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## Not Joseph's, and Not Modern

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# NOT JOSEPH'S, AND NOT MODERN

*Daniel C. Peterson*

At the dawn of the twentieth century, essentially no scholarship existed in support of the historical authenticity and divine inspiration of the Book of Mormon. Even at the midpoint of the past century, little of any merit was to be found. Since then, however, Book of Mormon scholarship has grown exponentially, and, as the twenty-first century gets fully under way, the book can claim far more support than at any previous time in its modern history. The trajectory of the discussion itself seems to support the book's claims. A simple fraud, a naive hoax, should have collapsed many decades ago. The collapse should, one would think, be obvious and unmistakable. Yet the Book of Mormon not only survives, it flourishes.

I shall attempt, within the confines of this brief essay, to sketch a few interesting pieces of evidence and to demonstrate how, together, they point to the reliability of the explanation for the Book of Mormon that has been taught

by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since its beginning.

## The Exodus Motif

As careful scholarship continues to demonstrate, and contrary to the expectations of many, the Book of Mormon is a work of impressive literary depth, subtlety, and complexity.<sup>1</sup>



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DEPTH OF  
EXODUS  
MOTIF

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Terrence L. Szink, for example, has demonstrated that Nephi's account of the journey of his father's family from Jerusalem to the land of promise is modeled, unmistakably and in some detail, on the biblical story of the exodus of Moses and Israel out of the land of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, both groups were led by visionary prophetic figures to leave lands that were under divine condemnation and to journey to lands of "promise," miraculously crossing major water barriers in order to reach safety from those who pursued or threatened them. In both accounts, rebellious members of the group "murmured" because of their hunger, lamented being taken from their previous home to perish in the wilderness, declared that they would rather have died than to have embarked on their present journey, and expressed a desire to return, instead, to the oppressive or dangerous lands from which God had delivered them. In both, a metallic object (the Liahona for the Lehites, the brazen serpent for the Israelites) played a major role, and we are told that to "look" upon it in a proper attitude was to "live." Both peoples were led by the Lord, who is represented by a figurative or literal "light." Both Nephi and Moses were summoned by the Lord to ascend a mountain, where Moses was given instructions on how to build a tabernacle and Nephi was given instructions on how to build

a ship. In both accounts, the group's rebellious members drew divine wrath down upon themselves and their fellows when they engaged in wild and inappropriate partying, forgetting the Lord who had delivered them. The similarities appear in nuances of language as well as in broader themes.

"It seems to me," Szink concludes,

that such a large body of parallels cannot be accounted for by coincidence. It appears that Nephi purposefully wrote his account in a way that would reflect the Exodus. His intention was to prove that God loved and cared for the Nephites just as he did the children of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

That the parallels are likely to have been intentional appears, too, in the fact that, at 1 Nephi 4:1–3, and 17:23–44, Nephi expressly compares himself and the experiences of his people to portions of the biblical exodus story, in the latter passage using language that seems to recall the crossing of the Red Sea.<sup>4</sup>

"Certainly," Szink further suggests,

this connection could not have been a product of Joseph Smith's writing. The parallels to Exodus occur at dozens of places throughout the Book of Mormon record. No hasty copying of the Bible could have produced such complex similarities, not to mention the differences that remain. In fact, because they are so quiet and underlying, no Latter-day Saint until our day has even noticed these comparisons. Nephi clearly composed a masterpiece full of subtle literary touches that we are only now beginning to appreciate.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, as Szink observes, comparisons between the Israelite exodus and the Lehite journey are made by

later Book of Mormon figures as well.<sup>6</sup> This is what we would expect from a genuinely historical narrative, since Lehi's exodus from Jerusalem inevitably had a powerful impact on his family and their descendants, marking them forever. Jacob, Lehi's "firstborn in the wilderness," for instance, spent his earliest years traveling in the Arabian desert as an exile. Many decades later, near the end of his life, he reflected 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."<sup>7</sup> Jacob, like his brother Nephi and his father, Lehi, had been born and raised in a culture where the mighty acts of God in the exodus were commemorated not only in frequent retellings of the story but in ritual form at Passover. It was natural that they should think of their deliverance from doomed Jerusalem as a second exodus, though

it is sadly ironic that Jerusalem, the promised land the Israelites had struggled so hard to obtain, had become at the time of Lehi analogous to the land of Egypt at the time of the Exodus. Lehi, a man of God, and his family were no longer safe there, and were forced to seek a *new* promised land.<sup>8</sup>

However, Lehi's is not the only "exodus" recorded in the Book of Mormon. Shortly after the group's arrival in the Americas, Nephi, feeling menaced by the people of Laman and Lemuel, led his faithful followers—including Jacob—away from the land of their "first inheritance." Still later, groups led by Mosiah, Alma, and Limhi, as well as the entire people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, similarly abandoned their homes for new lands, impelled by deep religious visions and led by prophets. In fact, the Nephites appear to have seen their repeated exodus experiences as archetypal

expressions of their individual and collective spiritual journeys.<sup>9</sup> They were, as Alma<sub>2</sub> said more than five centuries after their arrival in the Americas, “wanderers in a strange land.”<sup>10</sup>

These later deliverances were likewise recounted in terms of the original biblical exodus, so that what David Daube says about the biblical narrative is no less true with regard to subsequent events recorded in the Book of Mormon: “By being fashioned on the exodus, later deliverances became manifestations of this eternal, certainty-giving relationship between God and his people.”<sup>11</sup> In very Hebraic fashion, the Nephites knew that one of their primary responsibilities before God was to “remember,” to never forget his glorious and mighty acts on their behalf.<sup>12</sup>

George S. Tate has likewise argued that Nephi’s account of the Lehite journey to the New World deliberately echoes the Israelite exodus.<sup>13</sup> He notes such motifs, beyond those already mentioned above, as references in both the Nephite and Israelite accounts to a (paschal?) lamb, miraculous provision of food in the wilderness when murmuring erupts among the hungry travelers, and even references in both accounts to the passage of forty years. To these, Mark J. Johnson has added such details as the burial of a deceased patriarch at a significant location, after (in the biblical instance certainly, and in the Book of Mormon account probably) the body has been transported for some length of time, as well as the transfiguration of Moses and Nephi before their people.<sup>14</sup> Tate goes still further, though, to contend that exodus typology runs through the entire Book of Mormon until it finds its ultimate and explicit fulfillment in the account of the visitation of Christ to the Americas, as recorded in 3 Nephi. S. Kent Brown agrees

that Christ's appearance at Bountiful is depicted in terms at least partially borrowed from the exodus story, and argues that the presentation of the Savior's atonement in the Book of Mormon is itself rendered in a manner that has been colored by reflection upon the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage.<sup>15</sup> This is, of course, precisely what we would expect, given the Book of Mormon's claim to roots in the culture of ancient Israel. As biblical scholar James Plastaras has observed,

It was the . . . exodus which shaped all of Israel's understanding of history. It was only in light of the exodus that Israel was able to look back into the past and piece together her earlier history. It was also the exodus which provided the prophets with a key to the understanding of Israel's future. In this sense, the exodus stands at the center of Israel's history.<sup>16</sup>

"In summary," Brown writes regarding the implications of what he and others have discovered in researching this topic,

the Book of Mormon can be seen as the repository of an extraordinarily rich tradition with deep, ancient roots. Taken as a whole, the work proves to be one of stunning complexity and nuanced subtlety—no small conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

Such sophisticated and authentic usage of the Israelite exodus narrative strongly suggests that the author of 1 Nephi in particular, like the authors of the Book of Mormon in general, was someone thoroughly steeped in the Hebrew Bible. Of course, that description seems appropriate to Nephi, the privileged and well-educated son of a wealthy Hebrew father. But it doesn't fit young Joseph Smith, who appears to have been anything but a systematic, regular

student of the Bible. Even by the age of eighteen, according to his mother—that is, in roughly 1823, when he received the first visitation from Moroni—he “had never read the Bible through in his life.”<sup>18</sup> Later in the 1820s, when the Book of Mormon was translated, his knowledge of the Bible does not appear to have been dramatically greater.<sup>19</sup>

### **Joseph Smith an Unlikely Author**

In fact, the youthful Joseph does not appear to have been an avid reader at all. His mother recalls that “he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children,” and there seems no reason to doubt her word.<sup>20</sup> Very few volumes sat on the shelves of the local library, and the Smiths do not appear to have had access to that library in any case.<sup>21</sup> Yet the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith somehow produced contains a great deal of information that is unlikely to have emerged out of his own experience.

For example, Joseph Smith never fought in a war. His military experience, such as it was, was limited almost entirely to the parades and drills of the Nauvoo Legion, with all the patriotic panoply of fife and drum that an early-nineteenth-century-American frontier militia could muster. However, in the Book of Mormon’s portrayal of the Gadianton robbers we find a detailed, realistic depiction of a prolonged guerrilla struggle—lacking any trace of romanticism, uniforms, glamour, or parades, but matching up remarkably well with the actual conduct of such unconventional conflict. Yet this portrayal was published well over a century before the great guerrilla warfare theorists of the twentieth century (such as Mao Tse Tung,



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GUERRILLA  
WARFARE

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Ernesto “Che” Guevara, and Vo Nguyen Giap) put their pens to paper.<sup>22</sup>



The modern scientific disciplines of seismology and vulcanology also have something to contribute to this matter: Joseph Smith lived in an area that was, geologically speaking, very quiet. He never saw a volcano, never experienced an earthquake of any notable magnitude (if, indeed, he ever felt one at all). Yet the Book of Mormon’s portrayal of the great New World catastrophes that marked the crucifixion of Christ is remarkably realistic, down to the after-shocks, the choking vapors, and the lightning storms that arise when volcanic particles churn at high velocities in the cloud above an eruption. It seems very likely that 3 Nephi was written either by someone who was an eyewitness to a major volcanic and seismic event (which Joseph never was) or, alternatively, by someone who had read accounts of the Nephite destruction. A third possibility is that someone employed similar accounts from other sources in order to formulate a fictional though deceptively realistic tale. However, it seems extremely unlikely that Joseph Smith had done any vulcanological or seismological research.<sup>23</sup>



Similarly, the lengthy allegory of the olive tree given in Jacob 5 betrays a knowledge of olive cultivation considerably beyond what Joseph Smith, growing up in the cool, wet deciduous forests of the American Northeast, likely possessed. In fact, the allegory is remarkably consistent in detail with what we learn from ancient manuals on Mediterranean olive culture.<sup>24</sup>

### **Christopher Columbus and the *Libro de las profecías***

One of the best-known prophecies in the Book of Mormon has generally been understood to predict the career

of Christopher Columbus, who is usually reckoned the effective European “discoverer” of the New World. Accordingly, Columbus emerges from the very pages of scripture itself as an important and foreordained actor in the divine plan:

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land.<sup>25</sup>

Skeptical readers of the Book of Mormon, however, have tended to dismiss this passage as a cheap and easy instance of prophecy after the fact, composed centuries after Columbus’s death—but postdated, as it were, in order to create a seemingly impressive and self-validating prediction by an ancient prophetic writer. At the very most, some have observed, a “prophecy” of Columbus hardly constitutes evidence for the antiquity or inspiration of the Book of Mormon.

On a surface level, such critics seem to be right. It would have taken little talent in the late 1820s for someone to prophesy the discovery of America nearly three and a half centuries earlier. But the description of Columbus provided by 1 Nephi 13:12 nonetheless remains a remarkable demonstration of the revelatory accuracy of the Book of Mormon. It is only with the growth of Columbus scholarship in recent years, and particularly with the translation and publication of Columbus’s *Libro de las profecías* in 1991, that English-speaking readers have been fully able to see how remarkably the admiral’s own self-understanding parallels the portrait of him given in the Book of Mormon.




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INSPIRATION OF  
CHRISTOPHER  
COLUMBUS

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The Columbus revealed in very recent scholarship is quite different from the gold-driven secular adventurer celebrated in the textbooks and holidays most of us grew up with.<sup>26</sup>

We now understand, for example, that the primary motivation for Columbus's explorations was not financial gain but the spread of Christianity. He was zealously committed to the cause of taking the gospel, as he understood it, to all the world. He felt himself guided by the Holy Spirit, and a good case can indeed be made that his first transoceanic voyage, in particular, was miraculously well executed.

Columbus was a serious and close student of the Bible. Among his very favorite passages of scripture was John 10:16: "And other sheep I have that are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd." This verse provided significant support for his image of himself as a bearer of the gospel to the New World. And, though he was unfamiliar with the writings of Nephi, Columbus was convinced that his role had been predicted by ancient prophets. "The Lord purposed," he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella,

that there should be something clearly miraculous in this matter of the voyage to the Indies. . . . I spent seven years here in your royal court discussing this subject with the leading persons in all the learned arts, and their conclusion was that it was vain. That was the end, and they gave it up. But afterwards it all turned out just as our redeemer Jesus Christ had said, and as he had spoken earlier by the mouth of his holy prophets.<sup>27</sup>

"For the execution of the journey to the Indies," he said, "I was not aided by intelligence, by mathematics or by maps. It was simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah had

prophesied.”<sup>28</sup> Referring to his first crossing of the Atlantic, Columbus declared,

With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies, and he opened my will to desire to accomplish the project. This was the fire that burned within me. . . . Who can doubt that this fire was not merely mine, but also of the Holy Spirit who encouraged me with a radiance of marvelous illumination from his sacred Holy Scriptures, by a most clear and powerful testimony . . . urging me to press forward? Continually, without a moment’s hesitation, the Scriptures urge me to press forward with great haste.<sup>29</sup>

As noted, the quite recent publication of Columbus’s *Book of Prophecies* in English translation—much too late for Joseph Smith to have used it—now permits us a window into the great admiral’s soul. And what we find there is strikingly reminiscent of prominent themes in the Book of Mormon. Columbus was fascinated, for instance, by such subjects as the recovery of the Holy Land and the rebuilding of the ancient Jewish temple in Jerusalem. One of his favorite scriptures, in this regard, was Isaiah 2:2 (= 2 Nephi 12:2): “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.” He was also, as mentioned, deeply committed to the notion that the gospel had to be preached to the ends of the earth and the inhabitants thereof brought to Christ before the end of the world. For much of this, as careful readers of the Book of Mormon might have guessed, Columbus’s favorite author was the prophet Isaiah. Indeed, it was in that prophet’s

book that Columbus thought he could see himself and his voyages divinely foretold. Among the passages that caught his attention was Isaiah 55:5:

Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not,  
and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee  
because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of  
Israel; for he hath glorified thee.

Columbus seems to have regarded this as a prophecy of his own mission, along with Isaiah 42:1–4 (“Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him. . . . and the isles shall wait for his law”), which students of the Book of Mormon will have no difficulty connecting with the prophet Jacob’s remarks at 2 Nephi 10:20–22:

And now, my beloved brethren, seeing that our merciful God has given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him, and lay aside our sins, and not hang down our heads, for we are not cast off; nevertheless, we have been driven out of the land of our inheritance; but we have been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and we are upon an isle of the sea.

But great are the promises of the Lord unto them who are upon the isles of the sea; wherefore as it says isles, there must needs be more than this, and they are inhabited also by our brethren.

For behold, the Lord God has led away from time to time from the house of Israel, according to his will and pleasure. And now behold, the Lord remembereth all them who have been broken off, wherefore he remembereth us also.

Therefore, cheer up your hearts.

“Our Lord,” Columbus said in 1500, “made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth, of which he spoke in the Book of Revelation by St. John, after having spoken of it by the mouth of Isaiah; and he showed me the place where to find it.”<sup>30</sup> Christopher Columbus would have heartily agreed with the Book of Mormon’s description of him as a man “wrought upon” by “the Spirit of God.”

### **Witnesses to the Book of Mormon**

On the basis of the kinds of considerations that we have already discussed, as well as many others (some of them treated elsewhere in this volume), it appears highly unlikely that Joseph Smith could simply have created the Book of Mormon out of the learning and experience naturally available to him. And the testimony of contemporary witnesses to the Book of Mormon makes it virtually impossible to maintain that the angel Moroni and the book he delivered were figments merely of Joseph’s imagination, whether skeptics prefer to think of him as sincerely deceived or intentionally deceptive. The claim by a sympathetic, insightful, but often severely misinformed European scholar, that the plates of the Book of Mormon were visible, if at all, only to Joseph Smith, “never seen by anyone else,” is simply false.<sup>31</sup> It cannot be sustained in the face of the evidence. And the importance of that fact can hardly be overstated.

First of all, there are the “official” accounts of the Three and the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, whose honesty and consistency are manifest in the many surviving documents by and about them. Space permits



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THE  
WITNESSES

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only a brief treatment of the voluminous evidence on this subject.<sup>32</sup>

On the day following the death of David Whitmer, in 1888, the *Chicago Times* reported an interview with an unnamed “Chicago Man.” This man related a conversation that he had engaged in with another individual some years before, a prominent resident of the county in which David Whitmer had lived who had been a lawyer and a sheriff there and who had, the Chicago Man said, known the witness very well. The prominent Clay County resident had given him a remarkable portrait of David Whitmer’s character and later life.

In the opinion of this gentleman, no man in Missouri possessed greater courage or honesty than this heroic old man [David Whitmer]. “His oath,” he said, “would send a man to the gallows quicker than that of any man I ever knew.” He then went on to say that no person had ever questioned [David Whitmer’s] word to his knowledge about any other matter than finding the Book of Mormon. [Whitmer] was always a loser and never a gainer by adhering to the faith of Joseph Smith. Why persons should question his word about the golden plates, when they took it in relation to all other matters, was to him a mystery.<sup>33</sup>

Yet this very David Whitmer persisted, literally to his dying day, despite ridicule and skepticism from those around him and despite his own deep disaffection from the institutional church led by Joseph Smith and then by Brigham Young and the apostles, in stating that he had been in the presence of an angel, had seen the gold plates and other objects related to the Book of Mormon, and had heard the voice of God declare the book true. In an 1878 interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, for

example, he gave dramatic and emphatic testimony of his experience as a witness:

I saw [the plates and other Lehighite artifacts] just as plain as I see this bed (striking his hand upon the bed beside him), and I heard the voice of the Lord, as distinctly as I ever heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by the gift and power of God.<sup>34</sup>

Six years later, Whitmer was interviewed by Joseph Smith III, in the presence of others, not all of whom were disposed to believe his account. Significantly, he listed several items that he had seen, besides the golden plates:

Rather suggestively [Colonel Giles] asked if it might not have been possible that he, Mr. Whitmer, had been mistaken and had simply been moved upon by some mental disturbance, or hallucination, which had deceived them into *thinking* he saw the Personage, the Angel, the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the sword of Laban. How well and distinctly I remember the manner in which Elder Whitmer arose and drew himself up to his full height—a little over six feet—and said, in solemn and impressive tones: “No, sir! I was not under any hallucination, nor was I deceived! I saw with these eyes and I heard with these ears! *I know whereof I speak!*”<sup>35</sup>

Unlike the Three Witnesses, who saw an angel and heard a divine voice testify to the truth of the translation of the metallic record—and whose testimony, for that reason, has been discounted by some determined skeptics as simple hallucination—the Eight Witnesses saw and handled the plates under quite matter-of-fact circumstances. Yet their testimony is no less impressive.



Hyrum Smith, for example, who besides being the Prophet's loyal elder brother was also one of the Eight Witnesses, wrote in December 1839 of his recent sufferings in Missouri:

I had been abused and thrust into a dungeon, and confined for months on account of my faith, and the testimony of Jesus Christ. However I thank God that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to . . . ; and I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life.<sup>36</sup>

These were not empty words. Four and a half years later, Hyrum Smith sealed his testimony with his blood at Carthage, Illinois, when an armed anti-Mormon mob with painted faces assassinated him and his brother. The historical evidence indicates that Hyrum understood his likely fate, and that he went to it willingly.<sup>37</sup>

Another of the Eight Witnesses, John Whitmer, was excommunicated on 10 March 1838, one month before his brother David. Like David, he never returned to the Church. In fact, for a brief period it even appears that John's spiritual confidence in the Book of Mormon had been shaken by his separation from his former associates and by his bitterness over the economic and other issues that had arisen during the Latter-day Saints' brief sojourn in Missouri. (He was sorrowful and dejected about his excommunication, but also, for at least a time, quite angry at the church in general and Joseph Smith in particular.)<sup>38</sup> During an 1839 exchange with Theodore Turley, the Mormon business agent who had stayed behind in Far West

to settle financial affairs there after the expulsion of the Saints, Whitmer confessed to doubts about whether the Book of Mormon was true. After all, he had heard no divine voice confirming the accuracy of the translation. Speaking of the original text on the plates, he said, “I cannot read it, and I do not know whether it is true or not.” Nonetheless, he insisted, “I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. I handled them.”<sup>39</sup>

Thus, even in the depths of his alienation and bitterness, even when he was most inclined to doubt what he could not see for himself—even living, as he did, in the area of the worst anti-Mormon persecutions, when continuing to affirm faith in anything connected with the Latter-day Saint movement could have been personally dangerous—John Whitmer did not deny that he had “lifted and handled a metal object of substantial weight.”<sup>40</sup> There was nothing mystical, visionary, or immaterial about his experience. It was a simple matter of hefting and examining something entirely tangible, something quite literally physical.

It appears, however, that John Whitmer’s bitterness, or at least his skepticism, was short-lived. By 1856, he was the last survivor from among the Eight Witnesses. In 1861, Jacob Gates spoke with him for more than four hours, thereafter entering the following summary comment in his journal: “[H]e still testified that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a Prophet of the Lord.”<sup>41</sup>

Fifteen years after that interview, in 1876, Whitmer wrote a lengthy letter to Mark Forscutt, which included the following:

Oliver Cowdery lived in Richmond, Mo., some 40 miles from here, at the time of his death. I went to see

him and was with him for some days previous to his demise. I have never heard him deny the truth of his testimony of the Book of Mormon under any circumstances whatever. . . . Neither do I believe that he would have denied, at the peril of his life; so firm was he that he could not be made to deny what he has affirmed to be a divine revelation from God. . . .

. . . I have never heard that any one of the three or eight witnesses ever denied the testimony that they have borne to the Book as published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. There are only two of the witnesses to that book now living, to wit., David Whitmer, one of the three, and John Wh[itmer], one of the eight. Our names have gone forth to all nations, tongues and people as a divine revelation from God. And it will bring to pass the designs of God according to the declaration therein contained.<sup>42</sup>

Several other people handled the plates and described them as quite heavy. Thus, for example, William Smith, in an interview with J. W. Peterson, later recalled an experience with the plates that occurred under wholly non-visionary circumstances: “I handled them and hefted them while [they were] wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds. I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back.”<sup>43</sup> Martin Harris, not yet invited to be one of the Three Witnesses, once lifted the box in which he had been told that the plates were concealed, to see what he could determine. He knew from the weight of the box that it had to contain something as dense and heavy as either gold or lead, he later recalled, “and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead.”<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, as already noted, the plates were not the only tangible objects involved in these accounts, nor were the official witnesses the only people who saw such things. Lucy Mack Smith, for instance, “examined” the Urim and Thummim and “found that it consisted of two smooth three-cornered diamonds set in glass, and the glasses were set in silver bows, which were connected with each other in much the same way as old fashioned spectacles.”<sup>45</sup> Regarding the breastplate that Joseph found with the plates, she wrote:

It was wrapped in a thin muslin handkerchief, so thin that I could see the glistening metal, and ascertain its proportions without any difficulty.

It was concave on one side and convex on the other, and extended from the neck downwards, as far as the centre of the stomach of a man of extraordinary size. It had four straps of the same material, for the purpose of fastening it to the breast, two of which ran back to go over the shoulders, and the other two were designed to fasten to the hips. They were just the width of two of my fingers, (for I measured them,) and they had holes in the ends of them, to be convenient in fastening.<sup>46</sup>

Joseph Smith’s wife Emma frequently encountered the plates while engaged in the utterly unmystical labor of early-nineteenth-century housework. She later recalled that

the plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one sometimes thumbs the edges of a book.<sup>47</sup>

Even now, despite the passage of nearly two centuries and countless attempts, no credible counterexplanation has been offered by any critic for the experiences claimed by the Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Their still-unimpeached testimony clearly demonstrates that the Book of Mormon plates and the other artifacts mentioned in the historical accounts were physical, that they were neither a figment of Joseph Smith's imagination nor generated by the credulous fantasies of a band of rustic religious zealots.

### Ancient Near Eastern Origins

So the Book of Mormon does not appear to have emerged out of Joseph Smith's subjective experience. He had objectively real plates and related objects in his possession. Others saw them. Where, then, did the Book of Mormon come from? Considerable evidence suggests that it came from precisely the kind of ancient Near Eastern cultural background that it claims for itself. A few examples will have to suffice.

Thus, for instance, two male characters named Alma appear in the Book of Mormon. And, of course, this seems to run counter to what we might have expected: If Joseph Smith knew the name *Alma* at all from his environment, it is highly likely that he would have known it as a Latinate *woman's* name rather than as a masculine one. (Many will recognize the Latin phrase *alma mater*, which means "beneficent mother.") Recent documentary finds demonstrate, however, that *Alma* also occurs as a Semitic masculine personal name in the ancient Near East—just as it does in the Book of Mormon.<sup>48</sup> How did Joseph know this? How could he have learned it? Quite simply, so far as modern scholarship has been able to determine, he could not



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THE NAME  
"ALMA"

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have known it from any source existing in his frontier American environment.

The Book of Mormon's use of *Alma* as a man's name has occasioned considerable amusement among uninformed critics of the book. So has the prophecy in Alma 7:10, predicting that Jesus "shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem, which is the land of our forefathers." As everybody who knows anything at all about Christianity also knows, Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem. However, although identifying a "land of Jerusalem" as the birthplace of Jesus would have seemed an obvious mistake for at least a century after the publication of the Book of Mormon, it is now plain that Bethlehem could be, and indeed anciently was, regarded as a town in the "land of Jerusalem." A recently released text from the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example—a text claiming to have originated in the days of Jeremiah (and, therefore, in Lehi's time)—says that the Jews of that period were "taken captive from the land of Jerusalem."<sup>49</sup> Texts discovered earlier in the twentieth century seem to include Bethlehem within that "land." Joseph Smith could not have learned this from the Bible, though, for no such language appears in it.<sup>50</sup>

He is also very unlikely, even had he been a diligent and deep student of it, to have deduced from his Bible the complex patterns associated with the calling of prophets that contemporary scholarship has begun to notice and discuss. Yet those patterns appear with striking clarity in the Book of Mormon—arguably, indeed, more clearly in the Book of Mormon than in the Bible or in any other single text coming to us from the ancient Near East. Diligent researchers have been obliged to piece the general pattern together from widely scattered documents. Yet Lehi's vision of God and



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his accompanying prophetic call, we now know, could serve as a textbook illustration of such visions and calls as they are recounted in ancient literature, complete with motifs of the heavenly book and the divine council that have only garnered scholarly attention in recent decades.<sup>51</sup>

The Book of Mormon relates that Lehi was overcome with the Spirit, [and] he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.<sup>52</sup>

This is clearly a vision of the divine council, known today from many ancient Near Eastern texts, that surrounds God and over which he presides. The Hebrew word *sôd*, which denotes that council, also refers to the counsel issued from it. It can often be interchanged, in this sense, with the Greek word *mysterion*. In ancient conceptions, it is frequently the prophet's admission to this council as a mortal human being, and his knowledge of its decrees and secrets, that lends him authority as an earthly spokesman for God. "Surely the Lord God will do nothing," said the ancient Israelite prophet Amos of Tekoa, "but he revealeth his secret [*sôd*] unto his servants the prophets."<sup>53</sup>

### Hebrew Conditional Sentences

Another helpful indicator of the true origin of the Book of Mormon is the presence of the *if-and* conditional construction in the 1830 first English printing of the book.<sup>54</sup> A little background will help to make the significance of this indicator clear. In English conditional sentences, we typically say things like "If you study hard, you will succeed," and "If you don't exercise and eat well, you will damage

your health.” The first part of such sentences is the “condition.” If that condition is fulfilled, the second part of the sentence will occur.<sup>55</sup> In the earliest manuscript of the Book of Mormon, however, a strikingly different kind of conditional sentence occurs several times. Thus, in the 1830 edition, Helaman 12:13–21 read as follows:

[Y]ea, and *if* he saith unto the earth, Move, *and* it is moved; yea, *if* he say unto the earth, Thou shalt go back, that it lengthen out the day for many hours, *and* it is done. . . . And behold, also, *if* he saith unto the waters of the great deep, Be thou dried up, *and* it is done. Behold, *if* he saith unto this mountain, Be thou raised up, and come over and fall upon that city, that it be buried up, *and* behold it is done. . . . and *if* the Lord shall say, Be thou accursed, that no man shall find thee from this time henceforth and forever, *and* behold, no man getteth it henceforth and forever. And behold, *if* the Lord shall say unto a man, Because of thine iniquities thou shalt be accursed forever, *and* it shall be done. And *if* the Lord shall say, Because of thine iniquities, thou shalt be cut off from my presence, *and* he will cause that it shall be so.<sup>56</sup>

Another, much more familiar passage also read rather differently in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and *if* ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, *and* he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.<sup>57</sup>

Of course, Joseph Smith was poorly educated. He spoke and wrote nonstandard English. But it is extraordinarily doubtful that he or any other native speaker of English has



ever spoken or written this way. An *if-and* conditional sentence grates on our ears. If someone were to use it in our presence, and we would find it very odd. Yet it is perfectly appropriate Hebrew. It is common in the Hebrew Bible, yet, to the best of my knowledge, it never appears in any biblical translation into English or any other Western language.<sup>58</sup>

## Nephi and His Asherah

Nephi's vision of the tree of life, one of the most loved passages in the Book of Mormon, is an expanded repetition of the vision received earlier by his father, Lehi.

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me: Look! And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.

And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious above all.

And he said unto me: What desirest thou?

And I said unto him: To know the interpretation thereof. . . .<sup>59</sup>

Nephi wanted to know the meaning of the tree that his father had seen and that he himself now saw. Accordingly, we would expect "the Spirit" to answer Nephi's question. But the response to Nephi's question, when it comes, is rather surprising:

And it came to pass that he said unto me: Look! And I looked as if to look upon him, and I saw him not; for he had gone from before my presence.




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NEPHI AND  
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And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the great city of Jerusalem, and also other cities. And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying, Look!

And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!<sup>60</sup>

Next, “the Spirit” asks Nephi the question that Nephi himself had posed only a few verses before: “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?”<sup>61</sup>

Strikingly, though the vision of Mary seems irrelevant to Nephi’s original inquiry about the significance of the tree—for the angelic guide’s response doesn’t mention the tree at all—Nephi himself now replies that, yes, he knows the answer to his question.

And I answered him, saying: Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore it is the most desirable above all things.

And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul.<sup>62</sup>

How has Nephi come to this understanding? Clearly, the answer to his question about the meaning of the tree somehow lies in the image of the virgin mother with her child. In some sense, it seems that the virgin *is* the tree.<sup>63</sup> Even the language used to describe her echoes the vocabulary previously used for the tree. Just as she was “exceedingly fair and white,” “most beautiful and fair above all other virgins,” so was the tree’s beauty “far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow.” Significantly, though, it is only when she appears with a baby and is identified as “the mother of the Son of God” that Nephi grasps the tree’s meaning.

Why would Nephi, whether consciously or unconsciously, see a connection between a tree and the virginal mother of a divine child? The ancient Near Eastern religious world is very foreign to us, as it was to Joseph Smith. Nephi’s vision appears to reflect a meaning of the “sacred tree” that is unique to the ancient Near East, and that, indeed, can only be fully appreciated when the ancient Canaanite and Israelite associations of that tree are borne in mind.<sup>64</sup>

A feminine divine being, generally called by some form of the name *Asherah*, seems to have been known and worshipped not only among the Canaanites but among the Israelites. Her veneration can be documented over a period

extending from the conquest of Canaan in the second millennium before Christ to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.—the time of Lehi’s departure with his family from the Old World. Belief in Asherah seems, in fact, to have been a conservative position in ancient Israel; it was *criticism* of her that appears to have been a religious innovation. In fact, an image or symbol of Asherah stood in Solomon’s temple at Jerusalem for nearly two-thirds of its existence, until the reforms of King Josiah (who reigned from roughly 639 to 609 B.C.). This means that her presence in the temple extended into the lifetime of Lehi and perhaps even into the lifetime of Lehi’s son Nephi. Since that time, though, she has been fiercely suppressed. In the text of the Bible as we now read it, although hints of the goddess remain, little survives that would enable us to form an accurate or detailed understanding of her character or nature. Greater understanding has only begun to come through relatively recent archaeological discoveries, including but not limited to the immensely important Canaanite texts from ancient Ugarit, in Syria.

What was the symbol of Asherah that stood in the temple at Jerusalem? Asherah was associated with trees. The tenth-century cultic stand from Ta’anach, near Megiddo, for instance, features two representations of Asherah, first in human form and then as a sacred tree. She *is* the tree.<sup>65</sup> Israelite goddess figurines that represent her typically feature upper bodies that are unmistakably anthropomorphic and female while their lower bodies are simple columns, very possibly representing tree trunks. Asherah “is a tree goddess, and as such is associated with the oak, the tamarisk, the date palm, the sycamore, and many other species. This association led to her identification with sacred trees or the tree of life.”<sup>66</sup> The rabbinic

authors of the Jewish Mishna (second–third century A.D.) explain the *asherah* as a tree that was worshipped.<sup>67</sup>

She seems to have been represented by a carved, wooden image, perhaps some kind of pole. Very probably it symbolized a tree, and it may itself have been a stylized tree. It was not uncommon in the ancient Near East for a god or goddess to be essentially equated with his or her symbol, and Asherah seems to have been no exception: Asherah was both goddess *and* cult symbol. She *was* the “tree.”

The menorah, the seven-branched candelabra that stood for centuries in the temple of Jerusalem, supplies an interesting parallel to all of this: Leon Yarden maintains that the menorah represents a stylized almond tree. He points to the notably radiant whiteness of the almond tree at certain points in its life cycle. Yarden also argues that the archaic Greek name of the almond (*amygdale*, reflected in its contemporary botanical designation as *Amygdalis communis*), almost certainly not a natively Greek word, is most likely derived from the Hebrew *em gādullāh*, meaning “Great Mother.”<sup>68</sup>

Among the Hebrews, Asherah seems to have been known as a maternal *dea nutrix*, a nourishing or nurturing goddess. Paradoxically, though, it appears that she may also have been considered a virgin. The Punic western goddess Tannit, whom Saul Olyan has identified with Israelite-Canaanite Asherah, the consort of the chief god El, the mother and wet nurse to the gods, was depicted as a virgin and symbolized by a tree.<sup>69</sup>

Although Asherah remains imperfectly understood, and although we cannot be certain of all the details, it should be apparent by now why Nephi, an Israelite living

at the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century before Christ, might have recognized an answer to his question about a marvelous tree in the otherwise unexplained image of a virginal mother and her divine child. His perception seems to derive from precisely the preexilic Palestinian culture into which, the Book of Mormon tells us, Nephi had been born. This is a culture very foreign to ours, and to that of Joseph Smith.

The evidence (barely) sampled here strongly suggests that Joseph Smith was not, and could not have been, the author of the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, it simply does not permit the notion, popular among some skeptics who seek a less confrontational mode of dismissing the claims of the restoration, that the whole thing can be explained purely on the basis of subjective events in Joseph Smith's mind. It forces the question, Truth or fraud? There is no middle ground. But it also whispers the correct answer to that question. It points to a culture with roots in the ancient Semitic Near East as a source for many of the peculiar characteristics of the Book of Mormon. It thereby supports the spiritual conviction of millions of Latter-day Saints, living and dead, that the Book of Mormon is a divinely provided testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ, the atoning Redeemer of humankind, and to the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the restoration.

## NOTES

1. Recent literary appreciations of the Book of Mormon include Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 217–31; Grant R. 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), 15–28; John S. Tanner, "Jacob and His Descendants as Authors," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. Sorenson and Thorne, 52–66; Alan Goff, "The Stealing of the Daughters of the Lamanites," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. Sorenson and Thorne, 67–74; Marilyn Arnold, *Sweet Is the Word—Reflections on the Book of Mormon—Its Narrative, Teachings, and People* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant, 1996); Eugene England, "A Second Witness for the Logos," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:91–125; Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997); Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999); and John S. Tanner, "The World and the Word: History, Literature and Scripture," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 217–35. Mark D. Thomas, in *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), while apparently not accepting the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, nonetheless celebrates the book's multilayered and complex literary quality. Two forthcoming studies by literature scholar Robert A. Rees, on "Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance"

and “Irony in the Book of Mormon,” argue that “Joseph Smith lacked the literary imagination and talent, authorial maturity, time, education, knowledge, or sophistication that would have been required to write the Book of Mormon.”

2. See Terrence L. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. Sorenson and Thorne, 38–51; and Terrence L. Szink, “To a Land of Promise (1 Nephi 16–18),” in *First Nephi to Alma* 29, *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 7, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 60–72. Compare Alan Goff, “Mourning, Consolation, and Repentance at Nahom,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. Sorenson and Thorne, 92–99.

3. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” 50.

4. For Nephi’s self-comparison to Moses, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” *BYU Studies* 27/4 (fall 1987): 15–37.

5. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” 50–51.

6. For instance, at Mosiah 7:19–20 and Alma 36:28–29.

7. Jacob 7:26.

8. Szink, “To a Land of Promise,” 71, emphasis in original.

9. This is the argument of Bruce J. Boehm, “Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and Holy Bible,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (spring 1994): 187–203.

10. Alma 13:23.

11. David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 14.

12. For a helpful exploration of this theme in the Book of Mormon, see Louis Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. Sorenson and Thorne, 168–76; and Louis Midgley, “‘To Remember and Keep’: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W.



Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 95–137.

13. See George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief*, ed. Lambert, 245–62. On pages 258–59, Tate offers a helpful chart of exodus motifs recurring in the Old and New Testaments and the Book of Mormon. For another chart comparing Lehi’s journey from Jerusalem to the land of promise with the exodus of the children of Israel out of Egypt, see John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), chart 91.

14. See Mark J. Johnson, “The Exodus of Lehi Revisited,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/2 (1994): 123–26, reprinted in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 54–58.

15. S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in his *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 75–98. This is a revised version of an article originally published under the same title in *BYU Studies* 30/3 (summer 1990): 111–26.

16. James Plastaras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1966), 7.

17. Brown, “Exodus Pattern,” 89.

18. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 344.

19. A notable example illustrating Joseph’s lack of intimate familiarity with the Bible during the production of the English Book of Mormon is briefly given in Daniel C. Peterson, “What the Manuscripts and the Eyewitnesses Tell Us about the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text*

*Project*, ed. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coutts (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 67–71. On the other hand, the Finnish Lutheran scholar Heikki Räisänen contends that Joseph’s reading of the Bible in the years immediately following publication of the Book of Mormon was acutely perceptive (although, from Räisänen’s perspective, ultimately mistaken). See Räisänen’s “Joseph Smith und die Bibel: Die Leistung des mormonischen Propheten in neuer Beleuchtung,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 109 (1984): 81–92.

20. Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 344.

21. See Erich Robert Paul, “Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library,” *BYU Studies* 22/3 (1982): 333–56; also Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992), 83.

22. See Daniel C. Peterson, “The Gadianton Robbers as Guerilla Warriors,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 146–73.

23. For discussions of this topic, see Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 231–38; Bart J. Kowallis, “In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist’s View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi,” *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997–98): 136–90; Benjamin R. Jordan, “‘Many Great and Notable Cities Were Sunk’: Liquefaction in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 38/3 (1999): 115–18; Russell H. Ball, “An Hypothesis concerning the Three Days of Darkness among the Nephites,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (spring 1993): 107–23; and John Gee, “Another Note on the Three Days of Darkness,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed., Welch and Thorne, 219–27 (originally published in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 [1997]: 235–44).

24. See the essays in Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, eds., *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).

25. 1 Nephi 13:12.

26. A good treatment of this subject is Arnold K. Garr, *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992). Prof. Garr's book is reviewed and summarized by Daniel C. Peterson, "Christ-Bearer," in *FARMS Review of Books* 8/1 (1996): 104–11. See also Pauline Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies,'" *American Historical Review* (February 1985): 73–02, of which a brief summary appears in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 32–35.

27. Delno C. West and August Kling, *The "Libro de las profecías" of Christopher Columbus* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 107.

28. Ibid., 111.

29. Ibid., 105.

30. Cited in Kay Brigham, *Christopher Columbus: His Life and Discovery in the Light of His Prophecies* (Barcelona: CLIE, 1990), 50 (or 57 n).

31. I quote Heikki Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma: Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 153, but any number of other authors, of varying degrees of competence and sympathy, could have been cited to the same effect.

32. For more detailed treatment, see especially Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981); and Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem: Grandin Book, 1991). Eldin Ricks, *The Case of the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Olympus, 1961); Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem: Grandin Book, 1983), republished in 1986 by Deseret Book; and Rhett Stephens James, *The Man Who Knew: The Early Years* (Cache Valley, Utah: Martin Harris Pageant Committee, 1983), are also worthwhile.

Even those seeking to dismiss the testimony of the witnesses now often find themselves obliged to concede the witnesses' honesty and sincerity. A good example of this is Dan Vogel, "The Validity of the Witnesses' Testimonies," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 79–121, which, although attempting to defeat the testimonies of the witnesses by claiming that they rest on nothing more than hallucinations (induced by some *ad hoc* combination or other of morbid psychological obsession, religious fanaticism, excitability, low blood sugar, hypnosis, and, if those notions somehow fail to convince, a stage-prop box and some bogus tin plates), concedes the character issue.

33. Cited in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 224.

34. Interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith (Richmond, Missouri, 7–8 September 1878), reported in a letter to President John Taylor and the Quorum of the Twelve dated 17 September 1878. Originally published in the *Deseret News* (16 November 1878) and reprinted in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 40.

35. Interview with Joseph Smith III et al. (Richmond, Missouri, July 1884), originally published in *The Saints' Herald* (28 January 1936) and reprinted in Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews*, 134–35, emphasis in the original.

36. Susan Easton Black, ed., *Stories from the Early Saints: Converted by the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 96.

37. See, for example, Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 402.

38. See F. Mark McKiernan and Roger D. Launius, eds., *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer Kept by Commandment* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 20.

39. Cited by Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 131, from memoranda written by Theodore Turley and dated 4 April 1839.

40. The quoted phrase comes from Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 132.

41. Journal of Jacob Gates for 18 March 1861, as cited in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 131.

42. Letter of John Whitmer to Mark Forscutt, dated 5 March 1876, cited in Richard L. Anderson, "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 55–56.

43. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 24.

44. Cited in *ibid.*, 107–8.

45. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 379.

46. *Ibid.*, 390.

47. Cited by Black, *Stories from the Early Saints*, 91–92.

48. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Alma as a Hebrew Name," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 72–73; Terrence L. Szink, "Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 70; and Terrence L. Szink, "The Personal Name 'Alma' at Ebla," *The Religious Educator* 1/1 (2000): 53–56.

49. For the original text and a translation of 4Qapocryphon of Jeremiah C (4Q385b [4QapocrJer C]), see Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered* (Shaftesbury, England: Element, 1992), 57–58. Florentino García Martínez, in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 285, inadequately renders the Hebrew.

50. See Daniel C. Peterson, William J. Hamblin, and Matthew Roper, "On Alma 7:10 and the Birthplace of Jesus Christ" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1995); John A. Tvedtnes, "Cities and Lands in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 147–50 [= Welch and Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, 164–68]; Robert F. Smith, "The Land of Jerusalem: The Place of Jesus' Birth," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. Welch 170–72; and Welch and Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, 139–41.

51. The relevant passage in the Book of Mormon is 1 Nephi 1. See John W. Welch, “The Calling of a Prophet,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 35–54; Blake Thomas Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26/4 (1986): 67–95; Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 24–28; compare Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, “The Throne-Theophany/Prophetic Call of Muhammad,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 323–37; and Daniel C. Peterson, “‘Ye are Gods’: Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind,” in *The Disciple as Scholar*, ed. Ricks, Parry, and Hedges, 471–594.

52. 1 Nephi 1:8.

53. Amos 3:7. See Raymond E. Brown, “The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of ‘Mystery,’” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20 (1958): 417–43; and Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 24–25.

54. On this, see the short article by Royal Skousen entitled “Hebraic Conditionals in the Book of Mormon,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. Welch and Thorne, 201–3.

55. This, of course, is yet another conditional sentence.

56. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 2:760, emphasis added, spelling and punctuation regularized.

57. Moroni 10:4, as given in Skousen, *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 2:973–74, emphasis added, spelling and punctuation regularized.

58. In the Hebrew of the book of Genesis alone, the *if-and* conditional construction occurs at 18:26; 24:8, 41; 28:20–21; 31:8 (twice); 34:17 (twice); 44:26; and 47:6.

59. 1 Nephi 11:8–11.

60. 1 Nephi 11:12–21.

61. 1 Nephi 11:21.

62. 1 Nephi 11:22–23.

63. Not necessarily in every sense. At 1 Nephi 11:25, Nephi himself declares that he “beheld that the tree of life was a representation of the love of God.” (In Hosea 14:8, God compares *himself* to a tree.) Metaphor, as opposed to allegory, is open to multiple (and therefore multivalently rich) meaning. The tree may well represent the love of God while, at the same time, it might have represented the virgin mother of God to an ancient resident of Jerusalem. The two are not mutually exclusive.

64. For a much more complete presentation of analysis and evidence on this subject, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 191–243. A greatly condensed version of the same article is Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 15–25, 80–81.

65. See J. Glen Taylor, “The Two Earliest Known Representations of Yahweh,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 67 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1988), 558–60, 565 n. 19; and J. Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 29.

66. Steve A. Wiggins, “The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess,” *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 23 (1991): 383, with references to the relevant literature.

67. See John Day, “Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105/3 (1986), 397–98, 401–4 and references supplied there.

68. See Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-Branched Lampstand* (Uppsala, Sweden: Skriv Service AB, 1972), 44–47, 103–6.

69. See Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 56–61, 65–67.