



Type: Journal Article

A Black Hole That's Not So Black

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Source: *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1994)

Published by: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

Page(s): 156–203

Abstract: Review of *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism of the Book "Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon"* (1994), by Jerald and Sandra Tanner.



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Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars: A Response to Criticism of the Book "Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon,"* volume 1. Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1994. 179 pp. \$6.00.

A Black Hole That's Not So Black

Reviewed by Matthew Roper

"Since we began publishing in 1959," write Jerald and Sandra Tanner in their most recent booklet, "the LDS Church has never put forth any official rebuttal. We have waited in vain for thirty-four years for the Church itself to make a response to our work. Although a large number of people have left the Mormon Church because of our publications, and many others have been very concerned . . . Mormon leaders seem to feel that the best policy is silence. Since they apparently cannot find a way to successfully refute our allegations, they believe that the less people know about our publications the better. Consequently they have maintained a conspiracy of silence for thirty-four years while we have continued to distribute books throughout the world." While LDS scholars in the past have, in the authors' words, "followed Church leaders' advice" by ignoring them, now, faced with the imposing bogeyman of their recent book, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, "Mormon scholars have suddenly [come] out like an army to attack us" (p. 1-2). According to the authors, this can only be because their revolutionary ideas "were having a significant impact upon some," nay "*thousands* of members of the Church" (p. 2, emphasis added). Naturally, "it was time to speak up" (p.1).

Reading their rebuttal, I was reminded of several observations made by non-LDS historian Lawrence Foster a few years ago.

Editor's note: a longer, more complete version of this review can be obtained from the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1-800-327-6715.

With the Tanners, "Every bit of evidence, even if it could be most plausibly presented in a positive way, is represented as yet another nail in the coffin being prepared for the Mormon church. . . . Even when they backhandedly praise objective Mormon historical scholarship, they do so primarily as a means of twisting that scholarship for use as yet another debater's ploy to attack the remaining—and in their eyes insurmountable—Mormon deficiencies."¹ Speaking of the Tanners' reaction to an earlier critique of their work by an anonymous historian, Foster reflects, "One is amused at the exaggerated sense of self importance that the Tanners' rejoinder reveals. . . . The Tanners' own response would seem to be the best possible vindication of the argument . . . that they lack a sense of balance and perspective."²

And some things never change.

After a few introductory comments on responding to Book of Mormon criticisms in general and a few preliminary observations regarding the work in question, I will discuss the issue of biblical influence on the translation of the Book of Mormon, the issue of sacrifice as it relates to King Benjamin's speech, and finally, the Tanners' so-called "Black Hole" theory, discussed in their earlier work, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*,³ and

¹ Lawrence Foster, "Apostate Believers: Jerald and Sandra Tanner's Encounter with Mormon History," in *Differing Visions: Dissenters in Mormon History*, ed. Roger D. Launius and Linda Thatcher (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 350. This article draws heavily upon Foster's earlier evaluation, "Career Apostates: Reflections on the Work of Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Dialogue* 17 (Summer 1984): 35–60.

² Foster, "Career Apostates," 51–52.

³ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1990). This work received detailed attention by L. Ara Norwood, Matthew Roper, and John Tvedtnes in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 158–230 (hereafter *RBBM*); and by Tom Nibley, "A Look at Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*," *RBBM* 5 (1993): 273–89. Reviews of other works written by the Tanners have also appeared recently. These include Matthew Roper, review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* in *RBBM* 4 (1992): 169–219, which reviews chapters 5 and 6 that deal with the Book of Mormon; William Hamblin, review of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, in *RBBM* 5 (1993): 250–72; and Roper, "Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (Fall 1993): 164–

now repeated in their recent rebuttal—the accusation that the loss of the 116 manuscript pages left a “black hole” in the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith tried to cover up chiefly by plagiarizing from the Bible. Since the authors discuss many issues that I did not address in my earlier review, I welcome this opportunity both to discuss those issues and to clarify a few of my earlier remarks.

Answering Mormon Critics

When I previously reviewed several of the Tanners' publications, I of course recognized that, generally speaking, criticisms such as theirs do little to impede the growth of the Church; however, I saw the reviews as an excellent opportunity to help any individuals who might have been negatively influenced by the Tanners' work by suggesting some of the reasons why I found their work unpersuasive. There is a substantial body of Book of Mormon scholarship, much of it available for years, which should be carefully and systematically addressed by those who are interested in serious scholarly discourse on the Book of Mormon and the Church. By reviewing the Tanners' work, I was able to discuss some of those issues which the authors and others sympathetic to their position have generally ignored. Thus, I stated in one of those essays that two chapters on the Book of Mormon from their book, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* merited review,⁴ which was another way of saying that they provided a convenient foil against which to highlight several elements in the Book of Mormon that I found significant. The authors, however, in a desperate attempt to find legitimacy, have now on at least two occasions cited my offhand comment as evidence that they have somehow “arrived.”⁵

93, which was in part a response to the Tanners' brief retort, “Roper Attacks *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?*” *Salt Lake City Messenger* 82 (September 1992): 12–14.

⁴ Roper, Review of *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 169.

⁵ Tanner and Tanner, “Roper Attacks,” 12–13; Tanner and Tanner, *Answering Mormon Scholars*, 2.

Concerning the Tanners' allegation that there has been a conspiracy of silence, "what accounts for this reluctance [among both conservative and liberal scholars] to discuss the Tanners," asks Foster in his most recent evaluation of the Tanners' work.

The Tanners' answer is simple: The Mormon church is *afraid of them*. In their view, it has been engaged in a "*conspiracy of silence*" because it *cannot answer their objections*. The Tanners argue that if the church were to try systematically to answer their objections, it would realize the error of its ways and collapse. By failing to deal with them directly, the church, in the Tanners' opinion, is providing yet another proof of its underlying fraudulence and repressive mind control. This interpretation fails to deal with many complex factors that have contributed to Mormon reticence about discussing the Tanners in print. The most obvious point is that neither conservative nor liberal Mormons think that the Tanners are really serious about wanting a truly open discussion or considering approaches that differ from their own chip-on-shoulder, anti-Mormon mindset. On the one hand, the Tanners have repeatedly demanded that Mormonism live up to standards of rectitude impossible for any human organization to achieve or else give up its truth claims. On the other hand, the Tanners simultaneously tell the Mormon church that even if it were somehow able to live up to its impossibly high standards, it would still be false because it is not normative Christianity as they understand it. . . . Faced with such resolute unwillingness to consider anything Mormonism does in a positive light or to engage in a constructive dialogue about differing approaches, the Mormon Church, as an organization, has understandably chosen to ignore the Tanners as much as possible. . . . The Church sees no advantage in engaging in vitriolic polemic with virtual unknowns and thereby giving them publicity.⁶

⁶ Foster, "Apostate Believers," 353–54, emphasis added. Foster's observation finds support in the Tanners' recent work in which if Church officials or LDS writers ignore them, it can only be because they are "unable to respond" (p. 1), and are engaged in a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 1), yet when

Given the miraculous growth of the Church today, why should anyone respond to critics of the Church at all? When Nehemiah was trying to build a wall, his enemies employed every means to try to stop that work from progressing. When these efforts failed, his frustrated and desperate opponents, much like the Tanners, sent messages to Nehemiah demanding that he come down and speak with them. Nehemiah refused to do so. "And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3). Given the tremendous responsibility that Church leaders are under and the challenges of administering a rapidly growing Church, I think that the Tanners merit little of *their* time and attention. This does not mean, however, that individual members cannot or should not *ever* respond to attacks upon the Church or criticisms of the Book of Mormon. Thus, "It is not necessary to publish everything of a scurrilous character that is said against us, as it would engross too much of our attention to the exclusion of subjects that are more profitable. It is necessary that the Saints should know what is said against them, and that some one should show the other side. When the Church is belied there ought to be a refutation of the misstatements."⁷

The first forty pages or so of *Answering Mormon Scholars* is largely a defense of Brent Lee Metcalfe and a review of the Hofmann episode (pp. 3–45). Metcalfe's recent book, *New*

LDS writers do respond, it is because they are "agitated" (p. 1), "concerned" (pp. 1–2), or "burning" with anger (p. 8), and by the way, its really not very nice for the Latter-day Saint to respond anyway, since somebody somewhere said that the Tanners were a waste of time (p. 1).

⁷ Charles W. Penrose, *Millennial Star* 53 (1891): 785, in Brian H. Stuy, *Collected Discourses*, 5 vols. (Burbank: Calif.: B. H. S. Publishing, 1988), 2:270–71. On the appropriateness of timely defenses of the Church and its beliefs see also D&C 71:1–11; 123:1–17; *Collected Discourses* 2:273–74; Anthony W. Ivins, *Conference Report* (October 1910): 42; Ivins, *Conference Report* (October 1923): 140; Hyrum Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 423; Neal A. Maxwell, "All Hell Is Moved," *BYU Devotional and Fireside Addresses* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 179; Maxwell, "Discipleship and Scholarship," *BYU Studies* 32/3 (Summer 1992): 5–9.

Approaches to the Book of Mormon, received detailed and thoughtful attention in a recent issue of this *Review*.⁸ Why do the Tanners spend so much time in Metcalfe's defense? I suspect that they were hoping to use Metcalfe's work to respond to recent reviews of their own writings and to further their efforts in attacking the historicity of the Book of Mormon. That Metcalfe's work received such a thorough pounding at the hands of some very competent scholars was obviously a serious blow to the Tanners. At various points in the Tanners' rebuttal they cite the articles by John Kunich (pp. 86–90),⁹ Stan Larson (pp. 160–64),¹⁰ David Wright (pp. 163–64),¹¹ and certain arguments by Brent Metcalfe (pp. 54–57),¹² without acknowledging the thoughtful and frequently devastating reviews of those articles. The Tanners' refusal to acknowledge such work only reinforces the impression that they were caught unprepared for such a response and are ill-equipped to deal with such matters.

Much of their discussion of the work of Brent Metcalfe provides only a distorted picture. Reading their polemic, the uninformed reader may get the impression that no one has responded to the substance of Metcalfe's work and that reviewers can only resort to *ad hominem* arguments. This is certainly not the case. William Hamblin, for example, has discussed many of the problems inherent in Metcalfe's published work and

⁸ *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 1–562.

⁹ See the review by James E. Smith, "Nephi's Descendants: Historical Demography and the Book of Mormon," *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 255–96.

¹⁰ See review by John W. Welch, "Approaching New Approaches," *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 145–68. See also Welch's earlier response to Larson's criticisms in *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 145–63.

¹¹ See Welch, "Approaching New Approaches," 168–86. See also his earlier essay, "The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19," in *By Study and also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:238–72.

¹² While the Tanners argue that Metcalfe's argument on nonrandom sequences of lexical variants is "irrefutable" (p. 56), they have not come to grips with Royal Skousen's discussion in "Critical Methodology and the Text of the Book of Mormon," *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 140–43.

methodology.¹³ If the Tanners, or Metcalfe for that matter, believed that Hamblin's assessment was incorrect, they should have demonstrated why and on what basis Metcalfe's stated approach and methodology is better or more sophisticated than that of Hamblin and others.

This penchant to misread or misinterpret the arguments of other writers can also be seen in their response to comments by Daniel Peterson regarding Metcalfe's role in the Hofmann affair (pp. 16–17). They spend over twenty-eight pages showing that many people were fooled by Mark Hofmann (pp. 15–43). Unlike many in the LDS community, however, Metcalfe was more than just a bystander in the Hofmann episode, but was in fact one of the chief advocates of the Salamander Letter and apparently got a great deal of pleasure out of undermining the faith of others.¹⁴ In any case, the fact that Hofmann deceived a lot of people was, as the Tanners know very well, not the issue.

Peterson's point was that Latter-day Saints were being asked to abandon a long-held tradition of faith on the basis of evidence they were not permitted to see and examine for themselves—evidence that Metcalfe would not show, so that we had to trust Metcalfe and his “extremely reliable source,” Mark Hofmann. Ironically, the Tanners themselves have described similar examples from their own dealings with Mr. Metcalfe in the past.¹⁵

The Bible in the Book of Mormon

One of the glaring inconsistencies in the Tanners' work is that while they accept the testimonies of those who witnessed Joseph

¹³ Hamblin's article is one of the most coherent discussions of methodological issues in Book of Mormon studies published so far. William J. Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe's Assumptions and Methodologies,” *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 434–523. Hamblin's essay was a response to Metcalfe's essay, “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity,” *Dialogue* 26/3 (Fall 1993): 154–84.

¹⁴ Linda Sillitoe and Allen D. Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 285; Richard E. Turley, *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 93.

¹⁵ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, “LDS Documents and Murder,” *Salt Lake City Messenger* 59 (January 1986): 17–19.

Smith dictate the Book of Mormon, such as David Whitmer and Emma Smith (p. 160), they still argue that Joseph deliberately pilfered from a Bible. As I have argued previously,¹⁶ none of those who witnessed Joseph Smith dictate the Book of Mormon mention his use of a Bible, and its apparent absence during the translation of the Book of Mormon poses serious problems for the Tanners' theory of deliberate biblical plagiarism. The Tanners go to great lengths to show that some LDS writers, such as B. H. Roberts and Sidney B. Sperry, have suggested that, when the Prophet came across passages which paralleled the King James translation, he may have taken out a Bible and simply followed the KJV insofar as it agreed with the ancient text. The point is quite irrelevant, since the argument for Bible use, whether made by Latter-day Saints or the Tanners, contradicts the testimony of those who watched the Prophet work.

The Tanners cite David Whitmer's description of the Prophet placing the seer stone in his hat, and, putting his face into the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light and then dictating what he read from off the stone. Yet while the Tanners clearly accept David Whitmer's testimony and that of other early witnesses who describe the Prophet's use of the seer stone, their rebuttal reveals a failure to come to grips with some of the implications of that testimony. For example, in responding to my earlier point regarding the lack of a curtain to conceal the translator, the Tanners said, "we do not believe that it would have been necessary for Joseph Smith to use a curtain. He may have had a Bible open on the table before him or on his lap. If he felt that he had to conceal its presence, he could have had loose pages from a Bible hidden in the bottom of the hat he used when translating the book." Then, after referring to the testimonies of Whitmer, Emma Smith, and the others, they make the incredible statement that "it would have been easy to read anything in the bottom of the hat by simply letting some light shine in. For that matter, by this same method he could have had notes or even pages of material which he had previously written to read to his

¹⁶ Roper, review of *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, 171.

scribe” (p. 160).¹⁷ The testimonies of those who witnessed the translation of the Book of Mormon do not allow for the Tanners’ interpretation.

Father Whitmer, who was present very frequently during the writing of this manuscript affirms that Joseph Smith had *no book or manuscript*, before him from which he could have read as is asserted by some that he did, he (Whitmer) having every opportunity to know.¹⁸

Emma Smith also testified to the same thing.

In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he . . . dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.

Q. Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read or dictated to you?

A. *He had neither manuscript or book to read from.*

Q. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

A. If he had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me. . . .

Q. Could not father have dictated the Book of Mormon to you, Oliver Cowdery and the others who wrote for him, after having first written it, or having first read it out of some book?

A. Joseph Smith . . . could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, it is marvelous to me, ‘a marvel and a wonder,’ as much so as to any one else.”¹⁹

¹⁷ This is another example of what Foster describes as the Tanners’ “skillful shell game in which the premises for judgment are conveniently shifted so that the conclusion is always the same—negative” (Foster, “Apostate Believers,” 353; see also 350).

¹⁸ *St. Louis Republican* Interview, Mid-July 1884, Richmond, Missouri, *St. Louis Republican*, 16 July 1884, in Cook, 139-40, emphasis added.

¹⁹ “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” 51, emphasis added.

The witnesses describe the extreme poverty of Joseph Smith and his family, making it unlikely that they even owned a Bible. They testify that the relatively unlearned Joseph Smith dictated hour after hour, day after day, correcting mistakes without seeing them, without the use of Bible, manuscript, or notes of any kind. Those who were there, whose firsthand testimony regarding the dictation of the Book of Mormon text the authors appear to accept, adamantly affirmed that he had none, that he could not have had books or manuscripts without their knowing. "Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon, without apparent hesitation, as fast as a scribe could write it in long hand. There is no chance for error on this point." Moreover, "The dictation from start to finish proceeded while the Prophet's eyes were thus hidden from seeing anything by the natural light . . . he did not stop to hunt up the passages which resemble, or are identical with, passages in the King James' Version of the Bible. Such an interruption could not have escaped detection, and would surely have been noted in the accounts of the listeners. The quotations, therefore, whether direct or indirect, must be regarded as having come precisely like the rest of the matter, and probably . . . without the conscious knowledge of the translator."²⁰ That is one of the reasons these early witnesses considered the event a miracle.

Plagiarism or Translation?

That the Book of Mormon translation was somehow influenced by the Bible has been clear to every person who has read it. If Joseph Smith did not use a Bible during the translation, how can we account for the obvious similarities between portions of the Book of Mormon text and passages found in the King James Version of the Bible? The Prophet said that he translated the Book of Mormon through "the gift and power of God." Since the testimony of those who observed the dictation of the Book of Mormon makes it clear that he did not have a Bible in front of him while translating, it seems reasonable that the Holy Ghost conveyed the translation to the Prophet in a scriptural register. Since the language of the King James Bible was the

²⁰ Nels Lars Nelson, "The Human Side of the Book of Mormon," *The Mormon Point of View* 1/1 (1904): 124, 126-27.

accepted version of the day, it would have been the most appropriate style in which to convey a new scriptural record.

The Tanners argue that Book of Mormon passages which follow the language and style of the New Testament are particularly anachronistic since the works of New Testament writers would not have been available to Nephite prophets. Thus, according to our authors, the problem arises in “the ancient Nephites making extensive quotations from works which were not even in existence at that time” (pp. 137–38). However, the Book of Mormon purports to be a translation of an ancient document which comes to us through a modern translator, so although the King James English of our authorized version would not have been used by Alma or Mormon, the King James Bible, with both its Old and New Testaments, *was* a part of the modern translator’s reservoir of language and expression and could therefore quite properly have been used in translating an ancient scriptural text like the Book of Mormon.

By way of illustration, the first time I read Homer’s classic *The Odyssey* I was struck by a passage in Book XI where Odysseus attempted to comfort his friend Achilles, who was dead, by stating, “For you, Achilles, Death should have lost its sting.”²¹ Being new to classics, I wondered if maybe Paul had borrowed this phrase from Homer (1 Corinthians 15:55). I was surprised to discover, after some investigation, that this translation was in fact not a precise rendering from the Greek.²² Yet when I discussed this fact with my instructors, I was assured that this was considered an excellent translation, since it accurately conveyed the sense and meaning of the passage. Thus, contrary to the Tanners, New Testament language, even King James English, in a pre-Christian pagan document can at times be a legitimate translation if it adequately conveys the proper meaning. This is why modern translators of ancient documents sometimes employ New

²¹ *The Odyssey*, trans. E.V. Rieu (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1946), 184.

²² Other translations render it variously: “Indulge not then, Achilles, in causeless grief that thou hast died” (*The Odyssey*, trans. William Cowper [London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1992], 181); “To you Achilles, death can be no grief at all” (*The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. T. E. Lawrence [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 165); “Think then, Achilleus: You need not be so pained by death (*The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald. [New York: Vintage Books, 1961], 201).

Testament biblical language in their translations of documents which are pre-Christian: "The king is my eldest son who split open my womb," begins Faulkner's translation of the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts. "He is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (compare Matthew 3:17).²³ Allen renders a passage from the Egyptian Book of the Dead as "Father who art in heaven" (Matthew 6:9).²⁴ A popular translation of Pindar speaks of that which "neither moth nor rust doth destroy."²⁵ If such usage can sometimes be appropriate in translations of ancient pagan documents, how much more so for a translation of an ancient Christian scriptural document like the Book of Mormon?

Revelation and Nephi

The Tanners' observation that the language of Nephi and Jacob sometimes parallels that of John in Revelation (pp. 166–69) is interesting but not surprising, since we are explicitly told that Nephi was shown the same vision as John (1 Nephi 14:18–30) and that Jacob and Isaiah apparently saw what Nephi saw (2 Nephi 11:1–3). Contrary to the Tanners (p. 138), the Isaiah chapters are not irrelevant to Nephi's and Jacob's prophecies since these chapters supplement and help to expound their own visions and prophecies. Moreover, while I have not yet explored this issue in detail, it appears to me that the Isaiah chapters on the small plates are thematically related to John's prophecy, just as Nephi seems to indicate. Like John, Isaiah alludes to the plagues to be poured out upon the wicked (1 Nephi 21:26; 2 Nephi 6:18; compare Revelation 16:4–7), the conflict with the dragon (2 Nephi 8:9; compare Revelation 12:1–17), a curse of darkness (2 Nephi 7:3; 15:30; compare Revelation 8:12–13; 15:10–11), the sun and stars being darkened (2 Nephi 7:3; 23:10; compare Revelation 6:12–13), the wicked wanting to hide in the rocks (2 Nephi 12:10–22; compare Revelation 6:15–17), the siege of Jerusalem (2 Nephi

²³ Utterance 1, R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1985), 1.

²⁴ Thomas George Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 158.

²⁵ Pindar, Fragment 222, in *The Odes of Pindar: Including the Principle Fragments*, ed. Sir John Sandys (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 613.

17–20; compare Revelation 11:1–2), the mission of the two witnesses (2 Nephi 8:18–20; compare Revelation 11:3–13), the fall of Babylon (2 Nephi 23–24; compare Revelation 14:8; 17–18), the Millennial peace (2 Nephi 21–22; compare Revelation 20:1–6). It should also be remembered that John’s apocalypse is deeply couched in Old Testament themes and ideas, which are not original to the Christian era. In fact, Revelation 4–22 alone has at least four hundred allusions to the Old Testament.²⁶ While Nephi and Jacob gained their information from their own revelations, one can easily see how they used Isaiah to explain their own prophecy. Consequently, one should not be surprised to find Book of Mormon prophets using similar themes and symbols such as the “rod of iron,” the “fountain of living waters,” and the “tree of life” in their teachings or in describing their revelations.

In my earlier review I faulted the Tanners for failing to acknowledge close linguistic and conceptual parallels between certain Old Testament passages and the Book of Mormon (Roper, review of *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, 174–81). Much of the Tanners’ rebuttal rests upon the mistaken assumption that I was arguing for direct borrowing by Book of Mormon prophets in each of these cases; however, if I was insufficiently clear, I will clarify: There are numerous examples from the Old Testament which provide close linguistic and conceptual parallels to Book of Mormon language and ideas. The Nephites had the brass plates, a record much like our Hebrew Old Testament, but substantially larger. This would have included part of our current Old Testament as well as additional material which is not presently found in the Hebrew Bible. We do not know, at this point, what that included, but it is reasonable to assume that Book of Mormon prophets were influenced by the thought, language, and teachings of their scriptures, just as New Testament writers were influenced by our Old Testament. In addition to this, however, the modern translator, Joseph Smith, whether he consciously drew upon his own memory and biblical background in the translation, or whether such language flowed directly from the Holy Ghost, would have been influenced by biblical language

²⁶ J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 27.

from both the Old and New Testaments, as he conveyed the translation of this ancient document into his own English language. Biblical parallels are inconclusive, since the authors cannot show whether this is evidence that the Joseph Smith deliberately plagiarized or whether, as translator, he used language appropriate to convey an ancient Christian text.

To summarize, the Tanners' theory of deliberate plagiarism from the Bible during the dictation of the Book of Mormon is seriously hampered by the testimony of witnesses to the event. Moreover, that theory fails to take into account the fact that the Book of Mormon, like other translations of ancient documents, can quite properly contain King James biblical style from the Old and New Testaments and still be an authentic translation from an ancient document. Finally, there are legitimate reasons to question the authors' assumptions regarding the uniqueness of New Testament language and ideas.

Firstlings, Sacrifices, and Burnt Offerings

Part two of the Tanners' rebuttal treats the question of Israelite festivals as they relate to King Benjamin's speech. Since much of this section deals with the issue of comparing ancient and nineteenth-century paradigms, and since I am currently preparing an article dealing with this subject for another publication, I will reserve my comments for a future time. There is one issue, however, which is simply too good to pass by, and that is the reference to sacrifice in Mosiah chapter two.

Mosiah 2:3 reads, "And they also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses" (Mosiah 2:3). In 1887 M. T. Lamb countered, "According to the law of Moses, the *firstlings* of their flocks were *never* offered as *burnt offerings* or *sacrifices*. . . . This one little blunder, then, proves beyond the chance of question that the Book of Mormon could not have been inspired." Moreover, "This passage is precisely such a passage as Joseph Smith or any other ignorant man like him might have written; it could not have been found in the book if God . . . had

to do with its preparation.”²⁷ Following Lamb’s lead, the Tanners add that this verse “actually shows that the author of the Book of Mormon really didn’t understand the law of Moses” and “was unfamiliar with the biblical material concerning offerings. Moreover, it appears that he was not even aware of the other kinds of Jewish offerings commanded in the Bible” (p. 96). However, these criticisms are doubly flawed since Book of Mormon critics have both misunderstood the nature of the Mosaic provisions and built their criticisms upon an interpretation of the Book of Mormon text which is highly questionable.

First, while firstlings, as we currently understand their use in ancient Israel, were probably not offered as the *olah* or burnt offering in ancient Israel, as Anderson notes, “It would not be accurate to say that the requirements for the burnt offering, peace offering, and reparation offering were rigidly fixed; there was room for variability”; “for the burnt offering one had to offer a male animal from the herd or flock. . . . The peace offering could be either a male or a female from the herd or flock.”²⁸ There is no question, however, that the firstlings of clean domesticated animals were sacrificed in the peace offering, as were other animals. “In early Palestinian experience the firstlings of the flock and herd were sacrificed at the local sanctuary.”²⁹ In fact,

²⁷ M. T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible: Is It from God?* (Salt Lake City: Ward and Drummand, 1887), 109–10; see also William E. Biederwolf, *Mormonism under the Searchlight* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 16; James Tolle, *Is the Book of Mormon from God?* (Pasadena, Tex.: Haun Publishing Company, 1957), 18; Marvin Cowan, *Mormon Claims Answered* (Salt Lake City: Marvin Cowan, 1975), 34; Tanner and Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*, 61–62.

²⁸ Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:875.

²⁹ “First-born,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 2:271. Menahem Haran argues that it was held by some Jewish authorities that, “not every type of sacrifice would be deemed suitable for solitary altars. Many offerings were held to be reserved for the temple, and it was obligatory to take them exclusively to the temple altar. Such were the firstlings of cattle and sheep,” the various forms of the peace offering, including the thanksgiving offering, and possibly others (*Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* [Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1985], 16)

“Any domesticated animal from the herd or flock, male or female (Leviticus 3:1, 6, 12), was permissible” for the peace offering.³⁰ Under Mosaic law the firstlings (i.e. firstborn animals) of flocks and herds were dedicated to the Lord (Exodus 13:12, 15) and were given to the Levites. The Israelites were forbidden from using them for work or gain (Deuteronomy 15:19–20) and were required to bring them to the temple during their pilgrimage festivals, where they would be sacrificed (Deuteronomy 12:5–6). Their blood was sprinkled upon the altar and their fat was burned (Numbers 18:17–18). What was left then was given to the individual and his family to eat that same day (Deuteronomy 15:19–20). Thus Lamb and the Tanners grossly misunderstand the sacrificial role of firstlings when they claim that the firstlings were not sacrificed. While apparently not used for the burnt offering, firstlings could and frequently were used along with other animals in the sacrificial peace offering. The Book of Mormon correctly states that the Nephites brought their firstlings to the temple to be sacrificed, for firstlings clearly were sacrificed at the temple.

Mosiah 2:3 is also consistent with the commandments given to Moses in Deuteronomy:

But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come: And thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your freewill offerings, *and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks.* (Deuteronomy 12:5–6)

These verses indicate that the Israelites were to bring the firstlings of their flocks and herds to the temple along with other unspecified animals to fill various sacrificial and dedicatory purposes. It is noteworthy that although this verse mentions several forms of sacrifice associated with temple worship (burnt

This would account for the specific mention of firstlings in Mosiah 2:3 in the context of a temple gathering.

³⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 14:603 (hereafter *EJ*).

offerings, heave offerings, freewill offerings, etc.), the only animals actually mentioned are the firstlings, even though the firstlings were, as far as we know, never offered as the burnt offering under Mosaic law. However, the mere mention of “burnt offerings” in this biblical passage clearly implies animals other than firstlings, even if no other animals are explicitly mentioned. Similarly, it is reasonable to interpret the Mosiah 2:3 reference to “sacrifice and burnt offerings” as an allusion to two distinct forms of sacrifice—the sacrifice of firstlings in the so-called peace offering and the burnt offering taken from other animals.³¹ Thus, the Nephites, in accordance with the legal prescriptions of Mosaic law, “took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice” and they also took other animals to offer as “burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3).³²

Second, there are legitimate reasons to reject Lamb’s and the Tanners’ interpretation of this Book of Mormon passage, especially in light of biblical passages which use similar language. Using language reminiscent of the Book of Mormon, Moses told Pharaoh, “Thou must give us also sacrifices (*zebah*) and burnt (*olah*) offerings, that we may sacrifice unto the Lord our God” (Exodus 10:25).³³ In reference to the term used for sacrifice in this and numerous other biblical passages (*zebah*), Gary Anderson, an authority on Old Testament sacrificial practices, warns that “one should not infer that the *zebah*, ‘slain sacrifice,’ [KJV “sacrifice”], refers to *any* slain sacrificial animal. In spite of its name, which is quite general, this sacrifice designation often occurs in the pair *zebah* and *ola* [i.e. “sacrifice and burnt offerings”]. In this type of usage there can be no doubt that

³¹ Critics are clearly mistaken when they claim that the peace offering was not really a sacrifice, for it certainly was, although it probably had no expiatory value.

³² For similar Book of Mormon references see 1 Nephi 5:9; 7:22; 3 Nephi 9:19. One can also interpret Mosiah 2:1–4 as a brief summary of why the people of Zarahemla gathered together. They did so: (1) to go up to the temple (Mosiah 1:1), (2) to hear the words of King Benjamin (Mosiah 1:1), (3) to offer sacrifice of their firstlings, (4) to offer burnt offerings according to the law of Moses (Mosiah 1:3), and (5) to give thanks unto the Lord their God.

³³ See also Exodus 18:12; Joshua 22:26, 28; 1 Samuel 6:15; 15:22; 2 Kings 5:17; 10:24; 1 Chronicles 29:21; Isaiah 1:11; 56:7; Jeremiah 6:20; 7:20–22; Ezekiel 40:42; 44:11; Psalms 50:8; 51:16.

zebah refers specifically to the *selamim* [peace] offering.”³⁴ In fact, scholars usually assume that these references to the burnt offering and the peace offering must be understood as clichés or “merisms for the entire sacrificial system.”³⁵ Mormon is, of course, abridging the account of these events.

There are several reasons why the sacrifice of the peace offering may have been particularly appropriate for the occasion described in Mosiah 1–5. According to Anderson, the peace offering was “emblematic of moments of joy or celebration.”³⁶ King Benjamin’s people sacrificed and gave thanks to the Lord for blessing them “that they might rejoice” (Mosiah 2:4). Other elements of King Benjamin’s speech indicate that this was a time of joy and great rejoicing (3:4; 4:3, 11–12). The peace offering was also particularly appropriate during important national events, such as the coronation of new kings, the renewal of the authority of an already functioning leader, or other times of national or spiritual renewal.³⁷ Likewise, the people of King Benjamin offer sacrifice following a period of serious contention and apostasy led by false prophets and teachers (Words of Mormon 1:12–18). These sacrificial practices may have been viewed as adding legitimacy to King Benjamin’s or Mosiah₂’s position and authority. The peace offering was particularly appropriate for the celebration of victory, such as Saul’s victory over the Ammonites at Jabesh Gilead,³⁸ or at the “successful conclusion of a military campaign.”³⁹ Similarly, the people of King Benjamin gather to the temple for sacrifice after the Lord has delivered them from their enemies, the Lamanites (Mosiah 2:4; see also Omni 1:24; Words of Mormon 1:13).

There were at least three different kinds of peace offerings. These included the thanksgiving offering, the vowed sacrifice, and the freewill offering.⁴⁰ Although “all three sacrifices were motivated by the same general circumstances,” Levine notes that,

³⁴ Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings,” 878, emphasis added.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 878, 882; Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 21–22.

³⁶ Anderson, “Sacrifices and Sacrificial Offerings,” 878.

³⁷ *EJ* 14:604; Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, 29.

³⁸ Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, 28–29.

³⁹ *EJ* 14:604.

⁴⁰ Anderson, “Sacrifices and Sacrificial Offerings,” 878.

“the *todah* [i.e. thanksgiving offering] was particularly appropriate for expressing gratitude over one’s *deliverance from danger* or misfortune.”⁴¹ “Its purpose was to render an expression of thanks for deliverance or blessings granted.”⁴² One is immediately reminded of King Benjamin again, during whose reign the people gathered to “offer sacrifice and burnt offerings . . . And also that they might *give thanks* to the Lord their God . . . who had *delivered them out of the hands of their enemies*” (Mosiah 2:3–4). Benjamin’s pointed references to giving thanks may also be relevant here (Mosiah 2:19–20).

The Loss of the 116 Pages

After the loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, the Lord told the Prophet that evil men had altered the words of the lost translation manuscript so that they read contrary to the original translation (D&C 10:10–11), and so that if he translated the same again evil men would publish an altered version claiming that he could not really translate. “And behold they will publish this, and Satan will harden the hearts of the people to stir them up to anger against you, that they will not believe my words” (D&C 10:32). The Tanners and several other critics reject this explanation: “If Satan did cause Joseph Smith’s enemies to alter the words,” they argue, “these wicked people would have had to produce the original pages to prove that Joseph Smith could not produce an accurate duplicate of the original. It would be almost impossible to alter a manuscript without detection. The Mormons could have taken the case to court and easily won a significant victory” (pp. 58–59).

I find such reasoning to be unpersuasive in light of the hostile environment in which early Mormonism emerged. In the face of poverty and persecution the Prophet’s earliest supporters were convinced that Joseph had the power to translate, a fact that was the polestar of their faith. If the plot against the Prophet had

⁴¹ Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, 43.

⁴² E. E. Carpenter, “Sacrifices and Offerings in the OT,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4:268. “In many contexts the term thanksgiving offering is used as a virtual synonym for peace offering (e.g. II Chron. 29:31; Jer.17:26; cf. II Chron. 33:16)” (*EJ* 14:604).

succeeded, it could conceivably have undermined the faith of some of Joseph's closest supporters, whose help and devotion were crucial to the success of early Mormonism. Early Mormons already faced an uphill battle. The Prophet's enemies would hardly have needed to produce the original manuscript to harden the hearts of the people and hinder the work from progressing. All they would have had to do was *print* the altered version. After that, the manuscript might have been destroyed or lost, but the effect would have been the same. They would have claimed that the corrupted version was the earlier one. In the end, it would have simply been a case of the Prophet's word against theirs. The whole affair would have been reprinted and rumored abroad by other newspapers within the region and would have tended to undermine the Prophet's credibility at a time when most people were only too willing to find an excuse to disbelieve the Book of Mormon. "Considering the state of transportation and communication in ante-bellum America," notes Leonard J. Arrington, "newspapers were able to 'get away with' ambiguous writing, if not palpable falsehoods. This partly accounts for the pertinacity with which early Americans held on to the false and damaging image of Mormonism" conveyed by writers and publishers.⁴³

The Plates of Lehi and Nephi

The Tanners note what they feel is a discrepancy between the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants 10:44. The 1830 preface states that the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon were "taken from the Book of Lehi, which was an account abridged from the plates of Lehi, by the hand of Mormon," while the revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants states that they were translated from "an abridgment of the account of Nephi" (D&C 10:44). Because of this apparent

⁴³ Leonard J. Arrington, "James Gordon Bennett's 1831 Report on 'The Mormonites,'" *BYU Studies* 10/3 (Spring 1970): 363. On the treatment of early Mormonism by New York and Ohio newspapers during this period see Walter A. Norton's superlative overview, "Comparative Images: Mormonism and Contemporary Religions As Seen by Village Newspapermen in Western New York and Northeastern Ohio, 1820-1833" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1991).

discrepancy the Tanners argue that “Joseph Smith first conceived of the Book of Mormon as an abridgment by Mormon of a set of plates prepared by Lehi.” When the 116 pages were lost, according to the Tanners, Joseph Smith “could not accurately reproduce the material which he claimed Mormon had abridged from Lehi’s plates, [so] he found it necessary to have Lehi’s son, Nephi, create an entirely different set of plates known as the ‘plates of Nephi’ ” (p. 38). While the Tanners argue that the 1830 preface and Doctrine and Covenants 10:44 are contradictory, I believe that these two passages can easily be reconciled with the text of the Book of Mormon, without viewing the plates of Nephi as an expedient afterthought.

Nephi tells us that Lehi had indeed written a record of his own, “for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he hath also written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children” (1 Nephi 1:16). Nowhere does the Book of Mormon text state that Lehi originally wrote his record upon plates. S. Kent Brown, for instance, has suggested that this record was initially written upon perishable materials and that it was only later copied onto the large plates by Nephi where it would have been preserved.⁴⁴ After Lehi and his family arrived in the New World, the Lord commanded Nephi to make the large plates of Nephi “that I might engraven upon them the record of my people. And upon the plates which I made I did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies have I engraven upon them” (1 Nephi 19:1). Nephi’s statement that he engraved the record of his father Lehi upon the large plates suggests that he engraved the entire record of his father and not simply an abridgment as some have argued.⁴⁵ Thus Lehi’s own account that he had initially written upon perishable

⁴⁴ S. Kent Brown, “Lehi’s Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source,” *BYU Studies* 24/1 (Winter 1984): 23–25.

⁴⁵ There appears to be no scriptural justification for assuming that Nephi abridged his father’s record when he inscribed it onto the large plates, as some have suggested (S. Kent Brown, “Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991], 4), although there is for the smaller record, where Nephi is clearly abridging his father’s much longer account (see 1 Nephi 1:16–17; 6:1–3; 8:29; 9:1).

materials was eventually copied by Nephi onto the first section of the large plates and seems to have been what became known on both that record and in Mormon's abridgment as "the Book of Lehi."

Nephi tells us that the large plates and the small plates were both known as the "plates of Nephi" (1 Nephi 9:2); however, that section of the small plates containing the account of Jacob and his descendants was known as the "plates of Jacob" even though they were in fact "made by the hand of Nephi" (Jacob 3:14). Consequently, the term "plates of Lehi" mentioned in the preface to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon need not be viewed as an anachronism but likely refers to those leaves of the large plates which contained Lehi's account, even though the actual plates upon which that portion of the record was inscribed were made by Nephi. The 116 pages were then an English translation of Mormon's abridgment taken from the Lehi section of the large plates and were known in Mormon's record as "the Book of Lehi."⁴⁶ With this interpretation most of the confusion expressed by the Tanners can be easily resolved.

At the time Joseph received the revelation now known as section 10 of the Doctrine & Covenants, his primary concern was obviously over what he should do about the temporary void left by the loss of the 116 pages. In answer to this concern the Lord explained that the Prophet was not to retranslate the Lehi portion of Mormon's plates but to complete the translation of the remainder of Mormon's record (D&C 10:38–46). The Lord explained that "an account of those things that you have written, which have gone forth out of your hands, is engraven upon the plates of Nephi" (D&C 10:38). While, as noted above, the term "plates of Nephi" could, depending on the context, refer to either the large plates, the small plates, or both, as John Tvedtnes has pointed out, section 10 can only refer to the small plates of Nephi,

⁴⁶ The colophon introducing the book of Helaman on page 368 of the 1981 edition states that Mormon's abridgment for this section of the Book of Mormon was taken from "the record of Helaman and his sons, even down to the coming of Christ, which is called the book of Helaman." This may suggest that the book titles in our current Book of Mormon basically follow the titles found upon the large plates. If this assumption is correct it would follow that Lehi's record or the "plates of Lehi" were also known upon the large plates as the "book of Lehi." However, this is far from certain.

since only the small plates were found on Mormon's record.⁴⁷ With this in mind the meaning of section 10:38–45 becomes clear. "An account of those things that you have written, which have gone forth out of your hands [the 116 pages of translation], is engraven upon the plates of Nephi; Yea and you remember it was said in those writings [the 116 pages] that a more particular account was given of these thing upon the plates of Nephi; And now, because the account which is engraven upon the plates of Nephi is more particular concerning the things, which in my wisdom, I would bring to the knowledge of the people in this account—Therefore, in order to fill the void left by the loss of the 116 pages,

you shall translate the engravings which are on the plates of Nephi, down till you come to the reign of king Benjamin, or until you come to that which you have translated which you have retained;⁴⁸ And behold, you shall publish it as the record of Nephi; and thus I will confound those who have altered my words. . . . Behold, they have only got a part, or an abridgment of the account of Nephi [the translation of Mormon's abridgment from the large plates]. Behold, there are many things engraven upon the plates of Nephi which do throw greater views upon my gospel; therefore, it is wisdom in me that you should translate this first part⁴⁹ of⁵⁰ the engravings of Nephi, and send forth in this work. And behold, all the remainder of this work [our current Book of Mormon] does contain all those parts of my gospel which my holy prophets, yea, and also my disciples, desired in their

⁴⁷ Tvedtnes, review of *Black Hole*, 206.

⁴⁸ As discussed below, the part "retained" refers at the very least to the beginning of the original book of Mosiah (now lost), the Words of Mormon, and the beginning of our current book of Mosiah.

⁴⁹ The reference to the "first part" refers to what is to be published as the first part of the Book of Mormon. "Hence, he was to provide, as the first part of the Book of Mormon, a translation from the 'engravings of Nephi' " (Tvedtnes, review of *Black Hole*, 207).

⁵⁰ The preposition "of" should be understood as meaning "from." Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), 2:25.

prayers should come forth unto this people. (D&C 10:41–42, 44–46)

The Title Page of the Book of Mormon

The Tanners point to what they feel is another discrepancy between the contents of the current Book of Mormon and the contents described in the Book of Mormon's title page. The title page says that the Book of Mormon is "an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates taken from the plates of Nephi. Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi; and also of the Lamanites. . . . An abridgment taken from the Book of Ether also, which is a record of the people of Jared." The Tanners feel that this is inconsistent with the fact that the small plates were really not written by Mormon but by Nephi, Jacob, and others. However, as we noted above, among Book of Mormon writers the small plates were simply known as the "plates of Nephi" since they were made by Nephi and were continued afterwards at his command: "For the plates upon which I make a full account of my people I have given the name of Nephi; wherefore, they are called the plates of Nephi, after mine own name; and these plates also are called the plates of Nephi" (1 Nephi 9:2). Both sets were known by the same name, "the plates of Nephi," even though they were separate records and had different functions. Consequently, the term "plates of Nephi" in the title page quite properly could include all of Nephi's plates and need not be confined to the large plates. Mormon's record was truly "an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates *taken* from the plates of Nephi"; that is, the account prepared by Mormon was taken from both the large plates and the small plates.⁵¹ "Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi." Again, this is doubly true in that Mormon abridged the large plates and also included within his record Nephi's small plates that are also, in part, an abridgment of certain elements of the Nephite history and teaching.⁵²

⁵¹ The word "taken" is appropriate whether the small plates were recopied or simply inserted into Mormon's record.

⁵² The small plates were an abridgment of both secular and religious material. Scriptural evidence for this is abundant. See for example 1 Nephi 1:6,

The Tanners complain of the apparent disparity between the lack of reference in the title page to 143 pages from the small plates and the mention of the record of Ether, which is only about thirty pages in our current Book of Mormon. "The fact that the title page of the Book of Mormon gives such a careful description of the 'Book of Ether,' a book of less than thirty-two pages, but either incorrectly describes or omits the small plates of Nephi, comprising over 142 pages, makes one wonder how such a serious mistake could be made in a book purporting to be divinely inspired" (*Black Hole*, 40). However, the Book of Mormon record of Ether also contained the sealed portion of the Book of Mormon which took up at least one-third of Mormon's plates.⁵³ In terms of our current Book of Mormon, this sealed material added to our current Book of Ether would be about 203 pages, not simply 32 as the Tanners mistakenly assume. Thus, contrary to the Tanners, Mormon's mention of the Jaredite account is perfectly reasonable, as is his description of the Book of Mormon as an account taken from the plates of Nephi.

Knowledge of Christ's Coming

The Tanners find it unreasonable that "the prophet Alma, who lived hundreds of years later, seem[s] to know nothing about this remarkable prophecy [Nephi's 600-year prophecy] which pointed out the exact year when Jesus would be born" (p. 45) and, since he in their view should know of it from the small plates, that this passage "is a serious contradiction in the Book of Mormon which cannot lightly be dismissed" (p. 46). In order to clarify these verses it is helpful to cite the entire passage:

13-16, 19; 5:17-19; 6:1-3; 8:29-38; 9:1; 10:1-16; 15:1, 11, 19-20; 16:24-29, 39; 17:7-9, 12-14, 52; 18:1-4; 19:8, 21-23; 2 Nephi 1:1-4; 4:14; 5:4, 20-25; 6:1-3, 8-11; 10:3; 11:1; 25:6; 31:1-2; 33:1; Jacob 2:25-34; 3:12-13; Jarom 1:13-14; Omni 1:5-7, 12:13, 18, 20-22.

⁵³ David Whitmer suggested that the sealed portion may have actually been somewhat larger: "About half the book was sealed" (P. Wilhelm Poulson Interview, no date, Richmond, Missouri, *Deseret Evening News*, 16 August 1878, in *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 21.

Now is the time to repent, for the *day of salvation* draweth nigh; Yea, and the voice of the Lord, by the mouth of angels, doth declare it unto all nations; yea, doth declare it, that they may have glad tidings of great joy; yea, and he doth sound these glad tidings among all his people . . . wherefore, they have come unto us. . . . Therefore, we are thus highly favored, for we have these glad tidings declared unto us in all parts of our vineyard. For behold, angels are declaring it unto many at this time in *our land*; and this for the purpose of *preparing the hearts of the children of men to receive his word at the time of his coming* in glory. And now we only wait to hear the joyful news declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of his coming, for the time cometh [i.e., the day of salvation], we know not how soon. Would to God that it might be in my day; but let it be sooner or later, in it I will rejoice. And it shall be made known unto just and holy men, by the mouth of angels, at the time of his coming, that the words of our fathers may be fulfilled according to that which they have spoken concerning him. (Alma 13:21–26)

The Tanners' interpretation of this passage is not the only, nor even the most reasonable, explanation of it. As I see it, one may reach several different conclusions depending on how one interprets the references to Christ's "coming" in verses 24–26. Here I will suggest four possible interpretations. Alma's reference to Christ's coming could refer to: (1) Christ's birth, (2) Christ's atonement, (3) Christ's postresurrection appearance to the Nephites in the New World, or (4) Christ's general coming, including all aspects of his life and mission in the meridian of time—his birth, life, teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection, culminating for the Nephites in his appearance to them shortly after he rose from the dead. Here we will briefly examine each of these possibilities in contrast to the Tanners' objections to the first two, as expressed in their rebuttal.

1. *Christ's Birth.* In responding to the Tanners' and Metcalfe's claim that this verse poses a serious problem for the Book of Mormon, John Tvedtnes has argued that Alma and perhaps other Book of Mormon prophets in Mosiah–Moroni may have been unfamiliar with the prophecies on the small plates of

Nephi.⁵⁴ The Tanners argue that this explanation is unreasonable because Alma had received all the plates from Mosiah₂ before becoming chief judge (pp. 49–50) and should therefore have been familiar with their contents, including the 600-year prophecy. The Tanners' objections dissolve when we recall that Alma had a voluminous library of scriptural records, far beyond anything we have today—not merely a few books. He possessed the brass plates, a record that the Book of Mormon explains was a great deal larger than our Old Testament (1 Nephi 13:23). He had the record of Ether on gold plates, containing an account of the Jaredites, of which we do not even have a hundredth part in our current Book of Mormon (Ether 15:33). He had the record of the Nephites on the large plates; references to this record in the Book of Mormon text strongly suggest that it an extremely large record, perhaps consisting of numerous volumes (Helaman 3:13–16). In addition to the brass plates, the account of Ether, and the voluminous record of the Nephite history on the large plates, Alma also would have had the record of the Zeniffite colony (Mosiah 9–22), the record kept by Alma at Helam from which Mormon made part of his abridgment of the book of Mosiah (Mosiah 23–24), and perhaps other records as well—including the small plates. This would be a fairly imposing corpus to read, much less to master and remember. Previous to Alma's conversion he had been a very wicked and idolatrous man (Mosiah 27:8–10). It is doubtful that he spent much time at that earlier period searching the scriptures. He received the library of records and other sacred things from King Mosiah₂ only shortly before becoming the first Nephite chief judge (Mosiah 28:20). For his first eight years as chief judge he did double duty as high priest over the Church (Mosiah 29:42; Alma 1–4:18). These were very difficult years for both the Nephite people and the members of the Church—so busy in fact that during those years Alma had not even had time to visit the nearby city of Gideon (Alma 7:1–2). At the beginning of the ninth year Alma retired from the judgment seat and devoted himself to full-time missionary work and the labor of running the Church (Alma 4:16–19). Alma delivered his sermon at

⁵⁴ John Tvedtnes, review of *Black Hole*, 198–99; Tvedtnes, review of Brent Lee Metcalfe, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, in *RBBM* 6/1 (1994): 43.

Ammonihah just over a year or so after retiring from political office. Much of his two-year ministry was spent traveling (Alma 5–16), so it is unlikely that he carted all the Nephite records around with him to study in his spare moments. In addition to keeping possession of the records, he also had to keep his own record (Alma 9:34; 11:46; 13:31; 35:16; 44:24), fight and direct wars (Alma 2:16–38; 3:20–25), judge the people (Alma 1), run the Church (Alma 6), and deal with all of the vicissitudes and challenges of raising a family (Alma 36–42). Is it really unreasonable that Alma did not spend much time on this little record of Nephi until several years after receiving them?

One may, therefore, reasonably interpret Alma's statement as a reference to Alma's ignorance of the 600-year prophecy at the time of his mission in Ammonihah during the tenth year of the reign of the judges. It seems clear to me that Alma was familiar with at least some of the prophecies on the small plates by at least the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges, since we are told that between the eleventh and fourteenth years "Alma and Amulek [did] go forth, and also many more who had been chosen for the work. . . . Holding forth things which must shortly come; yea, holding forth the coming of the Son of God, his sufferings and death, and also the resurrection of the dead. And many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come; and they were taught that he would appear unto them after his resurrection; and this the people did hear with great joy and gladness" (Alma 16:15, 19–20). This suggests to me that Alma had some knowledge of the small plates by this time, since Nephi had prophesied of this appearance (2 Nephi 26:1).

2. *Christ's coming to atone for the sins of mankind and redeem them from death.* Several statements by Alma regarding the coming of Christ clearly refer to his coming to redeem man from sin and death. In describing his own conversion, for example, Alma states, "I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, *to atone for the sins of the world*" (Alma 36:17). Later he could testify, "I know that Jesus Christ shall come, yea, the Son, the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. And behold, it is he that cometh to take away the sins of the world, yea, the sins of every man who steadfastly

believeth on his name” (Alma 5:48). Thus there is scriptural precedent for the interpretation that the coming of Christ discussed in Alma 13:25 may refer to Christ’s coming to atone for sin and break the bands of death. The Tanners might perhaps object to this interpretation on the basis of verses 25 and 26, in which Alma states that his coming would be declared by “the mouth of angels” (Alma 13:25) and that this event would “be made known unto just and holy men, by the mouth of angels, at the time of his coming” (Alma 13:26); however, when Jesus was resurrected many of the departed Saints also arose and appeared unto many of the Nephites and did minister to them. Resurrected beings are certainly angels. Given the time of their appearance, it is reasonable to assume that they announced the fact that Christ’s atonement was fulfilled.

3. *Christ’s appearance to the Nephites.* In a review of the Tanners’ previous book, Tom Nibley suggested that Alma in Alma 13 had reference to Christ’s appearance to the Nephites, since he speaks of “the time of his coming in his glory.” In responding to Brent Metcalfe, I also indicated that I believed this was “an interesting phrase.”⁵⁵ The Tanners have pointed out that the idea of Christ coming in glory is not unique to allusions to his resurrected appearances, but could also refer to mortality. Even if this term were not unique to a resurrected appearance, it would still be an appropriate one to describe the Savior’s glorious New World appearance.⁵⁶

4. *Christ’s general coming.* By referring to the coming of Christ Alma may simply have reference to Christ’s coming in a general sense. Under this interpretation, Alma means Christ’s coming, beginning of course with his birth, but also including his perfect life and teachings, his atoning sacrifice and death, and his

⁵⁵ Roper, “A More Perfect Priority?” 364.

⁵⁶ The Tanners objected to this interpretation on the grounds that footnotes to Alma 13:25–26 reference scriptures that speak of the Savior’s birth and also because it differs from the position set forth in several LDS commentaries, such as the former manual for Institute-level students of the Book of Mormon. Most Latter-day Saints are sensible enough to realize that helps like scriptural footnotes and commentaries, even when published by the Church, are simply study aids and do not carry the same weight as the standard works themselves, which have always been the standard by which all doctrines and teachings are measured.

resurrection, culminating for the Nephites in his resurrected appearance to them when he delivered his teachings. The Tanners might object to this on the basis of verses 25–26, which state that angels would declare his coming (Alma 13:25) and “it shall be made known unto just and holy men, by the mouth of angels, at the time of his coming” (Alma 13:26). Clearly angels appeared to some at the birth of Christ, but Alma’s statement could easily refer to other periods as well. Nephi the son of Nephi was certainly a just and holy man: “For behold, it was a just man who kept the record—for he truly did many miracles in the name of Jesus; and there was not any man who could do a miracle in the name of Jesus save he were cleansed every wit from his iniquity” (3 Nephi 8:1). Angels appeared to him as well: “And it came to pass that Nephi—having been visited by angels and also the voice of the Lord, therefore having seen angels, . . . went forth among them in that same year, and began to testify, . . . for so great was his faith on the Lord Jesus Christ that angels did minister unto him daily” (3 Nephi 7:15, 18). The resurrected Saints appeared unto many of the Nephites at the time of Christ’s resurrection and ministered unto many (Helaman 14:25; 3 Nephi 23:9–12), and numerous angels ministered to those who were gathered at the temple in Bountiful (3 Nephi 17:24; 19:14). In speaking of events during this time, Mormon uses a phrase similar to that used by Alma to refer to the death of the prophets during the reign of Lachoneus²: “Behold I say unto you, Yea many have testified of these things at the coming of Christ, and were slain because they testified of these things” (3 Nephi 10:15). This is an obvious reference to 3 Nephi 6:20–23, yet it speaks of these events as occurring “at the coming of Christ” even though this is years after Jesus’ birth and three years before his death. This suggests that Alma’s reference to angels making things known unto just and holy men at the time of his coming could refer to the entire period from Christ’s birth to his resurrected appearances. Under this interpretation, Alma’s uncertainty need not refer to knowledge of Christ’s birth, but could refer to the date of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, his resurrection or his appearance to the righteous Nephites. In fact, the references to Christ giving his word to the Nephites in fulfillment of the prophecies of Alma’s fathers could be seen as an indication of Alma’s familiarity with the small plates.

Words of Mormon

The Tanners cite a passage from Words of Mormon which says, "I found these plates, which contained this small account of the prophets, from Jacob down to the reign of king Benjamin, and also many of the words of Nephi" (Words of Mormon 1:3). The Tanners object that

[Mormon's] statement would lead a person to believe that [the small plates] were not written by the prophet Nephi. . . . A comparison of his statement with our present Book of Mormon seems to indicate that he either gave an inaccurate description of these plates or else read from a different set of plates. . . . Mormon completely overlooked Nephi in the first part of his description claiming that the record was an account of 'the prophets, from Jacob down to this king Benjamin,' and then he tacked on the end of the verse that these plates also contain 'many of the words of Nephi.' This, of course gives the impression that while some of the words of Nephi are included, the plates were actually authored by Jacob and his successors."

Here it appears that the Tanners are trying to create problems that just aren't there. Whatever the order, Mormon states that Nephi's words are "many" while those of Jacob and his descendants are "small." This is a very accurate description of the record on the small plates; they obviously do contain many of Nephi's words in addition to a much smaller record of the prophets from Jacob down to Amaleki, who lived at the time of King Benjamin.⁵⁷

Prophetic Knowledge of the Small Plates

The Tanners argue that Nephite prophets in Mosiah—Moroni seem to be unfamiliar with the small plates of Nephi. They further reason that the absence of such knowledge is clear evidence for

⁵⁷ Perhaps Mormon makes the distinction between the "words of Nephi" and those of "the prophets" because of Nephi's political role as king, while singling out Jacob and his descendants because of their religious role.

their theory that the small plates were only an afterthought in the mind of Joseph Smith. “The obvious lack of citations to Nephi’s words in the last nine books of the Book of Mormon is certainly not consistent with what one would expect to find if the Book of Mormon were a true record.” The Tanners believe that this is easily explained by their black hole theory: “Since the first 116 pages of Joseph Smith’s manuscript were either stolen or lost and Smith did not know exactly what material he would use to replace the missing section, he could not cite anything from Nephi as he wrote the last nine books of the Book of Mormon because there was nothing to quote” (p. 52). Unfortunately for the Tanners, however, there is persuasive evidence that some of the Nephite prophets were in fact familiar with information on the small plates of Nephi.⁵⁸ While I have not made an exhaustive search, examples are not difficult to find.

Small Plates

For there is nothing which is *good* save it *comes from the Lord*; and that which is *evil cometh from the devil* (Omni 1:25).

Large Plates

For I say unto you that whatsoever is *good cometh from God*, and whatsoever is *evil cometh from the devil* (Alma 5:40).

⁵⁸ Some have suggested that since Amaleki gave the small plates to King Benjamin shortly before his death, members of the Zeniffite colony would not have been familiar with them (John Gee, “Limhi at the Library,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 [Fall 1992]: 64). This may not necessarily be so, however, since Amaleki’s brother was part of that colony (Omni 1:30) and may have carried knowledge of that record with him to the land of Nephi. Moreover, Benjamin’s statement that the prophecies of the Nephite fathers were well known to the people and had been taught to them (Mosiah 2:34) indicates to me that the small plates of Nephi may have been better known to the people than is generally thought.

Yea, even *the very God of Israel do men trample under their feet*; I say, trample under their feet but I would speak in other words—*they set him at naught* and hearken not to the voice of his counsels (1 Nephi 19:7).

It is better that *one man should perish* than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief (1 Nephi 4:13).

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, 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* (1 Nephi 1:8).

And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also (1 Nephi 8:12).

Ye know that the *Egyptians were drowned* in the Red Sea, who were the armies of Pharaoh (1 Nephi 17:23–24, 27).

Can ye *lay aside* these things, and *trample the Holy One under your feet* (Alma 5:53).

It is better that *thy soul should be lost* than that thou shouldst be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction (Alma 30:47).

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, *God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God*; yea, and my soul did long to be there (Alma 36:22).

I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste (Alma 36:24).

For he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has *swallowed up the Egyptians* in the Red Sea (Alma 36:28).

Ye know that [the children of Israel] were *led* forth by his matchless *power* into the *land of promise* (1 Nephi 17:42).

Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me to make these plates *for a wise purpose in him*, which purpose I know not (1 Nephi 9:5).

Upon these plates . . . the things which were written should be kept . . . *for other wise purposes*, which purposes are known unto the Lord (1 Nephi 19:3).

And it came to pass that my father, Lehi, also found upon the *plates of brass* a *genealogy of his fathers*. . . . And thus my father Lehi did discover the genealogy of his fathers (1 Nephi 5:14, 16).

And he *led* them by his *power* into the *Promised Land*; yea and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time (Alma 36:28).

Keep all these things sacred which I have kept, even as I have kept them; for it is for a wise purpose that they are kept. . . . And now remember, my son, that God has entrusted you with these things, which are sacred, which he has kept sacred, and also which he will keep and preserve *for a wise purpose in him*. . . . For he promised unto [Alma's fathers] that he would preserve these things *for a wise purpose in him* (Alma 37:2,14,18).

And these *plates of brass*, which contain these engravings . . . have the *genealogy of our forefathers*, even from the beginning (Alma 37:3).

And now when *my father* saw all these things, he was filled with the Spirit, and began to *prophesy* concerning his seed—That these plates of brass should go forth unto all nations kindreds, tongues and people who were of his seed" (1 Nephi 5:17–18).

Wherefore, he said that these plates of brass should never perish; neither should they be *dimmed any more by time* (1 Nephi 5:19).

And thus we see that by *small means* the Lord can bring about *great things* (1 Nephi 16:29).

For behold, ye yourselves know that *he counseleth in wisdom, and in justice*, and in great mercy, *over all his works* (Jacob 4:10).

For behold, he hath all *power unto the fulfilling of all his words* (1 Nephi 9:6).

Behold, it has been *prophesied by our father*, that they should be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord until they shall go forth unto *every nation, kindred, tongue and people*, that they shall know the mysteries thereon (Alma 37:4).

And now behold, if they are kept they must *retain their brightness*; yea, and they will retain their brightness" (Alma 37:5).

Behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are *great things* brought to pass; and *small means* in many instances doth confound the wise (Alma 37:7).

For he doth counsel in wisdom over all his works (Alma 37:12).

For God is *powerful to the fulfilling of all his words* (Alma 37:16).

The *compass*, which had been *prepared of the Lord* (1 Nephi 18:12).

The *ball*, or *compass*, which was prepared for my father by the hand of *the Lord* (2 Nephi 5:12).

And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of *curious workmanship*; and it was of fine brass (1 Nephi 16:10).

And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way *whither we should go in the wilderness* (1 Nephi 16:10).

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld the *pointers* which were in the ball, that they did work according to the faith and diligence and heed which we gave unto them (1 Nephi 16:28).

And thus we see that by *small means* the Lord can bring about *great things* (1 Nephi 16:29).

And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director—or our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a *compass*; and *the Lord prepared it* (Alma 37:38).

And behold, there cannot any man work after the manner of so *curious a workmanship* (Alma 37:39).

And behold, it was prepared to show unto our fathers *the course which they should travel in the wilderness* (Alma 37:39).

And it *did work* for them according to *their faith* in God; therefore, if they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, it was done (Alma 37:40).

Nevertheless, because those miracles were worked by *small means* it did show unto them *marvelous works* (Alma 37:41).

And it came to pass that after they had bound me insomuch that I could not move, the compass, which had been prepared of the Lord, did *cease to work*. . . . and we were *driven back* upon the waters (1 Nephi 18:12–13).

And it came to pass after they had loosed me, behold, I took the compass, and it did work whither I desired it. . . . And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did guide the ship, that *we sailed towards the promised land*. And it came to pass that after we had sailed for the space of many days we did arrive at the promised land (1 Nephi 18:21–23).

Wherefore, the ends of the law which the Holy One hath given, unto the inflicting of the punishment which is affixed, which punishment that is *affixed is in opposition to that of the happiness* which is affixed, to answer the ends of the atonement (2 Nephi 2:10).

They were slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence and then those *marvelous works ceased*, and *they did not progress* in their journey (Alma 37:41).

For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them *a straight course to the promised land* (Alma 37:44).

Now repentance could not come unto men except there were a *punishment*, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be, *affixed opposite to the plan of happiness*, which was as eternal also as the life of the soul (Alma 42:16).

And they perish because they cast out the prophets, and the saints, and stone them, and slay them; wherefore the cry of the *blood of the saints* shall ascend up to God from the ground against them (2 Nephi 26:3).

But behold, the *righteous* that *hearken unto* the words of the prophets, and *destroy them not* . . . behold, they are they which *shall not perish* (2 Nephi 26:8).

And by the opening of the earth (1 Nephi 19:11).

And they that kill the prophets, and the saints, the depths of the *earth shall swallow them up*, saith the Lord of Hosts (2 Nephi 26:5).

And by *mountains* which shall be *carried up* (1 Nephi 19:11).

And behold, that great city Moronihah have I covered with earth, and to inhabitants thereof . . . that the *blood of the prophets and the saints* shall not come any more unto me against them (3 Nephi 9:5; The same announcement is made regarding numerous other cities 3 Nephi 9:7–9, 11).

And it was the more *righteous* part of the people who were saved, and it was they who *received the prophets and stoned them not*; and it was they who had not shed the blood of the saints, who were *spared* (3 Nephi 10:12).

And by the opening of the earth to receive them (3 Nephi 10:14).

[The righteous] were not . . . *buried in the earth* (3 Nephi 10:13).

And the *earth was carried up* upon the city of Moronihah, that in the place of the city there *became a great mountain* (3 Nephi 8:10; Some sites are made into "hills" 3 Nephi 9:8).

I saw the *vapor of darkness*
(1 Nephi 12:5).

And it came to pass that there was *thick darkness* upon all the face of the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the *vapor of darkness* (3 Nephi 8:20).

By *smoke and vapor of darkness* (1 Nephi 19:11).

[The wicked were] overpowered by the *vapor of smoke and of darkness* (3 Nephi 10:13; see verse 14 for "smoke").

I heard . . . all manner of *tumultuous noises* (1 Nephi 12:4).

All the *tumultuous noises* did pass away (3 Nephi 10:9).

because of the *groanings of the earth* (1 Nephi 19:12).

And the *dreadful groanings* did cease (3 Nephi 10:9).

I saw *many cities that they were sunk* (1 Nephi 12:4).

And *many great and notable cities were sunk* (3 Nephi 8:14; see 9:4,8).

I saw *many [cities] that they were burned with fire* (1 Nephi 12:4).

Behold, that great *city Zarahemla* have I *burned with fire* and the inhabitants thereof (3 Nephi 9:3).

And behold, that great *city Jacobugath* . . . have I caused to be *burned with fire*. . . . And the city of Laman, and the *city* of Josh, and the *city* of Gad, and the *city* of Kishkumen, have I caused to be *burned with fire* (3 Nephi 9:9–10).

And it came to pass that I saw
a *mist of darkness upon the*
face of the land of promise
(1 Nephi 12:4).

And I saw *many cities . . .*
that did *tumble to the earth*,
because of the quaking
thereof (1 Nephi 12:4).

And they that kill the
prophets, and the saints
. . . *buildings shall fall upon*
them and crush them to
pieces and grind them to
powder (2 Nephi 26:5).

So great were the *mists of*
darkness which were *upon the*
face of the land (3 Nephi
8:22).

And *many* great and notable
cities. . . were shaken till the
buildings thereof had fallen to
the earth, and the inhabitants
thereof were slain (3 Nephi
8:14).⁵⁹

The Tanners may now argue that Joseph Smith, while dictating to his scribe, day after day without hesitation, without books, manuscript or notes of any kind, was somehow able to keep track of all these passages in his mind. I would suggest that such a position would require a great deal more faith than my own.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For further evidence, compare 2 Nephi 9:16 with Alma 12:17; Jacob 6:10 with Mosiah 3:25, 27; Enos 1:20 with Mosiah 10:12; Omni 1:25 with Alma 5:40; 1 Nephi 1:8 with Alma 36:22; 1 Nephi 5:17–18 with Alma 37:4; 2 Nephi 9:16 with Mormon 9:14; 2 Nephi 30:6 with Words of Mormon 1:8; 2 Nephi 25:21–22 with Words of Mormon 1:11; 2 Nephi 32:8 with Mosiah 4:14; Jacob 4:8 with Mosiah 8:20; 1 Nephi 2:12 with Mosiah 10:14; 2 Nephi 5:2–3 with Mosiah 10:15; 2 Nephi 5:5, 12 with Mosiah 10:16; 1 Nephi 10:12–14 and 1 Nephi 15:14–15 and 2 Nephi 10:2 and 2 Nephi 30:5 with Helaman 15:11–13; 1 Nephi 10:18 with Mormon 9:9; 2 Nephi 17:23 and 2 Nephi 29:9 with Moroni 10:19; 2 Nephi 9:16 with Mormon 9:14; 2 Nephi 26:10–11 with Moroni 8:27–29; 1 Nephi 1:14 with Moroni 9:26; 2 Nephi 33:13 with Moroni 10:27–28; 2 Nephi 29:2 (see 25:21–22) with Moroni 10:28; Jacob 6:13 with Moroni 10:34. See also Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Uses and Interpretations of Zenos,” in *the Allegory of the Olive Tree* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1994), which discusses references to the allegory on the small plates by later prophets.

⁶⁰ The Tanners seem to be aware of the difficulty posed by such a scenario: “It is possible, of course, that Joseph Smith could have made up some material while he was working on the last nine books and attributed it to Nephi in those books, but if he did this, he would have to remember to add that material to the

The Nature of the Small Plates

Pages 71–90 of the Tanners' work provide both a restatement of their earlier arguments regarding the lack of details on the small plates and a partial rebuttal to the comments of several reviewers who have criticized their theory. The authors insist, contrary to the position of these reviewers, that the small plates should contain a great deal of historical information on dates, names of kings, geography, wars, etc., which is not there. According to the Tanners, comparisons noted by the reviewers between the small plates and portions of the Old Testament which have likely been abridged are invalid because, "the material that comes from these plates [the small plates] has not been abridged. It in fact purports to be a first-hand account written by people who were present as Nephite history unfolded. . . . A condensed account can hardly be compared with one written by nine contemporary eyewitnesses" (p. 75). Speaking of the lack of geographical details on the small plates: "We certainly felt that a first-hand account should be more precise with regard to geography and dating" (p. 82). Such statements show that the Tanners have built much of their case for their black hole theory upon the erroneous assumption that, because the men who wrote on the small plates personally witnessed Nephite history and their account is a "first-hand" account, the small plates cannot be an abridgment and should then contain more historical details. Reading such statements, I honestly can't help but wonder if the Tanners understand what an abridgment is, since an "account," even a "first-hand account," can be short or long, abridged or unabridged, and a witness can give a full account or a summary depending upon the circumstances.

Although not abridged by Mormon, the small plates are quite clearly an abridgment of early Nephite history, teachings, and prophecies. This can be demonstrated on several grounds. First we know that in the first portion of Nephi's record, he abridged the record of his father Lehi. Material not recorded in full included

first two books of Nephi when he began working on the first part of the Book of Mormon. *It would, of course, be very easy to forget to include this material when it came time to rewrite the two books of Nephi*" (p. 52, emphasis added).

the genealogy of Lehi's fathers, which he discovered on the brass plates (1 Nephi 6:1–2; 19:2); the full account of his family's journeyings in the wilderness, or as Nephi puts it, "the more part of our proceedings in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 19:2); the chastening words which the Lord spake to Lehi (1 Nephi 16:24–26); the words frequently found upon the ball (1 Nephi 16:25–27); and many other promises of the Lord (1 Nephi 15:11; 17:12–14). In addition to historical matters, Lehi's record probably also included a full account of his prophecies and teachings, of which Nephi gives only a summary, such as his prophecies and teachings, to the Jews at Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:18–20); his prophecies regarding the brass plates and his seed, which Nephi said were "many" (1 Nephi 5:17–19); his exhortations to Laman and Lemuel following his tree of life vision and other teachings given in the valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 8:37–38; 9:1); his teachings and prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah, his forerunner, and the scattering and redemption of the Jews (1 Nephi 10:1–16; 15:1); his teachings regarding the Lord's mercies upon the waters (2 Nephi 1:1–3); his commandments regarding plural marriage and chastity (Jacob 2:25–34); and many things which he taught Laman and Lemuel before his death (2 Nephi 4:14). In addition to historical information and doctrinal teachings and prophecies, Lehi's record also would have included many of his visions and dreams, such as the full accounts of his first vision of a pillar of fire (1 Nephi 1:6), his second vision regarding God's judgments upon Jerusalem (1 Nephi 1:13; 2 Nephi 1:4), the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of the world (1 Nephi 1:14–15, 19), a full account of his vision of the tree of life (1 Nephi 8:29–36), and many other visions and dreams that he revealed to his children (1 Nephi 1:16–17).

Not only are First and Second Nephi a partial abridgment of Lehi's record, but Nephi's account is also an abridgment of his own history, teachings, and prophecies. These abridged materials included Nephi's teachings regarding the restoration of the Jews in the latter days (1 Nephi 15:19–20), his exhortations to his rebellious family in the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:24–26), a full account of his words to his rebellious brethren at Bountiful (1 Nephi 17:52), the Lord's instructions regarding the construction of the Lehite vessel (1 Nephi 17:7–9; 18:1–4), the words of the

angel regarding the 600-year prophecy of Christ's coming (1 Nephi 19:8), his teachings from the brass plates and the books of Moses (1 Nephi 19:21–23), his words to his rebellious brethren following the death of Lehi (2 Nephi 4:14), the words his brothers murmured against him after Lehi's death (2 Nephi 5:4), many of his prophecies (1 Nephi 19:1), a revelation from the Lord regarding the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:20–25), Nephi's commentaries and teachings to his children regarding how the judgments of God that came upon the Jews were a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies (2 Nephi 25:6), other details regarding Nephi's vision that he was not forbidden to speak of or write (1 Nephi 14:24–30; 31:1–12, 14–15), and many other things taught among the Nephites (1 Nephi 33:1).

Third, like Nephi, Jacob and his descendants touch only lightly upon Nephite history, which was included on the large plates and contained the record of Lehi (1 Nephi 19:1); genealogical matters (1 Nephi 6:1–2; 19:2); the full account of Nephite history (1 Nephi 9:2; 2 Nephi 4:13–14; 5:33; Jacob 1:3; 3:13; Omni 1:11), including the reign of kings (1 Nephi 9:4; Jacob 3:13; Jarom 1:13–14; Omni 1:11); and their wars, contentions, and destructions (1 Nephi 9:2; 19:4; Jacob 3:13; Jarom 1:13–14). Although we frequently refer to the large plates as containing secular matters, it is apparent that they also contained more spiritual matters as well. Thus they included many prophecies and teachings of Lehi and Nephi mentioned above, and also a more detailed account of those of Jacob and others as well, which the small plates only touch upon briefly. These included, among other things, many of the words of Jacob to the people of Nephi (2 Nephi 6:1–3; 11:1; 31:1–2); the details of Jacob's own vision (2 Nephi 6:8–11; 10:3); other words of Jacob against unchastity and other sins (Jacob 3:12); teachings of Nephite prophets, teachers, and priests during the time of Enos, Jarom, and others (Enos 1:22–23, 26; Jarom 1:4, 10–12); an account of the destruction of the more wicked part of the Nephites during Amaron's time (Omni 1:5–7), the prophecies and teachings of Mosiah₁ as he traveled with his people into the wilderness (Omni 1:12–13); the genealogy of Zarahemla (Omni 1:18); and the words on the Jaredite stone (Omni 1:20–22). Thus the small plates, from beginning to end, were quite clearly an

abridgment, not only of historical matters, but of spiritual matters as well.

Nephi's Theme

Finally, the small plates are not simply any kind of abridgment, but one with a very focused purpose. Near the beginning of his record Nephi states,

And now I, Nephi, do not give the genealogy of my fathers in this part of my record; neither at any time shall I give it after upon these plates which I am writing; for it is given in the record which has been kept by my father; wherefore, I do not write it in this work. For it sufficeth me to say that we are descendants of Joseph. And it mattereth not to me that I am particular to give a full account of all the things of my father, for they cannot be written upon these plates, for I desire the room that I may write the things of God. *For the fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob and be saved.* Wherefore, the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of the world. Wherefore, I shall give *commandment* unto my seed, that they shall not occupy these plates with things which are not of worth unto the children of men. (1 Nephi 6:1-6)

I find it significant that the writers on the small plates are consistent in sticking to Nephi's theme. Although Nephi does provide some historical background on the small plates,⁶¹ this is largely to provide a context for his own prophecies and teachings regarding Christ. Yet even these historical sections often have profound doctrinal overtones relating to salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶² Jacob states that before Nephi died he "gave me,

⁶¹ Relatively few chapters on the small plates purport to contain historical information anyway.

⁶² I am thinking in particular of the well-known Exodus theme, which has been discussed by numerous writers. See for example, S. Kent Brown, "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30/3 (Summer 1990):

Jacob, *commandment* concerning the small plates, upon which these things are engraven." Jacob was commanded

that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered most precious; that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi. For he said that the history of his people should be engraven upon his other plates, and that I should preserve these plates and hand them down unto my seed, from generation to generation. And if there were *preaching* which was sacred, or *revelation* which was great, or *prophesying*, that I should engraven the heads of them upon these plates, and touch upon them as much as it were possible, for Christ's sake, and for the sake of our people. (Jacob 1:1-4)

Nephi's whole purpose in making the small plates was to persuade men and women to come unto Christ. Jacob and his descendants were specifically commanded by Nephi "not to touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people," the reign of kings, etc. They were commanded to be selective and to choose from among those teachings, revelations, and prophecies that they considered sacred, great, or precious those that would be most appropriate to Nephi's theme of persuading men and women to come unto Christ and be saved. This is exactly what Jacob and his descendants do. Jacob makes a few brief historical comments (Jacob 1) and then discusses his teachings against pride and unchastity (Jacob 2-3); then he makes a few prophetic comments regarding Christ and his rejection by the Jews and cites Zenos's allegory of the olive tree (Jacob 5:1-77), in addition to some further comments of his own (Jacob 6:1-13), to show how the Jews "after having rejected the sure foundation [Christ] can ever build upon it" (Jacob 4:17). Finally, he provides an account of his encounter with the anti-Christ Sherem, who attacked the prophecies about Christ.

Enos gives an account of how he received a remission of his sins through the atonement of Christ and how that experience affected his life thereafter (Enos 1:1–27). Jarom, clearly aware of Nephi’s commandment to his grandfather to choose prophecies and revelations and teachings that were precious, states that he “shall not write the things of my *prophesying*, nor of my *revelations*. For what could I write more than my fathers have written? For have not they revealed the plan of salvation? I say unto you, Yea; and this sufficeth me” (Jarom 1:2). He then shows how the Lord blessed and prospered the Nephites in fulfillment of the prophecies of their fathers that if they would keep the commandments of God they would prosper in the land (Jarom 1:3–10). Omni does not write much, stating that he considered himself a “wicked man” who presumably did not have many revelations (Omni 1:1–3), but his son Amaron tells how the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed in fulfillment of the prophecy that if they would not keep the commandments of God they would not prosper (Omni 1:4–8). While Chemish only makes a brief comment on how the record was passed down, his son Abinadom makes a brief historical comment (Omni 1:10) and then states “I know of no *revelation* save that which has been written, neither *prophecy*; wherefore, that which is sufficient is written” (Omni 1:11). This is again suggestive of Nephi’s commandments to Jacob and his seed to be selective regarding the revelations or prophecies they would include on their record. This verse probably does not suggest, as I once thought, that Abinadom did not have revelations or did not prophesy, but rather that he did not consider it necessary to include any of those on the small plates. Finally, Amaleki provides some necessary historical information regarding Mosiah₁ and his exodus from the land of Nephi and his ascension to the throne in Zarahemla, but he also provides a few comments regarding Christ, inviting all men to “come unto God, the Holy One of Israel,” and to believe in revelations, prophecies, and other spiritual gifts and to seek after things that are good. “And now, my beloved brethren, I would that ye should come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and prayer, and endure to the end;

and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:25–26). These are certainly appropriate words for one who is the last writer on a record dedicated to persuading people to come unto Christ, the God of Israel. In short, the writers on the small plates from Nephi to Amaleki are both consistent in what they write and obedient to Nephi’s commands given at the beginning of the record.

Here we should also note that the small plates were made for other purposes than just replacing the lost 116 pages. They in fact served at least two purposes and not just one. Nephi said that they (1) were to be “kept for the instruction of my people, who should possess the land,” and also (2) “for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord” (1 Nephi 19:3). Thus, the small plates had already served an important purpose for the Nephite people, long before Mormon placed them in his own account.

Black Holes and Other Singularities

In 1974 physicist Stephen Hawking surprised his colleagues by suggesting that, contrary to popular understanding, black holes actually emit particles of radiation and must, therefore, eventually evaporate. According to Hawking, this implies that “gravitational collapse is not as final and irreversible as we once thought.”⁶³ Regarding this theory, William J. Kaufmann explains, “As material pours out of a primordial hole, new information is being introduced into the universe. In principle, the matter erupting from one of these holes carries color, texture, chemical composition—all fresh, new data that never before existed in the universe. A primordial (black/white) hole is therefore an ‘information source.’ ”⁶⁴

Since its publication in 1830, one could say that the Book of Mormon has been the focus of a great deal of “negative energy.” I have always found it somewhat remarkable that Book of Mormon criticisms through the years have inadvertently had the tendency to bring the Latter-day Saints to a deeper understanding

⁶³ Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 112.

⁶⁴ William J. Kaufmann, III, *Black Holes and Warped Spacetime* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1979), 215.

and appreciation for that book by highlighting significant elements that might otherwise have been ignored.

What the Tanners have characterized in the small plates as a mundane conglomeration of odds and ends strikes me as an extremely sophisticated text, with many significant historical, literary, doctrinal and spiritual insights, which are both relevant and profound—rays of light, as it were, out of what the Tanners ironically call a “black hole.” As the criticisms of the doubters and disaffected continue to shrink and evaporate, those who accept the Book of Mormon for what it claims to be can look forward to the not-too-distant information explosion, in which all that was once lost will be restored (2 Nephi 27:11; 29:13–14; 30:16–18; 3 Nephi 26:6–11; Ether 4:13–19; D&C 121:33). In the meantime, as Hugh Nibley reminds us, “There is no point at all to the question: Who wrote the Book of Mormon? It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for Joseph Smith. And whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 123.