Type: Book Chapter

Boundary Maintenance that Pushes the Boundaries: Scriptural and Theological Insights from Apologetics

Author(s): Neal Rappleye
Source: *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*
Published: Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2017
Page(s): 43–62

Abstract: Apologetics is, by definition, a defense of already held beliefs and points of view. As such, it is easy to see apologetics as an obstacle to new understandings of scriptural texts and theological concepts. This can and does happen, and some may even argue that defending a viewpoint in-herently obscures or prevents new points of view from being considered. However, as counterintuitive as it may seem, the practice of apologetics by Latter-day Saint scholars has often done just the opposite: efforts to defend certain points of Latter-day Saint belief have often led to fresh perspectives on LDS scripture and theology.

THREE

Boundary Maintenance that Pushes the Boundaries: Scriptural and Theological Insights from Apologetics

Neal Rappleye

Apologetics is, by definition, a defense of already held beliefs and points of view. As such, it is easy to see apologetics as an obstacle to new understandings of scriptural texts and theological concepts. This can and does happen, and some may even argue that defending a viewpoint inherently obscures or prevents new points of view from being considered. However, as counterintuitive as it may seem, the practice of apologetics by Latter-day Saint scholars has often done just the opposite: efforts to defend certain points of Latter-day Saint belief have often led to fresh perspectives on LDS scripture and theology.

My purpose here is not to defend or endorse any particular apologetic approach or argument, but rather to show how defending certain tenents of Latter-day Saint belief involves reinterpretations of scripture and doctrine—and that whatever the merits of any specific reinterpretation may be, this transformative effect is a net positive. Apologetics is at its best not when it is merely defending or providing supportive evidence, but when it can get Latter-day Saints to rethink their understanding of scriptural narratives and teachings, even as it defends certain fundamental premises.[1] My background makes me more familiar with LDS apologetic work on

1. Since "apologetic" and "apologist" have in certain venues become a pejorative, I simply want to clarify that my use of these terms here is not intended in a negative or derogatory sense. To the contrary, I myself identify as an apologist and have contributed apologetic works utilizing some of the approaches discussed in this paper.

the Book of Mormon, so I will largely draw my examples from there. Other apologetic work, however, has also provided its fair share of insights into LDS theology and scripture.

"As Far As It Is Translated Correctly": The Bible and the Book of Mormon

One place to start is by looking at how certain apologetic approaches to the Book of Mormon have changed how we read and understand the Bible. Despite rejecting biblical inerrancy and accepting the Bible only insofar "as it is translated correctly" (A of F 1:8), LDS approaches to the Old Testament have generally been rather conservative. Biblical narratives are typically taken at face value, and the Bible is theologically harmonized both internally—within the books of the Bible—and externally—with the rest of the LDS canon and contemporary teachings.

Some LDS scholars, however, have not only dealt with critical approaches to the Bible, but embraced them as part of their argument for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. An example of this is found in the way Margaret Barker's work has become paradigmatic for some Latter-day Saint apologetic scholarship.[2] Throughout several books and articles, Barker has argued that pre-exilic Israelite religion was centered on the temple, where *El* or *Elohim* sat on his throne in the holy of holies as "Most High God" (*El Elyon*), amidst a divine council of gods. *Yahweh* (Jehovah) was one of the sons of El, appointed over Israel (i.e., the "God of Israel"), and he was manifest on earth through the Davidic king (i.e., the "Messiah"). Through temple ritual, the king (the Messiah), acting as Yahweh, would make atonement for the people. According to Barker, these original Israelite beliefs were lost or repressed for centuries, and Christianity marked a return to this older faith.[3]

Barker's reconstruction of ancient Israelite belief, and her notion of Christianity as a "restoration" of that belief, bears an uncanny resemblance to traditional Mormon theology. Her work has therefore possessed a natural attraction for LDS apologists, and they've used it in a variety of ways.

---

2. See Kevin Christensen, "'Paradigms Regained': A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001).

3. Barker's views on this are scattered throughout numerous publications, but can be found conveniently summarized on her website in Margaret Barker, "Temple Theology," online at http://www.margaretbarker.com/Temple/default.htm.

In particular, Barker's reconstruction of pre-exilic Israelite theology is used to defend the Book of Mormon from criticisms about its overtly Christian theology in 600 BC, and to argue that the Book of Mormon fits this pre-exilic context better than a nineteenth-century context.[4] Yet adopting Barker's work as a paradigm for understanding the Book of Mormon and LDS theology introduces some new wrinkles.

According to Barker, the loss or repression of this ancient Israelite religion began under the direction of King Josiah during his religious reformation, ca. 622 BC. The biblical narrative presents Josiah as a righteous king, who responds to the discovery of a lost "book of the law" (Deuteronomy) by restoring and implementing its lost religious teachings (2 Kgs. 22–23). Barker, however, would have it the other way around: older Israelite religious traditions were stamped out and purged by Josiah and his supporters, and biblical texts, most especially Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, were written or edited by Josiah's supporters and their ideological descendants to eliminate or suppress the older, messianic faith.[5] In LDS parlance, Josiah's reforms were not a restoration but an apostasy.

Placing Lehi, Nephi, and the Book of Mormon within this paradigm acknowledges competing theological views within the Old Testament and sets the Book of Mormon at odds with some of them. It also dramatically changes how we understand King Josiah. Within typical LDS pedagogy, the positive portrayal of Josiah found in the Old Testament is accepted at face value.[6] While LDS scholars who have embraced Barker's paradigm

---

4. See Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 449–522; Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 59–90; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:214–22. Barker herself reviews the Book of Mormon and other LDS beliefs in light of her views on pre-exilic Israel in Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israel," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2005), 69–82.

5. See Margaret Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 521–42.

6. See, for instance, the treatment of Josiah in *Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Manual* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2001), 144–50.

have not completely rejected Josiah and his reforms as mistaken, it has certainly required a more nuanced approach.[7]

Apologetic approaches like this give weight to a theological concept—that the Bible is not perfect and contains errors—that often feels hollow within typical Mormon approaches. They also serve to illustrate to Latter-day Saints that critically approaching the composition of scripture need not be something to fear. Seeing multiple, and even contending points of view within scripture is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it can bolster faith as it provides better context for the Book of Mormon and improves understanding of how the Book of Mormon relates to different traditions within the Old Testament.

Authorial Bias in the Book of Mormon: Laman and Lemuel as a Case Study

These kinds of approaches also invite us to look for competing traditions and viewpoints within the Book of Mormon itself—since it is, after all, believed to be written by several different persons who lived in different places over the course of 1,000 years. Taking the Book of Mormon seriously on those terms has led LDS scholars to consider the circumstances in which specific authors within the text are said to have written, and reflect on how those circumstances shape their writing. Noel Reynolds, for example, has noted that when Nephi wrote his additional account (First and Second Nephi) in the small plates, his father Lehi had already passed away and his brothers Laman and Lemuel had made competing claims of leadership within the Lehite community (2 Ne. 4:12; 5:3). Reynolds thus argues that this separate account was written as a "political tract" intended

7. This subject was discussed by a pair of apologists with different perspectives in 2013. See Benjamin L. McGuire, "Josiah's Reform: An Introduction," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 160–63; William J. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–76; Kevin Christensen, "Prophets and Kings in Lehi's Jerusalem and Margaret Barker's Temple Theology," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 177–93. For another approach, see the personal note in 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), 218–19. My own personal thoughts on this can be seen in Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 89–90.

to establish the legitimacy of Nephi's rule over the competing claims of his brothers.[8] For the apologist, this demonstrates complexity in the narrative and motives for writing, and it ties those motives to specific circumstances in Nephi's life—thus arguing that First and Second Nephi were written by someone who really experienced those conditions (i.e., Nephi himself), rather than being a fictional account written by someone far removed from such a situation (i.e., Joseph Smith).

The suggestion that Nephi's account, which he says is for the "more sacred" things (1 Ne. 19:5) is actually a highly political document by itself is a remarkable insight into the Book of Mormon text, but it also opens further possibilities. If Nephi's text is a political tract meant to establish his own legitimacy, how might that impact how he portrays the political opposition—Laman and Lemuel? Grant Hardy notes that in Nephi's account, "Laman and Lemuel are stock characters, even caricatures."[9] Using Barker's reconstruction of pre-exilic Israelite religion, if Lehi and Nephi are seen as being at least partly opposed to Josiah's reforms, Laman and Lemuel it seems were all in.[10] But this means that Laman and Lemuel were not paragons of wickedness or decadence, as modern readers tend to assume, but "orthodox, observant Jews" from their time.[11] Even their attempts to kill Nephi and Lehi can be seen in the context of Deuteronomic laws regarding false prophets, rather than nefarious or murderous designs (Deut. 13:1–11; 18:20).[12] None of this means that Laman and Lemuel were right or that Latter-day Saints today should agree with them, but it does make them more understandable as real people who held beliefs and points of view that, in context, were entirely rational.

A Divine Mother in the Book of Mormon

Given Latter-day Saint belief in a Heavenly Mother,[13] it is no surprise that LDS apologetic scholars have also taken interest in the proposal, made

8. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 20–33.

9. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

10. See Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms," 87–99.

11. Hardy, *Understanding*, 39.

12. See Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms," 93–94; Hardy, *Understanding*, 40.

13. See David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71–97.

by Barker and many others, that many ancient Israelites worshipped a Mother Goddess named *Asherah*, wife of El or Yahweh.[14] David L. Paulsen drew on this work to argue that theologians and scholars are now coming around to the doctrines within LDS theology—such as the belief in a divine mother—that have traditionally been seen as pushing the boundaries.[15] But more interesting—and somewhat surprising—than the use of Asherah to support LDS belief in Heavenly Mother is the way this ancient Israelite belief has been used to argue for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon.

A connection between Heavenly Mother and the Book of Mormon doesn't seem obvious; no blatant appearance of an ancient Israelite goddess shows up within its pages. Yet Daniel Peterson has argued that in Nephi's vision (1 Ne. 11), the spirit draws explicitly on the imagery of Asherah in order to instruct Nephi on the meaning of his father's dream.[16] When Nephi asked to know the meaning of the tree, he is shown "the mother of God . . . bearing a child in her arms" (1 Ne. 11:18, 20).[17] Throughout ancient Near Eastern cultures, goddesses are symbolized by a sacred tree,[18] and Asherah in Israel appears to be no exception to this.[19] In the broader Canaanite cultures, these tree-goddesses were heavily sexualized, but in

---

14. See William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns, 2005).

15. David L. Paulsen, "Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith's Theology in His Bicentennial," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 1 (2006): 104–7.

16. For the most recent iteration of his argument, see Daniel C. Peterson, "A Divine Mother in the Book of Mormon?" in *Mormonism and the Temple: Examining an Ancient Religious Tradition*, ed. Gary N. Anderson (Logan, Utah: Academy for Temple Studies and USU Religious Studies, 2013), 109–24. See also Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25.

17. I am following the wording found in the original text, which did not include "son of" in 1 Nephi 11:18. For discussion of this variant, see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part 1: 1 Nephi–2 Nephi 11*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS and BYU Studies, 2017), 235–38.

18. John S. Thompson, "The Lady at the Horizon: Egyptian Tree Goddess Iconography and Sacred Trees in Israelite Scripture and Temple Theology," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, et al. (Orem, Utah, and Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 217–41.

19. See Margaret Barker, "The Fragrant Tree," in *The Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternity*, ed. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2011), 55–79.

both Israel and Egypt, the tree-goddess took on a more motherly role—specifically, the mother of the gods in heaven and the king on earth—and tree-goddesses are often depicted nursing a child.[20]

Peterson acknowledges, of course, that Mary is not Asherah or Heavenly Mother. But with the association of Mary with the same symbolism and title as Asherah, Mary becomes a representation on earth of the divine Mother in Heaven.[21] Furthermore, Nephi's sudden understanding that the tree in his father's vision is the "love of God" (1 Ne. 11:22) potentially takes on additional meaning. As Allison Skabelund Von Feldt noted, "the 'love of God' could also mean not merely a possession of God's . . . but rather the object of God's love—the person whom he loves. . . . A beloved wife, perhaps."[22] In any case, an allusion to Heavenly Mother in the Book of Mormon is a significant insight, one that could, with further exploration, provide a means for bringing the divine feminine more to the forefront in contemporary Mormon thought.[23]

The Temple in Scripture and Antiquity

As of June 2017, there are 182 temples either in operation, currently under construction, or announced by the LDS Church.[24] As with so many other things, Joseph Smith believed that he was restoring something ancient but lost or corrupted with the building of temples and the introduction of rituals performed there. So, starting with Hugh Nibley,[25] ancient temple studies has been a major component to LDS apologetic scholar-

20. See Thompson, "The Lady at the Horizon," 225, 228–229; Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *JBMS* 19; Peterson, "A Divine Mother," 110–11; Barker, "The Fragrant Tree," 72.

21. Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israel," 76; Samuel Zinner, *Textual and Comparative Explorations in 1 & 2 Enoch* (Orem, Utah, and Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 265.

22. Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt, "Does God Have a Wife?" *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 114.

23. Overall, this potential has scarcely been tapped. For one effort to further seek out Heavenly Mother in scripture, however, see Val Larsen, "Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture," *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (2015), http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html.

24. See "Statistics," at *Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, June 3, 2016, http://ldschurchtemples.org/statistics/.

25. For a collection of Nibley's temple-related studies, see Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992).

ship.[26] Given the nature of temple ritual and commitments, arguments are often more implicit than explicit, but the (usually implied) argument is that ancient temple rituals parallel the ceremonies performed in the modern LDS temples, thus supporting Joseph Smith's claims of restoring ancient traditions and countering claims of more modern derivation from sources such as Masonry.[27] Recognizing ancient similarities to LDS temple practices, however, also has the potential to enrich and add meaning to the temple experience of Latter-day Saints.

Understanding the meaning and symbolism in similar ancient Near Eastern and early Christian rituals can yield insights for temple-attending Latter-day Saints. William Hamblin, for example, has pointed out that in ancient Israel, Yahweh's "secret" plan (Amos 3:7) was revealed to prophets in the divine council, which usually took place in a temple setting. Noting that the pattern followed in these visions was similar to the pattern followed in the LDS temple endowment ceremony, Hamblin suggested that participants in the Endowment should see themselves as ritually participating in the divine council, where the initiate enters into God's presence, has His plan revealed, and is commissioned to fulfill that plan.[28] Through this insight, a fairly typical Latter-day Saint can see themselves as receiving the same experience and commission as the ancient prophets.

Insights from ancient temple studies have also been extended to the unique LDS scriptural works. Mormon scholars have identified ancient temple themes and patterns in the Book of Mormon,[29] the Book of

26. See the papers in Donald W. Parry, ed., *Temples in the Ancient World* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994); Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, ed., *The Temple in Time and Eternity* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999).

27. See Blake Ostler, "Clothed Upon: A Unique Aspect of Christian Antiquity," *BYU Studies* 22, no. 1 (1982): 31–45; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "Freemasonry and the Origins of Modern Temple Ordinances," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 159–237.

28. See William J. Hamblin, "The *Sôd* of YHWH and the Endowment," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 147–54.

29. John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: An Approach to 3 Nephi 11–18 and Matthew 5–7* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999); LeGrand L. Baker and Stephen D. Ricks, *Who Shall Ascend in the Hill of the Lord? The Psalms in Israel's Temple Worship in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2010).

Moses,[30] and the Book of Abraham.[31] Apologetically, these observations are used both as evidence that these scriptural works are genuinely ancient, and that the modern LDS temple rituals were not later innovations of Joseph Smith but in fact baked into his earliest revelations.[32] Going beyond these apologetics, such connections can inform how we read these scriptural works, and they can help Latter-day Saints connect their temple worship experience to their daily worship and scripture study.

Recognizing temple themes in LDS scriptural texts also leads to specific insights into scriptural meanings. An illustration of this can be seen with the "tongue of angels" in Joseph Spencer's reading of First and Second Nephi as a temple text.[33] The phrase "speak with the tongue of angels" in 2 Nephi 31:13–14 and 32:2–3 is customarily understood to mean speaking under inspiration of the Holy Spirit.[34] Read as a temple text, however, the "tongue of angels" comes as a part of Nephi's reflections on passing through the veil and entering into the Lord's presence (2 Ne. 30–33). Coupling this context with the fact that Nephi uses similar phraseology when describing both speaking with the tongue of angels and his father's encounter with the divine council (1 Ne. 1:8; 2 Ne. 31:13), Spencer argued that speaking with the "tongue of angels" should be un-

30. See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014); David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 147–49.

31. See Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005); Stephen O. Smoot and Quinten Barney, "The Book of the Dead as a Temple Text and the Implications for the Book of Abraham," in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored* (Orem, Utah, and Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2016), 183–209.

32. Gerald E. Smith, *Schooling the Prophet: How the Book of Mormon Influenced Joseph Smith and the Early Restoration* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015), 129–64; Don Bradley, "Piercing the Veil: Temple Worship in the Lost 116 Pages," (paper presented at the Annual FairMormon Conference on August 3, 2012 in Sandy, Utah), available at https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2012/piercing-the-veil-temple-worship-in-the-lost-116-pages.

33. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 33–52.

34. Robert L. Millet, "Tongue of Angels," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 757–58.

derstood as becoming divine and joining the council.[35] This interpretation is supported further by analysis of the patterns and phrasing in the divine council settings described in 1 Nephi 11 and 2 Nephi 16 (Isaiah 6), and Nephi's final conclusion, where he asserts that he himself will be among the divine council when the reader enters into the Lord's presence to be judged (2 Ne. 33:11). This comes right on the heels of his statement that he "speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost" and that his writings are "the words of Christ" (2 Ne. 33:1, 10)—both conceptual equivalents to speaking with the tongue of angels (2 Ne. 32:3).[36] This new interpretation—that speaking with the tongue of angels refers to becoming a divine member of God's council—also gives Latter-day Saints one way to see deification (exaltation) in the Book of Mormon, a modern LDS belief not customarily thought to be present in the Nephite text.

Geography and Gentiles

Transitioning from the esoteric to the more mundane and physical, studies in Book of Mormon geography often serve apologetic purposes, but also have valuable insights to offer. Most readers of the Book of Mormon pay little attention to geographic details, but if they do, they quickly find themselves lost in a dizzying array of details scattered across the 500-plus page narrative. Sorting out Book of Mormon geography can feel like putting together a 1000-piece puzzle without having the picture on the box for reference.[37] Not having paid much attention to the details, however, most readers assume that the book's geography is "obviously" hemispheric—with the "land northward" being North America, the "land southward" being South America, and Panama being the "narrow neck of land."

From very early on, however, some who carefully read and analyzed the geographic details in the text realized that Nephite geography must

35. Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 49–52.

36. See Neal Rappleye, "'With the Tongue of Angels': Angelic Speech as a Form of Deification," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 303–23.

37. The leading Book of Mormon geographers have cited up to 1,068 passages while constructing geographical models. See Randall P. Spackman, "Verses in the Book of Mormon with Potential Geographical Relavance" (2003), available online at https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/verses-book-mormon-potential-geographical-relevance.

have been more limited in scope.[38] In 1909, even while upholding a hemispheric geography himself, B. H. Roberts realized that "the physical description relative to the contour of the lands occupied by the Jaredites and Nephites . . . can be found between Mexico and Yucatan with the isthmus of Tehuantepec between," and felt that shifting to that more limited region, "many of our difficulties as to the geography of the Book of Mormon—if not all of them in fact, will have passed away."[39] Using a more limited geography, a coherent picture emerges from that 1000-piece puzzle—a fact that is used in apologetics as evidence that the Book of Mormon was too complex to be written in rapid dictation by Joseph Smith.[40] The emergence of a coherent geography is also an impressive insight in its own right.

Even before attempting to correlate it to the real world, the "internal maps" that Book of Mormon geographers such as John Sorenson and John Clark have produced are useful study aids that can, at the very least, help readers make sense of the sometimes-dizzying geographical details.[41] The insight this can provide to the geographic-heavy war narratives or missionary journeys should be obvious. But there are also some more surprising ways understanding Book of Mormon geography can bring clarity to the text. In some instances, awareness of the geographic situation can help make sense of how Isaiah is being used in the Book of Mormon.

Consider the trial of Abinadi in Mosiah 12–17, where the priests of King Noah ask him to interpret Isaiah 52:7–10. Why would they ask him to interpret Isaiah in the middle of a legal trial? The typical assumption is

---

38. For the intellectual history of Book of Mormon geography, see Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 225–75; John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, revised edition (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 7–35. For analysis of the travel distances in the Book of Mormon, see John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 55–78.

39. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 3:502–3.

40. John L. Sorenson, "How Could Joseph Smith Write So Accurately About Ancient American Civilization?" in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: 2002), 267–69. See also Hardy, *Understanding*, 6–7.

41. See Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*; John E. Clark, "Revisiting 'A Key for Evaluating Book of Mormon Geographies'," *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 13–43. The utility in assisting readers make sense of the text is precisely why Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana, Ill., and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003) included Sorenson's internal map (pp. 688–89).

that the wicked priests are witless pursuers of the scriptures who seek better understanding from the prophet Abinadi, even as they prepare to execute him.[42] To the contrary, however, understanding the topography of Nephite lands and geo-historical context reveals that the priests of Noah perhaps had a specific and sophisticated interpretation of Isaiah 52:7–10, and that they believed this interpretation proved Abinadi was a false prophet.[43]

This story takes place in the land of Nephi. This was the place Nephi and his first followers had settled and built a temple when they separated themselves from Nephi's brothers (2 Ne. 5:1–16). It was evidently amidst a mountainous region, high up in elevation.[44] After hundreds of years making this land their home, the Nephites left this land, coming down from the mountains and settling in the land of Zarahemla (Omni 1:12–13). Zeniff, Noah's father, led a group of Nephites back to what would have been, to them, their promised land, where they displaced the Lamanites and regained possession of the city and the temple (Mosiah 7:21; 9:1–9). As Noah began to rule, they were prospering in the land, as evidenced by Noah and his priests' opulence (Mosiah 11).

As John Welch and Joseph Spencer have argued, in this geographic, historical, and political context, Isaiah 52:7–10 was not just some random scripture that Noah's priests were curious about. It was a proof text. *They* were the messengers, whose feet were beautiful "upon the mountains," who preached the "good tidings of good." The Lord had, indeed, "brought again Zion" in the land of their fathers, their "Jerusalem" had been "redeemed."[45] And now, in the face of what they saw as clear pro-

42. See, for example, Monte S. Nyman, "Abinadi's Commentary on Isaiah," in *Mosiah, Salvation Only Through Christ*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1991), 161.

43. See John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 139–209. Though I chose not to explore it in this paper, the legal analysis of Welch on not just Abinadi's trial, but also several other stories in the Book of Mormon, is another example of apologetic scholarship—Welch is arguing that the Book of Mormon reflects ancient Israelite legal perspectives—which has provided several rich insights into the Book of Mormon. Joseph M. Spencer, "Isaiah 52 in the Book of Mormon: Notes on Isaiah's Reception History," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 6, no. 2 (2016): 203 n.40 praises Welch's analysis of Abinadi's trial as "some of the best available exegesis of the Abinadi story."

44. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 32–34.

45. See Welch, *Legal Cases*, 176; Spencer, "Isaiah 52 in the Book of Mormon," 203–4.

phetic fulfillment, who was Abinadi to challenge them? The priests cited Isaiah 52:7–10 as evidence that the Lord was with them, and thus Abinadi must be a false prophet worthy of death. This insight further enlightens the rest of the Abinadi narrative.[46]

The realization that the geography is limited has other implications to how the text is read. The Book of Mormon's stage was in "a comparatively little theater," in the words of late-twentieth-century apostle Neal A. Maxwell,[47] and that little theater left a lot of room for other peoples to play out other stories. As with the limited geographical scope, there's been some awareness of this reality from very early on in Mormon history,[48] though most readers have generally assumed that Book of Mormon peoples inhabited an empty continent. To overcome that general impression, LDS apologetic scholars have scoured the text searching for hints of "others" in the text.[49] At the same time, the lack of more explicit reference to these "others" has been explained by defining the Book of Mormon as a "lineage history," a type of history found in ancient Mesoamerica (and many other places) that deals exclusively, or at least primarily, with the history of a specific lineage to the exclusion of all other peoples.[50]

Shrinking Book of Mormon geography and adding other populations into the picture has several apologetic advantages: no longer does the Book of Mormon or its defenders have to account for every artifact or every ruin, or explain all the linguistic diversity through the limited

---

46. For the full analysis, see John W. Welch, "Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 293–312; Welch, *Legal Cases*, 139–209.

47. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer to 'The Great Question'," in *First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 9; originally given at a symposium at BYU in 1986.

48. See Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 91–112

49. See John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34; Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors,"113–27.

50. John L. Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 418–29. For examples of the cultural diversity that would often go unmentioned in hieroglyphic texts (which focused on the history of the ruling lineage), see Mark Alan Wright, "The Cultural Tapestry of Mesoamerica," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 11–12.

migrations mentioned in the text.[51] With the rise of modern genetics, the limited geography theory has become a semi-official apologetic to deal with the lack of Middle Eastern DNA in Native American populations.[52] Yet understanding the Book of Mormon as a lineage history—telling the story of one people among many—also brings several new perspectives to the table.

Consider Nephi trying to establish a people of God not in some kind of cultural vacuum, but rather in the midst of other nations, or "gentiles." In this light, John Gee and Matthew Roper review anew Nephi's selection of Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi.[53] The Isaiah quotations begin with Jacob, who says he was assigned this text by Nephi, and encourages his people to liken it to themselves (2 Ne. 6:4–5). Despite stressing that they should liken Isaiah to themselves as the house of Israel, Jacob starts with Isaiah 49:22–23 (2 Ne. 6:6–7)—a text about gentiles who will be "nursing fathers" and "nursing mothers" to Israel. Jacob then taught, "blessed are the Gentiles . . . if it so be that they shall repent and fight not against Zion" (2 Ne. 6:12).

As Nephi begins his own extended quotation of Isaiah, he similarly stresses that Isaiah's words should be likened to his people (2 Ne. 11:2). He then begins with a quotation of Isaiah 2, which describes a time when "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains" and "all nations shall flow unto it" (Isa. 2:2; 2 Ne. 12:2). Remembering that Nephi's people just settled in the land of Nephi, a mountainous region, and built a temple there (2 Ne. 5:1–16), this could be read as an invitation to all those among them who were not of Israelite descent to nonetheless "flow unto" the temple and make covenants with the Lord. Indeed, Nephi concludes his quotation with Isaiah 14, which begins by mentioning Israel being set "in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them" (Isa. 14:1; 2 Ne. 24:1). Then, while providing

---

51. See, for example, John W. Welch, "Finding Answers to B. H. Roberts's Questions and An Unparallel," FARMS Preliminary Reports, 1985, available at https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=2839&index=71.

52. "Book of Mormon and DNA Studies," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://www.lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-and-dna-studies.

53. See John Gee and Matthew Roper, "'I Did Liken All Scriptures Unto Us': Early Nephite Understandings of Isaiah and Implications for 'Others' in the Land," in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon*, ed. Camille Fronk, Brian M. Hauglid, Patty A. Smith, Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2003), 51–65.

commentary on these Isaiah passages, Nephi taught that the Lord "inviteth them all to come unto him . . . and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Ne. 26:33).

Understanding that Nephi and his family settled in an already populated and culturally diverse promised land, this use of Isaiah can be seen as part of Nephite efforts to incorporate "gentiles," "strangers," and other "nations" into their midst, extending the blessings of the Lord to those who joined with them.[54]

Finding Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon

Beyond internal geographies, John Sorenson and others have tried to situate the Book of Mormon in the real world by identifying a location that fits or at least approximates the map constructed from all the geographic puzzle pieces in the text. Sorenson's work is the most comprehensive, fitting Book of Mormon geography to Mesoamerica using several hundred of the geographic clues in the Book of Mormon.[55] For apologists, the very fact that hundreds of scattered geographic references can not only form a coherent picture, but then that it can fit reasonably well with a real-world setting serves as evidence favoring the book's claims to legitimate history. If Joseph Smith made this up, they argue, it would not fit reasonably anywhere in the world.[56]

Sorenson also went beyond geography and sought to ground Nephite life and history within Mesoamerican archaeology and culture, arguing for several hundred "correspondences" between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica.[57] While such correspondences are typically exploited as evidence for apologetic purposes, this context has consequences. As evangelical biblical scholar Peter Enns recently observed:

> Nothing has changed our understanding of the Old Testament more dramatically than what we have learned over the past 150 years or so about what Israel's

54. Gee and Roper, "I Did Liken," 55–60.

55. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

56. See John E. Clark, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 47.

57. John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1999); John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013).

> ancient neighbors thought and how they lived—and how much the Israelites not only resembled their neighbors but how indebted they were to modes of thinking that were well in place long before the Israelites ever existed. No corner of the Old Testament has remained unaffected: stories of origins, cosmology, theology, cult (worship), psalmody, wisdom, prophecy, and more.[58]

Likewise, if placed in a Mesoamerican context, every corner of the Book of Mormon must be reconsidered in light of Mesoamerican norms, beliefs, and practices. Sorenson laid the foundation, and began to work in this direction, but today LDS Mesoamericanists such as Brant Gardner, Mark Wright, and Kerry Hull are further exploring the impact that a Mesoamerican setting has on the Book of Mormon.[59] This work is adding new insights that can deepen a person's appreciation for and engagement with the text.

The story in Alma 20, for example, becomes particularly interesting in light of Mesoamerican political structures. In this chapter, King Lamoni's father, the "king over all the land," intercepts Lamoni traveling with Ammon toward Middoni to free Ammon's brethren from imprisonment there (Alma 20:2–8). Lamoni's father reacted by demanding that Lamoni kill Ammon, but when he refused, his father attempted to kill him—Lamoni being spared by the intercession of Ammon (Alma 20:14–18). Usually understood as a family quarrel, readers have been quick to condemn Lamoni's father as being so wicked he was willing to kill his own son simply for being with a Nephite![60] When read in the context of Classic Maya politics, however, a different view emerges.

Brant Gardner has pointed out that, among the Classic Maya, scholars have found a complex system of kings and "overkings," to whom lesser kings were subordinate.[61] The lesser king would be expected to make regu-

---

58. Peter Enns, "5 Modern Insights about the Old Testament that Aren't Going Anywhere," *Pete Enns: The Bible for Normal People*, June 6, 2017, https://www.peteenns.com/5-modern-insights-old-testament-arent-going-anywhere/.

59. See Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015); Mark Alan Wright, "Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, et al. (Orem, Utah, and Salt Lake City: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 243–57; Kerry Hull, "War Banners: A Mesoamerican Context for the Title of Liberty," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 84–118.

60. See, for example, D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 1:427.

61. See, for example, Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicles of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2008), 20–21.

lar "royal visits" and pay tribute to his overking. Failure to attend such an occasion would, at the least, be seen as a serious insult to the overking, and likely be taken be as a sign of rebellion.[62] In this setting, Lamoni's father was more than just a dad upset that his son wasn't home for dinner. Instead, he was an overking who felt insulted that one of his subordinate kings failed to attend an important diplomatic feast (Alma 20:9), where not only his presence but likely his payment was expected. Finding Lamoni currently traveling with the prince—Ammon was the son of King Mosiah—of an enemy state (Alma 20:10–13), about to use his political clout to help free others of Nephite nobility from captivity,[63] no doubt heightened his suspicions of rebellion. Lamoni's blatant insubordination upon being ordered to kill Ammon (Alma 20:14) all but confirmed Lamoni's treason. It is at this point that the overking attempts to kill Lamoni, not as a father upset at who his son is spending his time with, but as a ruler seeking to dispatch a treasonous vassal lord.[64] The actions of Lamoni's father suddenly become very understandable within a Mesoamerican political context.

A Mesoamerican context also explains a curiosity in the account of Abinadi's death. Abinadi's "death by fire" (Mosiah 17:20) is typically visualized as a burning at the stake. Yet before "flames began to scorch him" (v. 14), the text says that Abinadi's tormentors "scourged his skin with faggots" (v. 13). The oddity of this phrase compelled Royal Skousen to propose an emendation here to "*scorched* his skin with faggots."[65] Emendation, however, may not be necessary. Mark Wright and Kerry Hull have documented a practice among the various North American and Mesoamerican natives, including the ancient Maya, of torturing and executing people by physically beating them with firebrands. This form of torment could go on for days or even weeks, and Wright and Hull note that it was often prolonged deliberately to maximize the pain. This kind of death is aptly

62. See Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers*, 300–302.

63. Royal captives were also significant in Mesoamerica, and would be kept and tormented for political reasons. See Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers*, 302–3.

64. For further discussion of the political context, see Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:311–19.

65. See Royal Skousen, "'Scourged' vs. 'Scorched' in Mosiah 17:13," *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 22, no. 3 (2002): 2–3; Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part 3: Mosiah 14–Alma 17*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies and FARMS, 2017), 1412–14.

described by the phrase "scourged his skin with faggots," and this dramatically changes one's perspective on Abinadi's death.[66]

The Mesoamerican setting can also provide insight into more spiritual principles. For example, LDS scripture declares that God "speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Ne. 31:3; cf. D&C 1:24). While it is one thing to say that the Lord adapts his messaging to the understanding of his people, it's hard to know what that looks like in practice. Since the Book of Mormon shares some material and an early cultural background with the Bible, ways in which things diverge from biblical patterns in the Book of Mormon might provide some clues. While several LDS scholars have argued that the early revelations of Lehi and Nephi follow the expected pattern of ancient Israelite theophanies,[67] Mark Wright noticed that a different pattern emerges by Alma's day—one that is more consistent with Mesoamerican modes of revelation.[68]

Wright also noticed a subtle difference in how Jesus Christ presented the wounds of his resurrected body in the account in 3 Nephi compared to those in the New Testament. In the biblical accounts, Christ either didn't mention (Luke 24:39–40), or mentioned secondarily (John 20:25–28), the wound in his side. In the Book of Mormon account, however, Christ mentioned the wound in his side *first*, and only secondarily mentioned the marks in his hands and feet (3 Ne. 11:14). Considering this difference in a Mesoamerican context, Wright noted that one common method of human sacrifice in Mesoamerica was to cut a large opening below the ribcage and remove the still-beating heart. Thus, to a Mesoamerican audience, it

66. See Mark Alan Wright and Kerry Hull, "Ethnohistorical Sources and the Death of Abinadi," in *Abinadi: "He Came Among Them in Disguise"*, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, forthcoming 2018). I would like to personally thank the authors for allowing me to read a pre-publication draft of this paper. See also Brant Gardner, "Scourging with Faggots," *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 21, no. 7 (2001): 2–3.

67. See Blake T. Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 67–95; Stephen O. Smoot, "The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon," *Studia Antiqua: A Student Journal for the Study of the Ancient World* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 1–18.

68. Mark Alan Wright, "'According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding': The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65.

was the wound on the side that would have primarily expressed the idea that Jesus had been killed as a sacrifice.[69]

For the believer who accepts the Book of Mormon as both historically authentic and divinely revealed, the way these divine communications within the text diverge from biblical patterns and conform to Mesoamerican ones provides concrete examples of what it really means for God to adapt His message to His audience's understanding.

Conclusion: Boundary Maintenance or Pushing Boundaries?

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, my purpose is not to defend or promote any of these particular approaches. It must be admitted, however, that the value of any one of these insights is at least somewhat contingent upon how much merit is granted to the paradigm that produced it. I do think, however, that even those who do not accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon or other Latter-day Saint claims can appreciate the ways LDS efforts to defend these points of view have yielded new insights and interpretations into LDS scripture and theology. Some may even be able to find the new perspectives interesting and meaningful, without necessarily accepting the apologetic arguments that often go with them.

My aim here, however, was simply to show that these new insights and perspectives exist, and are beneficial to the vitality of Latter-day Saint belief. New insights like the ones described above force believing Latter-day Saints to rethink aspects of their faith in light of new information and research, even while defending fundamental premises such as the historicity of the Book of Mormon or the antiquity of temple rituals. They help readers humanize scriptural characters, and thus better relate to the stories being told within the LDS canon. When readers have been engaging theses texts since childhood, the stories can begin to feel stale, but ancient paradigms can bring in fresh perspectives that help bring the stories to life.

In several cases, these new insights may challenge Latter-day Saints used to typical interpretations and approaches. Seeing scriptural texts and authors as being at odds with each other might seem uncomfortable. A tree-goddess might seem weird and pagan. The notion that Nephites thought Jesus was sacrificed by having his still beating heart ripped out of

69. Mark Alan Wright, "*Axes Mundi*: Ritual Complexes in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 89–91.

his chest might not only seem pagan, but also gruesome and distasteful, along with Abinadi's being "scourged" to death by burning sticks bound together. Thus, despite apologetics usually being a form of boundary maintenance, in many cases LDS apologetic approaches are actually pushing the boundaries of scriptural interpretation and theological understanding.