture (typically Isaiah) to inform Nephi’s people at the time the sermon was given.

Understanding how a scripture was interpreted at the time it was included in a Nephite sermon requires that we understand that the Nephites were a real people living in a real world. That seems so simplistic, but the implications are important. For the purposes of their paper, Gee and Roper begin with the traditional (but untenable in any real-world scenario) idea that the Nephites were alone when they arrived in the New World. Placing the Nephites in a real world virtually requires that they were *not* alone. Enough is known of the archaeology of the New World that it can confidently be said that if there was habitable land, it was inhabited when the Lehites arrived. Some places had a greater population than others, but it should also be understood that any location that the Book of Mormon describes as a favorable place to live had long since been discovered by indigenous peoples who established numerous communities. As Gee and Roper point out, while Lamanites might have once been a tribal designation, it became a generic label for anyone who was not favorable to the Nephites (see Jacob 1:14).

Their Introduction to the meat of the paper is worth quoting:

With this background in mind and the likelihood that additional non-Lehite peoples had united with both the Nephites and Lamanites, some of Nephi and Jacob’s teachings relating to Isaiah take on greater significance. After explaining that “we had already had wars and contentions” with the Lamanites (see 2 Nephi 5:34), Nephi then inserts a lengthy sermon delivered by his brother Jacob (see 2 Nephi 6–10). Jacob indicates while he had previously spoken about many things (2 Nephi 6:2), Nephi now wanted him to preach from Isaiah. In fact, Jacob says, Nephi had even selected the scriptural passages he was to discuss (see 2 Nephi 6:4). The words that Jacob was assigned to preach were prophecies of Isaiah that concern the relationship between scattered Israel and the Gentiles. Why talk about this now? Jacob at that time asked his people to liken these passages from Isaiah to their present situation. He also suggested that the application of these teachings concerned “things which *are*, and which are to come” (2 Nephi 6:4; emphasis added). Given that latter-day prophecies concerning the house of Israel and the Gentiles would be informative to the Nephites on any occasion, what relevance did it have for the early Nephites? (p. 210)

The paper continues with a close reading of the sermon in the context of a new Nephite nation placed inside a larger population of non-Nephites. Without this analysis, Jacob’s citation of Isaiah would be almost nonsensical. Indeed, it would be easy to use that sermon as a reason to see a modern Joseph Smith sticking random passages of Isaiah into the text. In context — in a *real* historical context — there is not only a reason, but an important reason, for this sermon. This paper is an example of the reason that historical context can enrich our understanding of the Book of Mormon.

**Cultural Contributions and Close Readings:  
“Lehi Dreamed a Dream: The Report of Lehi’s Dream  
in Its Biblical Context” (Dana M. Pike)**

Pike’s cultural close reading of Lehi’s dream is on firmer historical ground because it deals with the Old World rather than the New. That does not make it more important, it only provides a broader and thicker context against which to read a Book of Mormon passage. Pike’s introduction to his paper is most succinct:

My thesis is that understanding the scriptural and cultural context of Israelite dream reports and interpretations as preserved in the Bible provides a richer and more insightful understanding of Lehi's dream (and his son Nephi's corollary interpretive vision), both by way of general background as well as specific insights. To demonstrate this, I provide introductory comments on the report of Lehi's dream, a general introduction to dream reports and interpretations in ancient Near Eastern texts, and a review of the biblical accounts of dreams, followed by an analysis of the report of Lehi's dream in its biblical context. (p. 222)

In his listing of the preliminaries to his study, Pike discusses Lehi's dream in its relation to Nephi's version. He states:

Although some have claimed that Lehi dreamed essentially what Nephi later saw in his vision, it appears that Nephi actually envisioned things that went well beyond what Lehi had seen, even taking into account that Nephi did not include "all the words of [his] father" in reporting Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:29; see also 8:36; 9:1; 10:2, 15). For example, Nephi in his vision specifically requested of the Spirit of the Lord "to know the interpretation" of the tree (1 Nephi 11:11). What was shown to Nephi in response to his desire to understand the symbolism of the tree — the mortal ministry and sacrifice of God the Son (1 Nephi 11:11–36) — does not seem to have been shown to Lehi (otherwise why would Nephi have asked?), nor does it fit the style of Lehi's dream. (p. 224)

This is not a critical point, but because I love the paper and its analysis, I get to nitpick on this one point. Nephi was writing his own story, not Lehi's. There is no reason to believe that Nephi included everything that Lehi saw. Indeed, it appears that Nephi separated some of what his father saw and recontextualized it into a resulting sermon:

For behold, it came to pass after my father had made an end of speaking the words of his dream, and also of exhorting them to all diligence, he spake unto them concerning the Jews —  
That after they should be destroyed, even that great city Jerusalem, and many be carried away captive into Babylon, according to the own due time of the Lord, they should return again, yea, even be brought back out of captivity; and after

they should be brought back out of captivity they should possess again the land of their inheritance.

Yea, even six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews — even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world.

And he also spake concerning the prophets, how great a number had testified of these things, concerning this Messiah, of whom he had spoken, or this Redeemer of the world.

Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer.

And he spake also concerning a prophet who should come before the Messiah, to prepare the way of the Lord — (1 Nephi 10:2–7)

It was only after that sermon that Nephi declared:

And it came to pass after I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God — and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come — I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men. (1 Nephi 10:17)

In context, it was his father's teachings about the Messiah that may have been the trigger. Indeed, as Pike uses the biblical context as an interpretive guide to the structure and content of Lehi's dream, he inadvertently underscores the probability that what Nephi recorded of his father's dream would have been transparent in its symbology. What Nephi really needed was the clarification, the testimony, of the coming Messiah.

Readers should not let my quibble deter them from reading the paper. It really should be read and provides great insight into the nature of Lehi's vision.

**Cultural Contributions and Close Readings:  
“Samuel the Lamanite: Confronting the Wall of  
Nephite Prejudice” (Jan J. Martin)**

Earlier I contrasted Peterson’s and Benson’s papers using the concepts of exegesis and eisegesis. Martin presents a fascinating example of how to integrate both concepts into a single examination of one aspect of the Book of Mormon. As she begins, she lays out her goal:

Unfortunately, only minimal scholarly attention has been paid to the hostility Samuel received because of *who* he was, and no attention has been directed at how Samuel responded to the discrimination. Thus, this paper will explore the latter by applying a social psychological lens. Even though there are places in the Book of Mormon where various forms of prejudice are apparent and even condemned by religious and civic leaders. (p. 250)

She then notes:

Mormon, the editor of Samuel’s story, has been described as a “deliberate, conscientious” man who utilized a number of literary devices to focus his readers’ attention on particular theological lessons. However, even though Mormon used stories like Samuel’s to “convince readers of the power of God, the consequences of sin, the reality of prophecy, and so forth,” he did not omit or whitewash difficult issues. Well acquainted with the worst in humanity (see Helaman 12), Mormon often lamented the depraved, perverse brutality of the Nephites and Lamanites of his day (see Moroni 9:18–19). He also knew that our day would be full of “great pollutions” and “all manner of abominations” (8:31). For these reasons he chose, under the inspiration of God, those “stories, speeches, and events that would be most helpful to us.” (p. 251)

That is the eisegesis, the likening. Her intent is to use scripture to inform and assist a modern reading audience. What makes this paper fascinating is that the eisegesis is inextricably linked to an internal reconstruction of the conditions Samuel encountered. That is the exegesis.

Martin’s paper is an excellent examination into things that have been long discussed, such as the question of Lamanite pigmentation, but moves away from modern interpretations and into more appropriate

understandings that come from the text itself. I really don't want to comment more on the paper, because I think it should be read by all who are interested in using the Book of Mormon as a tool for a modern understanding. Basing contemporary lessons on the context of the real people of the Book of Mormon provides a stronger basis for their issues and solutions being relevant to real people in our own time.

### **Cultural Contributions and Close Readings: “Moroni, the Last of the Nephite Prophets” (H. Donl Peterson)**

Peterson provides a nice summary of things that can be known about Moroni. Some might be easily known. Some took a little more digging. In all cases, this is a good overview of Moroni with very few questions asked. It is a good foundation, but it asks few questions and therefore leaves much open for further examination.

In his conclusion, Peterson writes: “This paper has attempted to highlight some of the lesser-known facts about the life of Moroni, one of the greatest prophets that has lived upon the earth. His contributions both during his mortal and his postmortal ministries have affected and will yet affect the lives of literally millions of God’s children” (p. 285).

*Highlight* may be the correct word. Begin here. There is more to be learned about many of the highlighted topics.

### **Post-Book of Mormon Readings on the Text: “The Book, the Words of the Book: What the Book of Mormon Says about Its Own Coming Forth” (Joseph Spencer)**

Spencer provides a fascinating close reading of the Book of Mormon statements about what would happen when it appeared. They become intertwined with, and integral parts of, the prophecy in 2 Nephi 27, which is based on Isaiah and speaks of the learned man and the words of the book.

In the first half of the paper, Spencer closely examines the words and compares them to the way that they provide a new perspective on the original Isaianic intent. The paper stands as a clear demonstration of the validity of his concept of a close reading of the text, a type of reading he suggests that the text intends. Whether that aspect might be true, it is a valuable approach, and this paper exemplifies the benefits.

What Spencer suggests is that the prophetic discussion of the problems of the learned reading the text may be expanded to the way the modern text is approached:



To read in a learned way is, often enough, to set side by side presently available accounts with relevant material artifacts. The historian retrieves from the archives the material traces of historical events and then mobilizes those traces against standard accounts of the relevant history. The archaeologist retrieves from geological strata the material traces of past cultures and then mobilizes those traces against standard accounts of those cultures' practices. The biologist retrieves from the sphere of living organisms material data and then mobilizes that data against standard accounts of how life operates. The learned too naturally respond to the words of the book — to the record known today as the Book of Mormon — by insisting that they are intelligible *only* when set side by side with relevant material artifacts and data. If the gold plates are not themselves available, then one must read the words of the book only when they can be interpreted in light of concrete historical and archaeological facts: unearthed ancient altars and temples on the one hand (the position of someone who believes in the book's historicity), and known historical trends from the nineteenth century on the other (the position of someone who does not believe in the book's historicity). What Nephi seems to mean by the "learned" approach to the words of the book is the modern insistence that the *best* or the *truest* or the *realest* understanding of the Book of Mormon is always what we call today a historical-critical reading. (p. 295–96)

There are two targets of this apologetic. The first is the most likely intended one, which is that the Book of Mormon does not easily respond to a solely secular or learned interpretation. It is to be read beyond its history.

The second, however, is pointed to a division among Latter-day Saint scholars in how one might approach the text. Spencer notes, "Thus learned interpretation, strictly speaking, cannot be pursued when it comes to the Book of Mormon — at least not in any straightforward way — and Nephi suggests that this is by divine design!" (p. 297). The idea that the learned interpretation cannot be pursued is suggested to be due to the dearth of historical artifacts or clearly definable locations for the Book of Mormon. Spencer is well acquainted with scholars who attempt (as he noted Nibley did) to contextualize the Book of Mormon in the ancient world. He is saying that it is not the divinely designed way to read the text.

Spencer is obliquely setting down his reading of the scholarly divide by suggesting that there is not only a divine design encouraging us to read in Spencer's close-reading style, but also that there may be an inherent danger in interpretations that pay too much attention to antiquity:

The more strictly historicized the Book of Mormon becomes, the more it inevitably slips into the ancient world. And the more the Book of Mormon disappears into the ancient world, the less it can have to say to the modern world. But God's intentions with the words of this book are unmistakably that they remain central and relevant to the life of faith. (p. 301)

In the interests of full disclosure, I happen to be one of those who approaches the Book of Mormon from the historicized perspective. What I would argue is that the intent of the placing the Book of Mormon in the best historical context we can find enriches our understanding of the text. I would agree with Spencer that using such elements to prove the Book of Mormon has little value. Nevertheless, having read numerous accounts of biblical books from both the Old and New Testaments where the context of the times aids in understanding the text, I would suggest that a usable context for the Book of Mormon may do the same thing. Thus, the Book of Mormon should never "disappear into the ancient world" to the degree that it says less about the modern world. Understanding that they were real people responding to real circumstances should make them even more relevant as we use their responses to teach us about our own responses to circumstances, both when we do it right and when we do it wrong.

Having stated my disagreement with this small part of Spencer's assessment, I must note that this is an excellent paper with much to think about. This close reading of 2 Nephi 27 provides much to think about for the way we should respond to the Book of Mormon.

### **Post-Book of Mormon Readings on the Text: "Scripture and Revelation" (Nicolas J. Frederick)**

This is a difficult paper to review, not because of the paper itself, but because it does such a good job of discovering an important aspect of both Nephite and modern religion. Here are the first two paragraphs:

The book of Jarom is a short chapter, consisting of only fifteen verses, that nonetheless manages to summarize the affairs of the Nephites over an approximately forty-year period. In the midst of his outline of the current Nephite status quo,

Jarom makes mention of the religious climate of the time: “Wherefore, the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, exhorting with all long-suffering the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was. And after this manner did they teach them” (Jarom 1:11).

This statement informs readers of two important notions: First, the Nephites are being taught the *written* word in the form of the law of Moses, presumably from a text such as the brass plates or from Nephi’s own record. Second, they are interpreting the law in such a way that it has led them to believe in the Messiah “as though he already was.” This is a remarkable statement and raises the question of *how* Nephite society had reached this theological awareness about the relationship between the law and the Messiah. Based upon Nephi’s record, it seems likely that this hermeneutical realization is the result of a Nephite revelatory tradition that uses the visionary experiences of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob as an interpretive lens. Thus, what Jarom presents readers with is a religious society that is reading the written word, the scriptures, through the lens of revelation. (p. 307–308)

And that is it. This is a brilliant understanding of both the tensions in Nephite religious history, and the way that modern religion deals with its sacred texts. There is almost nothing left to say. What Frederick does is carefully walk through the stories in the Book of Mormon that support this thesis. It is nicely done, but he had me at the first paragraph. I was stunned at how important that insight is. Even his closing is perfect:

It is fitting that the Book of Mormon ends with Moroni’s plea to both *read* the book and *pray* about its veracity (Moroni 10:3–4). With the promise that God will “manifest the truth of it [the Book of Mormon] to you, by the power of the Holy Ghost,” and that “by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things,” Moroni assures readers that the hermeneutic keys needed to interpret the text are available to all those willing to seek them (Moroni 10:4–5). (p. 322)

**Post-Book of Mormon Readings on the Text:  
“A Multiplicity of Witnesses: Women and the Translation  
Process” (Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope)**

Easton-Flake and Cope document the important roles of four women in the events that led to the publication of the Book of Mormon and the establishment of the Church. This is an important contribution to the scholarship on the topic. The story of the women is important and powerful. I would encourage all to read this for two reasons. One is that the way the women participated is important. The second is that it is too often missed because men have written the history. Easton-Flake and Cope note:

While their names and narratives are well known, scholars and members of the Church have largely overlooked their powerful and important contributions to the work of translation, since they were not a part of the official three or eight witnesses. This chapter addresses this gap in scholarship and historical memory by looking at a variety of sources (both those that are frequently cited and those that have been largely neglected) that recount these women’s experiences with the plates. (p. 325)

They do not mention the reason that there is a gap in scholarship and the gap itself is not their interest. Nevertheless, important historical articles such as this simply underscore the need to continue to try to close that gap in scholarship and historical memory.

**Post-Book of Mormon Readings on the Text: “Finding  
Lehi in America through DNA Analysis” (Ugo A. Perego)**

Unstated in this paper, but important to know, is that Perego knows this material as a scientist, not an apologist. His purpose in writing might be to assist believers in the Book of Mormon in navigating the questions that have been raised about DNA and the Book of Mormon, but he does so by applying a science he has practiced and understands well. With so many articles being written by those who are interpreting what the scientists say (and perhaps not getting it quite right), Perego *is* the scientist. Thus, any who have questions about DNA and the Book of Mormon must read this paper.

Perego begins with an important clarification:

Most early Latter-day Saints assumed that the Jaredites, Mulekites, and Lehites were the first to settle the Americas. The original Book of Mormon text, however, does not claim that the peoples mentioned in its narrative were either the predominant or the exclusive inhabitants of the lands they occupied. It provides only subtle and short references to possible cultural contacts between the peoples it describes and others who may have lived nearby.

Over time, this view that the American continent was empty at the time of the arrival of the Book of Mormon peoples has been perpetuated among some members of the Church. In more recent times and with the advance of DNA technology, it has also been assumed that Book of Mormon migrants should have carried the most typical genetic signatures found in the modern Middle East, implying that all Native Americans today should have a similar genetic makeup to their Israelite forefathers. If these two hypotheses were true, it would make sense to think that DNA should be able to *prove* the Book of Mormon to be a factual account. But this is not the case. (p. 348)

This is precisely the point that created the tension around DNA and the Book of Mormon. If the Book of Mormon peoples were the only people ever on the continent, then we should find DNA evidence that would show that. The one thing the DNA information did is to assist Latter-day Saints in discarding the traditional, but unofficial, idea the Book of Mormon peoples arrived in an empty continent. Scholars of the Book of Mormon understood this before DNA became an issue. Archaeology has uncovered a very populated New World during pre-Book of Mormon times. If there was habitable land, it was inhabited. If it was really good land, there were even more inhabitants. DNA has assisted in disproving that one erroneous assumption. However, neither the Book of Mormon nor the Church ever taught the assumption. People in the Church did, but they unintentionally parallel the Book of Mormon “Lamanites, who know nothing concerning these things, or even do not believe them when they are taught them, because of the traditions of their fathers, which are not correct” (Mosiah 1:5).

Perego’s article is a very careful walk through the problems of attempting to use DNA to answer questions about the Book of Mormon. Perhaps one of the most interesting is a question asked of an expert and that expert’s response:

The initial group of emigrants accompanying Lehi consisted of his family, Ishmael's widow and her children, and Zoram — the servant of Laban — which would have been about thirty to forty individuals. Henry C. Harpending, distinguished professor of anthropology at the University of Utah, commented on how this type of scenario would have affected the persistence of their DNA in the Americas. He was asked, "If a group of, say, fifty Phoenicians (men and women) arrived in the Americas some 2,600 years ago and intermarried with indigenous people, and assuming their descendants fared as well as the larger population through the vicissitudes of disease, famine, and war, would you expect to find genetic evidence of their Phoenician ancestors in the current Native American population? In addition, would their descendants be presumed to have an equal or unequal number of Middle Eastern as Native American haplotypes?" Professor Harpending's reply was, "I doubt that we would pick up [evidence of the Phoenicians] today at all, but it does depend on how they intermixed once they were here. If they intermixed freely and widely, and if there were several millions of people here in the New World, then the only trace would be an occasional strange stray haplotype. Even if we found such a haplotype we would probably assume it was the result of post-Columbian admixture." (p. 357)

Perego concludes:

We need to be wary about any statement against or in favor of the historical accuracy of the Book of Mormon based on DNA and take the time to understand the difference between scientific data and claims people make about it. Scientists in general are extremely cautious to make statements based on the available data that point to a single conclusion and leave no room for an alternative explanation. As with other religious texts and topics, science is often an inadequate tool to corroborate spiritual or historical truths. (p. 360)

## **Conclusions**

Any collection of articles necessarily contains some that are stronger or more important than others. That applies to the chapters in this book only in that the bar is set high. Any perception of ranking the papers

will depend solely upon the reader. All readers interested in a wider and deeper understanding of the Book of Mormon will enjoy this volume.

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