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Abstract: Members, missionaries, and apologists must never lose sight of the fact that the gospel isn’t merely about abstractions and theoretical principles. It’s also, and most importantly, about people, about people with their own life stories, fears, hopes, and questions. Thus, if we want to be optimally effective, we must listen to people, understand them, and craft our message to reach them individually, where they are. The Interpreter Foundation is committed to helping with this task, but it cannot replace personalized instruction and caring.

Sean McDowell, a son of the well-known Evangelical apologist Josh McDowell (author, among many other books, of the popular 1972 volume *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* and 1977’s *More Than a Carpenter*) and himself an assistant professor in the Christian apologetics program at southern California’s Biola University, tells a helpful story at his own expense.1

He was, he says, visiting the ski resort town of Breckenridge, Colorado, when he decided to have his hair cut. When his turn came, the young hair stylist who was working on him noticed that he had been reading a Christian book. Hair stylists often make small talk with their clients while they’re at work, but she had a rather serious topic that she wanted to raise. Would he mind if she asked him a question about God that she’d been pondering?

“Of course I said yes,” recalls McDowell, “relishing the opportunity to talk about theology. After all, I had been studying apologetics and

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1 The story appears in Sean McDowell, “Introduction: A New Kind of Apologist,” in *A New Kind of Apologist*, ed. Sean McDowell (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2016), 11–13. I’ve retained the italics of the original. All paraphrases and quotations from McDowell, unless specifically indicated otherwise, come from these pages.
was ready with all the right answers. *Bring it on,* I thought, smiling to myself.”

She hesitated for just a moment, and then plunged into her concern. “Why,” she asked, “does God allow so much evil and suffering in the world?”

“*Really, that’s all you got?*” thought McDowell to himself.

It’s one of the most oft-asked questions in apologetics, and I was ready with the classical free-will defense — emphasizing that God desires a relationship with us, which is possible only if we have free will. I made the point that evil can exist only if there is first a standard of objective good, and there can be good only if there is a God. In other words, her very question, I pointed out, presupposes the existence of God.

This led to more questions, and I found I could answer each one pretty easily. She’d ask a question, and I had an answer ready at hand.

His reading and study were bearing fruit. McDowell thought that he was doing very well with his slam-dunk arguments “until she paused for a long moment, lifted the scissors away from my head, and then began to cry. She stepped back from cutting my hair and said in a quavering voice, ‘This is a bunch of bs! You’ve got an answer for everything. It can’t be that easy. You just don’t understand.’”

He was stunned. What he thought had been going so very smoothly had, in fact, been a disastrous failure. He hadn’t helped her at all, hadn’t brought her closer to untroubled faith in God and Christ, and hadn’t represented Christianity very well at all.

A few minutes later, outside the hair salon, he turned to a friend who had been there with him and heard the exchange, asking what had gone wrong. Or, more precisely, he asked why “she had been so defensive.”

“Well,” his friend replied after a careful pause, “do you have any idea how arrogant you were toward her?”

McDowell was shocked. And, very likely, he was more than little defensive himself.

But as we walked along the streets of Breckenridge, I thought about the encounter and realized he was absolutely right. Rather than really listening to her, asking questions, and trying to learn from her, I was more interested in scoring points and winning the argument. My replies had come across as prepackaged sound bites rather than compassionate
and respectful responses. What I saw, maybe for the first time, is that truth must be wedded to grace, and that what we say is important … but how we say it is equally critical.

He hadn’t, according to his own account, been in any way abusive of the young woman. Still, in reflecting upon the story now, he thinks of Paul’s second letter to Timothy, which I quote here in the King James translation familiar to English-speaking Latter-day Saints:

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,

In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.\(^2\)

This seems to me precisely right. But I would add more. Many years ago, before I was even married or had received my undergraduate degree, I was impressed by an address given by Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone during the October 1976 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Elder Featherstone’s remarks were entitled “The Impact Teacher,” and a very specific passage from them has remained with me ever since.

Some years before, Elder Featherstone said, the president of the Boise North Stake, L. Aldin Porter, had dropped by the home of a man by the name of Glen Clayton, who was the Scoutmaster in his home ward. (President Porter would himself be called to serve in the First Quorum of the Seventy in 1987.) Brother Clayton and his son were working together, trying to repair a bicycle. President Porter stood talking with them for a few minutes and then left. After several hours, though, he returned. When he returned, he found that the father and his son were still working on that bicycle. Amused, President Porter remarked, “Glen, with the wages you make per hour you could have bought a new bike, considering the time you have spent repairing this old one.” Brother Clayton’s response is what has stuck with me now for the forty years since I heard it in Elder Featherstone’s conference address: He stood up, looked at President Porter, and answered, “I’m not repairing a bike, I’m training a boy!”

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It’s easy to see why a man with such an attitude might be an exceptional leader of Boy Scouts. “That year,” said Elder Featherstone, “twenty-one boys achieved the rank of Eagle Scout in Glen’s troop. Impact teachers do not teach lessons, they teach souls.”

And surely that’s true for teachers in church and for missionaries, as well as for parents. When we teach the Gospel, we aren’t — or shouldn’t be — simply endeavoring to pass on a body of facts, nor even merely one or more stellar, penetrating insights (much as I, personally, appreciate such facts and value such insights). Gospel Doctrine classes aren’t solely about the dates of Ezekiel or the historical background to Doctrine and Covenants 76; they’re also about appealing to the spiritual feelings of class members, building testimonies, and encouraging ourselves and others to be disciples of the Savior.

Sean McDowell’s problem is obvious — to him, now, and, thanks to his honesty, to us as well: He had shown no interest in the young woman herself. To him, she had represented a problem to be addressed more than a human soul to be helped.

I’m reminded in this context of a story related to me by the wife of a longtime university colleague, whom we’ve known for nearly four decades. The couple had recently returned from a lengthy stay in a remote and rather backward area of the Arabian Peninsula. The wife was cooking dinner while he sat reading. When she called him to eat, he stood up and promptly collapsed. He was taken by ambulance to the nearby hospital, a research institution affiliated with a very prominent public university in the state where they were living at the time.

At one point during his stay in the hospital, she came to visit him. She was impressed to find him surrounded by doctors who were considering his case with deep interest. Suddenly, one of them turned around and said to nobody in particular, “Oh, it’s just ordinary, garden-variety hepatitis.” The disappointment was palpable, and the room emptied out almost immediately.

Given our friend’s travel history, the medical staff had thought that they were perhaps seeing a rare (and usually fatal) disease seldom encountered by physicians in their part of the developed world. When that turned out not to be the case, however, they lost interest. As one of my own professors commented to me, after having spent some time in the same hospital following a medical crisis, the technical care in the

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facility was superb, but the physicians and nurses there seemed to be more interested in the disease than in the patient.

Now, nobody is more interested in having and passing on factual knowledge than I am. I expect my students at Brigham Young University to learn about the Qur’an, Form IX of the triliteral Arabic verb, the philosophical and theological arguments of al-Ghazali, the contents of the Persian *Shahnameh*, and the reasons for the rise of Egypt’s Fatimid dynasty, just as other professors expect theirs to know multivariate analysis, classical Chinese syntax, the structure of organic compounds, and Kant’s categorical imperative. So, too, my Gospel Doctrine classes are focused on the scriptural texts, trying to understand what they mean and how they mean it, not merely on whatever feelings and emotions can be connected with those passages. (My approach may perhaps be overly intellectual, but that’s how I do it.)

Still, I recognize that more is going on in such Gospel-teaching situations — or, anyway, ought to be going on — than merely the transfer of facts or even the generation of analytical insights. And people usually come to Church, to the missionaries, and to defenders of the faith for more than merely factual information. They don’t only want to be instructed. They want to be inspired, comforted, and fortified for their daily lives. Often, the most important work that needs to be done is more pastoral than it is informative.

Sean McDowell learned a lesson from his failure in Breckenridge. Now, he says,

> Whenever the problem of suffering and evil come[s] up, I try to avoid simple answers. I typically respond with a question: “Of all the things you can ask about God, why that one?” Occasionally, people have a genuine intellectual issue they want to wrestle with, and I am more than happy to help. But more often than not, the intellectual question masks a deep personal wound. When I ask this question, I often hear painful stories of sickness, broken relationships, and abuse. The Christian response is not to simply give a reason, although there may come a time for that, but to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15) and to show comfort and care to the afflicted (Psalm 82:3).

The Apostle Paul’s powerful words about charity come to mind here, as they do in so many other contexts:

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Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.\(^5\)

Such charity isn’t mere teaching ability, cleverness, or intellectual agility. It might make use of one or more of those desirable qualities, but it’s not reducible to any or all of them and it will often have nothing whatever to do with them. The word *agape*, translated as *charity* in the King James Version of the Bible but often rendered in other English translations simply as *love*, involves a whole-souled response to the whole soul of another. It requires taking seriously the entire personality of that other, with whatever fears, worries, concerns, and limitations that personality includes.

For many of those whose testimonies need help to grow or repairs to save, there are deep existential issues that are crying out not only for answers but for relief. We misjudge them and we underserve them if, instead of the bread of life, we give them just the hard stones of a few facts or a handy rebuttal to an intellectual objection.\(^6\) Such cases aren’t merely occasions for intellectual one-upmanship. They’re not purely theoretical discussions or classroom exercises. C. S. Lewis makes an important related point:

> I have found that nothing is more dangerous to one’s own faith than the work of an apologist. No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended in a public debate. For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest on oneself; as a result, when you go away from that debate, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar. That is why we apologists take our lives in our hands and can be saved only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments, as from our intellectual counters, into the

\(^5\) 1 Corinthians 13:1–3.

Reality — from Christian apologetics into Christ Himself.
That also is why we need another’s continual help — oremus pro invicem ['Let us pray for each other'].

I would suggest that one other reason why a doctrine might seem “spectral,” to use Lewis’s word, would be regarding it as merely a theoretical proposition to be precisely articulated and convincingly defended. We should always think of the doctrines of the Kingdom as living, spiritual realities, as truths with real implications for how we and others live and with power to help, to comfort, to inspire, and to save. We should never forget, either, that when Alma summoned those to accept baptism who had fled to the waters of Mormon with him, he didn’t tell them to accept certain propositions. Rather, he invited them to join a community of those who “are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death.”

Bearing “witness” doesn’t stand alone in his description of this community. And “bearing witness” isn’t limited to merely passing on information or posting good academic arguments. Faith involves assent to certain propositions, but it isn’t limited to such assent. “Thou believest that there is one God,” wrote James. “Thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”

But trying to reach people where they actually are, attempting to listen to them, and to craft our responses to them according to their individual needs, is time-consuming and energy-intensive. None of us can do it for everybody, or even, unfortunately, for more than relatively few people.

And it cannot be done en masse. It’s an individual matter.

To put my point another way, such pastoral ministry isn’t the primary work of the Interpreter Foundation, which exists, in large part, to exhibit the richness, depth, and credibility of Latter-day Saint scripture and doctrine. The articles and books and roundtables produced by the Foundation cannot listen to the personal concerns of particular people. They cannot supplant Spirit-directed, targeted care and individualized teaching. They cannot really show compassion in any adequate way,

8  Mosiah 18:8–9.
9  James 2:19.
although we hope that they’ll be written, where appropriate, in a spirit of kindness and concern. We don’t confuse what we do with the ministry of the Church.

No tool is adequate for all purposes. Hammers cannot do everything that screwdrivers can do, and screwdrivers are useless for some of the tasks that hammers do well.

We do, however, believe that we are creating a resource that can be useful for certain aspects of that ministry. If we can provide our peculiar, limited, but (we hope) valuable kind of help to teachers, students, parents, leaders who counsel, and missionaries who preach, we will consider our efforts a success. What we try to provide should be applied, with the help of the Spirit and the judgment of the individuals applying it, to the myriad of uniquely individual cases that exist and will exist at any given time. If, whether directly or indirectly, we can assist others to deepen, solidify, and enrich their testimonies, that will be more than enough reward for us.

Nowadays, at least in American English, calling someone a “tool” is a fairly deep insult. But surely there are worse things than offering oneself up as a “tool” in a worthy cause. “This is my glory,” said the converted Alma the Younger, “that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy.”

The Interpreter Foundation aspires to become and to be such a useful tool in the hands of God and those who try to serve him. We’re profoundly grateful to all those who have helped us to make the Foundation what it has become to this point through volunteer labor, financial contributions, writing, reviewing, editing, and the myriad of other tasks that always require attention. And we invite others to join them and us in this effort.

Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur’an and

10   Alma 29:9.
on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).
Abstract: This is a follow-up to my article, “Joseph Smith and the American Renaissance,” published in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought in 2002. My purpose in writing that article was to consider Joseph Smith in relation to his more illustrious contemporary American authors — Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. In that article I tried to demonstrate that in comparison with these writers, Joseph Smith did not possess the literary imagination, talent, authorial maturity, education, cultural milieu, knowledge base, or sophistication necessary to produce the Book of Mormon; nor, I argued, had he possessed all of these characteristics, nor was the time in which the book was produced sufficient to compose such a lengthy, complex, and elaborate narrative. This addendum takes the comparison one step further by examining each writer’s magnum opus and the background, previous writings, and preliminary drafts that preceded its publication — then comparing them with Joseph Smith’s publication of the Book of Mormon. That is, each of the major works of these writers of prose, fiction, and poetry as well as the scriptural text produced by Joseph Smith has a history — one that allows us to trace its evolution from inception to completion.

I was fortunate as an undergraduate at BYU in the late fifties to have had Robert K. Thomas as a teacher and mentor. After taking “Introduction to Literature” from Bob, I recognized him as an unusually gifted teacher, one who made his subjects and his students come alive.

As an undergraduate at BYU, I have had a few great teachers in my life, including Hugh Nibley, Parley A. Christensen, and J. Reuben Clark Jr., and as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madeline Doran, Helen White, Ricardo Quintana, and Frederick Cassidy, but none spoke to my mind, heart, and soul as clearly and as forcefully as did “Brother...
Thomas.” I took every class he taught, and it was essentially because of
his influence that I became a professor of literature and a serious student
of the Book of Mormon. I was pleased during my first year in graduate
school to nominate Bob for the Teacher of the Year honor at BYU, which
he won.

I say I was fortunate in having Bob as a teacher because he introduced
me to the Book of Mormon, the Bible as literature, and the writers of
the American Renaissance, including especially Ralph Waldo Emerson
and Henry David Thoreau (the latter the subject of Thomas’s Columbia
University PhD dissertation). When I published “Joseph Smith and the
American Renaissance” in Dialogue in 2002, I was aware of how much
that article was indebted to Bob’s insight into scripture and these great
American writers.

What I attempted to show in that article, as summarized in the
headnote to this article, is that in comparison to the major writers of the
American Renaissance — that rich outpouring of imaginative expression
Van Wyck Brooks called the “flowering of New England”2 — at the time he
produced the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith lacked the compositional
skills, literary gifts, and cultural background necessary to write a book
as structurally complex, rhetorically varied, and culturally “strange” as
the Book of Mormon (by strange, I mean the Egyptian, Hebrew, and
New World elements one finds in the history of these Promised Land
peoples). That is, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman
all had educations superior to Joseph Smith’s education, all lived under
more substantial and more stable socio-economic conditions, and all
had much greater family, community and cultural systems to support
their writing than he did.

Since writing that article, I have continued to think of Joseph Smith
in relation to his distinguished fellow authors. Recently in working on a
dramatic script about Emerson and his contemporaries while at the same
time teaching the Book of Mormon at Graduate Theological Union and
the University of California, Berkeley, I realized there was an important
dimension of the comparison between the American prophet and his
contemporaries to which I had not given sufficient consideration in my
original article: the biographical and bibliographical context in which
each writer produced his magnum opus. This article is an attempt to
address that dimension because it completes the picture of these writers

2 Van Wyck Brooks, The Flowering of New England: 1815–1865 (Mattituck,
and their places in this incredibly fertile chapter of American literary history in relation to the Mormon prophet and the book with which he is most closely and famously identified.

Over the past century, scholars have been divided over the authorship of the Book of Mormon as well as its literary merits. Some have argued that the book is clearly the product of Joseph Smith’s mind and imagination while others have contended that it could not possibly be so. Various theories have been advanced to show that Joseph Smith was the sole author, that someone else wrote the book, that he had considerable help from others in writing it, that he plagiarized large sections of it from the Bible and other sources, that he produced it by some mysterious or miraculous process, or that he had a colossal capacity to both compose, memorize and dictate its contents—and to do so over a surprisingly brief period. More recently, critics have argued that Smith wrote the book but did so under divine guidance. For example, Anthony Hutchinson feels “[t]he Book of Mormon should be seen as authoritative scripture.” He adds, “God remains the author of the Book of Mormon viewed as the word of God, but Joseph Smith, in this construct, would be the book’s inspired human author rather than its inspired translator.”


4 Louis Midgley has summarized the various attempts to explain the book into four categories: 1) “Joseph Smith wrote the book as a conscious fraud,” 2) “Joseph Smith wrote the book under the influence of some sort of paranoia or demonic possession or dissociative illusion,” 3) “Joseph Smith had the help of someone like Sidney Rigdon in creating the book as a conscious fraud,” and 4) “Joseph Smith wrote the book while under some sort of religious inspiration.” “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 104. As I summarized in my original article, “Taken together, these explanations show Joseph Smith as a country bumpkin and a brilliant sophisticate, as a simple self-delusionist and a complicated conspirator, as an idiot and a genius, and as Devil-inspired and God-inspired.”

5 “The Word of God is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture,” in New Approaches, to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1993), 1, 2.
In my original article, I spoke of what Melville scholars refer to as his “try works.” The image found in Chapter 96 of his great novel, *Moby-Dick*, refers to the two large kettles or “try pots” situated on the decks of nineteenth-century whaling ships that were used to “try out” or reduce whale oil by boiling the blubber. As with many of the elements and episodes in the novel, try-works can symbolize various things and Melville clearly intended that as readers we see into his multi-level symbols and extended metaphors whatever we are able to bring to them of our imagination and experience. In fact, Melville includes a specific episode to illustrate his symbolic intention. As I explained in another article,

Ahab, in his megalomaniacal quest for the white whale, nails a gold doubloon to the mast of the *Pequod* as a reward to the first man who sights the whale. As they seek the elusive leviathan, each of the characters on the ship comes up and looks at the doubloon, and each sees something different. For Ahab it is the prophetic emblem of his quest; for Starbuck it is a Puritan sermon; for Stubb it is an almanac of the zodiac; for Flask, the pragmatist, it is “but a round thing made of gold. . . . worth sixteen dollars”; for Queequeg it is merely “an old button off some King’s trousers”; for the dark and ghostly Fedallah it is the sign of the Devil; and, finally, for the mad black boy Pip, it is a reflection of the mad world itself: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look. And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats.” As Ahab says, “This round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.”

One of the ways in which *try works* functions is as a symbol of the process of writing, the fire of discipline and imagination necessary to boil away the rhetorical blubber that plagues most authors, especially in their early years. In this sense, it stands for the process a successful writer must go through in order to refine and perfect his or her writing. Thus, for Melville, the five novels he wrote prior to *Moby-Dick* (*Typee, Omoo, Mardi, Redburn* and *White-Jacket*), constitute the try works that prepared him for the more complex rhetorical style, universal themes, and timeless scope of *Moby-Dick* as well as the subtleties and other stylistic felicities that constitute the novel’s amazing ontological density.

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Melville was aware he had written a much deeper, more profound novel, which is evident in his response to Hawthorne’s praise of *Moby-Dick*: “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me. I would sit down and dine with you and all the gods in old Rome’s Pantheon. It is a strange feeling — no hopefulness is in it, no despair. … I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling. … I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces.”

My intention in my original article as well as in this one is to consider the respective intellectual, emotional, and cultural state of these writers and the circumstances and conditions under which they created their most important works — those for which history most remembers them. Let’s consider each in his turn.

**Emerson (1805–1882)**

Emerson was likely the most influential writer and thinker of his generation. Today he is remembered as a poet and quasi-philosopher, but during the period in which he flourished, he was recognized as somewhat of a prophet and sage, which is why this period is sometimes referred to as the Age of Emerson. Emerson was fortunate to be blessed with conditions conducive to producing an accomplished writer. He had an excellent education at the Boston Latin School and Harvard College (from which he graduated at age eighteen) and Harvard Divinity School (age 22), published his first article at age nineteen, travelled to Europe when he was twenty-nine, and gave his first public lecture when he was thirty. He published his first major piece, *Nature*, when he was thirty-three. In addition, he was an indefatigable keeper of journals (running to some ten published volumes) and prolific correspondent, and he worked out many of the ideas and expressions for his writing and speaking

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8 Melville to Hawthorne, 17 November 1851, ww.melville.org/letter7.htm.
through such journaling. For the next nearly four decades he was the most popular lecturer in America, delivering some fifteen hundred lectures throughout the northern, New England, and midwestern states as well as in Europe over the course of his lifetime.

Further, Emerson lived in one of the most creative and intellectually stimulating environments in American history. He was at the center of an amazing array of poets, artists, philosophers, educators, innovators, explorers, adventurers, and other luminaries. He was heralded not only in America but in Europe, where he met other writers who influenced him — people like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Eliot, and Carlyle. Although Emerson never produced a singular major work, his collections of essays (1841, 1844, and 1846) and poems (1846) mark him as a major American writer. Thus Emerson had a long apprenticeship before he produced his most mature work in his late thirties and early forties. In addition, having been the recipient of two inheritances, he lived a life of relative comfort and leisure, giving him the time to develop his expressive talents. Since he was at the hub of a cultural revolution, he was also fortunate in associating with luminaries in the political, social, and cultural world of Boston and beyond.

**Thoreau (1817–1862)**

Like Emerson, his fellow and older townsman (by twelve years), Henry David Thoreau was well educated, having attended Concord Academy (where he later taught) and Harvard College. Like Emerson, he was an avid journal writer. However, in contrast to Emerson’s extensive travel and lecturing, Thoreau was an autodidact and immersive student of nature. Noting with intentional irony, “I have traveled much in Concord,” he set out to know the microcosm of his own environs. A wide reader and deep thinker, Thoreau published poetry and essays as well as a memoir, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849, age thirty-one), before producing one of the most important and influential works of American literature, *Walden Pond* (1850), the following year. Thoreau lived for a time in Emerson’s house and tutored Emerson’s and (at Stanton Island) Emerson’s brother William’s children. He enjoyed the association of a number of other writers and thinkers, including Hawthorne and Whitman. He lectured in Concord and published several essays, including the influential “Civil Disobedience.” Although in many ways different from Emerson, Thoreau benefited from Emerson’s friendship, as Emerson did from his. What one sees with Thoreau, as
with Emerson, is a significant apprenticeship as a writer from the time he was a teenager until he published *Walden Pond* at age thirty-two.

**Hawthorne (1804–1864)**

Nathaniel Hawthorne showed an early proclivity for writing when at age sixteen he wrote and published *The Spectator*, a short-lived newsmagazine. The next year, he entered Bowdoin College where he was classmates with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the future US President Franklin Pierce. After graduation, Hawthorne withdrew from the world to devote full time to becoming a writer. He published his first novel, *Fanshaw*, at age twenty-four and began publishing short stories under a pseudonym. His most famous and influential collection of stories, *Twice Told Tales*, was published in 1837 when he was thirty-three. In 1842 Hawthorne moved into Emerson's ancestral home in Concord with his new bride, Sophia Peabody, of the prominent Peabody sisters and an excellent critic and editor of her husband’s works. For the next several years Hawthorne had one of his most creative and productive writing periods, producing additional stories, children’s stories, and a novel, *Mosses From an Old Manse* (1846). In 1849, Hawthorne began work on his major novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, which he published the following year (1850) at age forty-six. What followed were additional novels, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860). In addition to writing, Hawthorne served as US Ambassador to Liverpool for four years (1853–57) during which time he interacted with distinguished British writers. Thus the time between his first novel at age twenty-four and *The Scarlet Letter* at age forty-six, was twenty-two years.

**Melville (1819–1891)**

Herman Melville’s formal education, which began when he was five, included attendance at the New York Male School, Lansingburgh Academy, the Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, and Albany Academy. As pointed out earlier, Melville had a long literary apprenticeship before he undertook to write *Moby-Dick*. His life as a sailor and his extensive travel, often to exotic places also prepared him to write about universal themes. In addition, his formal and informal education provided both breadth and depth to his writing, which began in his adolescent years. According to Merton Sealts, Melville’s “study of ancient history, biography, and literature during his school days left a lasting impression on both his thought and his art, as did his almost
encyclopedic knowledge of both the Old and the New Testaments.”¹⁰ One sees the influence of Melville’s education in his fascination with Shakespeare. In a collection of the Bard’s plays he purchased in 1849, there are nearly five hundred markings, and Shakespeare’s influence can be seen in many places, including some prose passages in *Moby-Dick* that scan iambic pentameter. As David Cope observes, “That Melville’s *Moby-Dick* contains nearly measureless references to the reading of Shakespeare is an old story featuring the whaling epic’s persistent Shakespearean verbal echoes, the composition and sequencing of scenes, and the construction of Ahab as a tragic hero-villain. … The verbal echoes pop up so often that Shakespeareans may look forward to enjoying the variety of uses to which Melville put the bard.”¹¹

Perhaps equally influential was Melville’s intimate, sustained relationship with Hawthorne, the writer with whom he had the greatest affinity and whose imprint on Melville’s imagination was indelible. The point is that in the long space between the completion of his formal education (1837) and the publication of his first novel, *Typee* (1846), Melville had ample time to develop his skills as a writer of fiction. Additionally, in the five-year span between *Typee* (1846) and *Moby-Dick* (1851), he published four additional novels. What is also relevant, after *Moby-Dick*, he continued to publish stories, sketches, novels and poems (including a long poem, *Clarel*, on the Holy Land). Two of his masterpieces, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*, were written in his later years (although the latter was unfinished at his death). Thus, from the beginning to the end of his career as a writer, one can see the progressive unfolding of Melville’s literary gifts and talents.

**Whitman (1819–1892)**

Unlike Melville and the other writers discussed in this article, Walt Whitman did not have a substantial formal education, a rich family culture, or intellectual community in which he could develop his literary talent. His father took him out of school when Walt was eleven, at which time he began working in printing, journalism, and the various trades he pursued during his lifetime. In 1848–49 (age nineteen–twenty) he established and edited the Brooklyn *Weekly Freeman*, which, among other liberal causes, opposed slavery.

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Although he was a journalist and dabbled in fiction, Whitman's real love was poetry. In 1855 he anonymously published the first edition of his revolutionary collection, *Leaves of Grass*, a work he would continue to revise and expand throughout his life. During the Civil War, Whitman worked as a nurse in a military hospital in Washington, D.C., was employed at several federal agencies, and continued to expand and polish his great poem. After the last edition (1892), Whitman exclaimed, “L. of G. at last complete — after 33 y’rs of hackling at it, all times & moods of my life, fair weather & foul, all parts of the land, and peace & war, young & old.”¹² *Leaves of Grass*, which Whitman expanded and revised almost literally to the end of his life, from the dozen poems in the first edition to the nearly four hundred in the last, chronicles the evolution not only of America's greatest poem but its most accomplished and most influential poet. In a sense, Whitman spent most of his adult life as a writer.

Each of the writers under discussion here had the ample time the writing of significant literature takes. Thus Emerson, who was relatively wealthy, had long periods of time for contemplation, reading, and writing. For the most part he could choose to spend his time writing. Thoreau was an independent spirit who came and went as he wished. He lived at Walden Pond with entire seasons devoted to observation, reading, and writing.; Hawthorne secreted himself in his mother's house while he worked out his literary style and was reclusive for long stretches of time during other periods of his life, which he devoted to composition, including writing *The Scarlet Letter*. Melville lived his life essentially as a writer although at times he struggled to find the time and money to support his profession. As a single, independent man, Whitman was able to devote substantial time to the writing and revision of his major work throughout his life.

What is true of the authors under discussion here could also be said of many other literary figures of the period, including Edgar Allen Poe, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Emily Dickinson. Although none produced a single major work on which his or her reputation rests, all produced a substantial body of literary expression whether poetry or prose. In addition, in comparison with Joseph Smith, all had superior educations, sustained periods in which to develop their mature work, and, with the exception of Emily Dickinson, enjoyed supportive critical environments.

Joseph Smith (1805–1844)

Just as we have with Joseph Smith’s contemporary writers, it is important to consider his life in the years preceding the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830 when he was twenty-five years old. In other words, what was he doing when Emerson, Thoreau, and their fellow writers during comparable periods of their lives were keeping journals, going to school, starting their professions, travelling, and mingling with the leading lights of their respective intellectual and cultural communities? According to Richard Bushman’s award-winning biography, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling, two years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph, speaking of his family, wrote, “We were deprived of the bennifit of an education. Suffice it to say I was mearly instructed in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmatic which constuted my whole literary acquirements.” Bushman adds, “Joseph may have attended school briefly in Palmyra, and a neighbor remembered the Smiths holding school in their house and studying the Bible.” While some have challenged the extent and degree of Joseph’s education or exaggerated what his “home schooling” might have entailed, the contrast between his education and those of the writers discussed above, with the possible exception of Whitman, is striking. Harvard and Bowdoin, though not colleges or universities in the sense we think of them today, offered the best classical education available in the United States and exposure to gifted teachers, a rich library, and other resources.

What we find in the historical record is that the hardscrabble life of the Smith family in general and of Joseph in particular seems to have left little space or leisure for the kind of thinking and writing necessary to produce a manuscript of the length and complexity of the Book of Mormon. Before Moroni’s first visit in 1823 and Joseph’s

14 Ibid.
15 The anonymous author of “Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book of Mormon,” Mormon Think, http://mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm#introduction, avers that Joseph, “was home schooled quite extensively,” without any supporting evidence to either describe what such “schooling” might have entailed or to back up such a claim. While it may have been true that the Smith family had the rudiments of basic educational lessons in the home, what the Smith children got was nothing close to what Emerson and Thoreau got at Harvard, Hawthorne at Bodowin, Melville at the various academies he attended, or likely even what Whitman got during his curtailed formal education.
acquisition of the plates in 1827, Joseph was preoccupied with the family’s declining fortunes, working the family farm and hiring himself out as a laborer, as, in his own words, “it required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family.”

Thus, the idea that Joseph had time to read broadly, undertake research, construct various drafts, and work out the plot, characters, settings, various points of view, and multiple rhetorical styles that constitute the five-hundred-plus page narrative of the Book of Mormon is simply incredible (in its original Latin sense of “not worthy of belief”).

Further, according to his wife Emma, who was well acquainted with her husband’s compositional, expressive, and literary talents at the time he was translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph was still somewhat of a rustic when it came to writing: “Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating [sic] a book like the Book of Mormon.”

Although some critics have suggested that Joseph was somehow composing and memorizing the text he was dictating to his wife and other scribes, Emma testified, “He had neither manuscript nor book to read from. If he had anything of the Kind he could not have concealed it from me.”

Joseph’s life just before and during the time he was translating was hardly conducive to writing. As Bushman states, Joseph “was entangled with the money-diggers and struggling to scrape together rent money for

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16 Bushman, Joseph Smith, 41.

17 An example of the uninformed, facile arguments about the composition of the Book of Mormon all too common these days is: “Could Joseph Smith Have Written the Book of Mormon?” The anonymous author argues, “First, translation of the BOM did not take place in less than three months; it spanned a time period of over a year and Joseph may have been working on the text for years. Second, the ‘most correct of any book on earth’ has undergone more than 3,000 textual and grammatical corrections. Some of these corrections included significant changes in doctrine. Third, a large portion of the BOM simply quotes the Bible, including translation errors unique to the King James Version. Fourth, stories in the BOM directly parallel stories from Joseph’s life, such as his father’s dream of the tree of life when Joseph was five years old. Fifth, the BOM is no more complicated than other works of fiction, such as Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and related works. Finally, the ideas in the BOM bear strong parallels to ideas popular in New England at the time and several other books. Sixth, Joseph may have had help.” Mormon Think, http://mormonthink.com/josephweb.htm#introduction.

18 Bushman, Joseph Smith, 70.

19 Ibid.
his family.”20 Also, during this period, as Bushman documents, “Joseph had to provide for Emma while attempting to translate in a house that her parents reluctantly provided as a place to work.”21 It was also during this period that “Emma gave birth to a son after an exhausting labor.” Bushman reports, “Whatever happiness the child brought was short-lived. The baby, named Alvin after Joseph’s older brother, died that very day, June 15. … Emma came close to death herself, and Joseph attended her night and day.”22 It was shortly after this great sadness that Joseph was thrown into despair over Martin Harris’s loss of the first translated pages of the Book of Mormon. It is hard to imagine less ideal circumstances under which one might try to compose a lengthy manuscript23

Where are the “try works” of the Book of Mormon? There are none that we know of or evidence that there might have been. In other words — and this is important — whereas we see copious journal entries, essays, letters, lectures, and other writings revealing Emerson working out his mature expressions in poetry and prose; whereas we see Hawthorne’s significant volume of early fiction (short and long forms), journals, and other writings leading up to and illuminating the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*; whereas we see Thoreau’s copious journals, notebooks, essays, lectures, fields notes, and other writings as preludes to *Walden*; whereas we see Melville’s many novels, stories, and other writings preparing him to write *Moby-Dick*; and whereas as we see Whitman’s journalistic writings, poetry, and numerous drafts of his major poem *Leaves of Grass*, we have practically nothing of Joseph Smith’s mind or writing to suggest that he was capable of authoring a book like the Book of Mormon, a book that is much more substantial, complex, and varied than his critics have been able to see or willing to admit. We need to remember that the Book of Mormon is considered one of the most influential books in American history and one that has occupied the serious consideration of scholars for over a century.

20 Ibid., 69.
21 Ibid., 63
22 Ibid., 66–67.
23 In an article entitled “For Authors, Fragile Ideas Need Loving Every Day,” the novelist Walter Mosley says that interruptions and distractions (such as those Joseph Smith had in abundance) cause the life to drain out of your writing: “The words have no art to them; you no longer remember the smell. The idea seems weak, it has dissipated like smoke.” He adds, “Nothing we create is art at first. It’s simply a collection of notions that may never be understood. … But even these clearer notions will fade if you stay away more than a day. … The act of writing is a king of guerrilla warfare.” (*New York Times*, 3 July 2000, B2).
Although we have ample examples of early writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and other writers of the time and a history of their evolving from immature to mature writers, we actually have very little of Joseph’s writing before the publication of the Book of Mormon. In other words, there are no writings that demonstrate that Joseph was creating the major characters of the Nephite and Jaredite history and working out the major themes and ideas found in the Book of Mormon, nor is there any evidence that he exhibited any proclivity to compose large narrative forms or differential styles or much of anything at all like the complex, interwoven, episodic components of the Book of Mormon.

What do we have from Joseph’s pen before the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830? According to Dean C. Jesse’s *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, very little: a note summarizing Martin Harris’s experience with Charles Anthon, possibly written in 1828, and a letter to Oliver Cowdery dated 22 October 1829. His handwritten account of the First Vision written in 1832 is ungrammatical, is written with little sense of punctuation or compositional structure, and, though sincere and authentic, shows little evidence of stylistic or compositional competence or confidence. Certainly there is evidence of the beginnings of an eloquent voice, but that voice is tentative and immature.

Because the Lord directed him to begin keeping a record of his experiences, Joseph commenced keeping a journal in 1832 following the completion of the Book of Mormon, but he was anything but a regular or systematic record keeper. Joseph was more likely to dictate his words to scribes. The reason, according to Jesse, was Joseph’s insecurity in expressing himself in his own words. As Jesse explains, using Joseph’s own language, “A complicated life and feelings of literary inadequacy explain his dependence. He lamented his ‘lack of fluency in address,’ his ‘writing imperfections,’ and his ‘inability’ to convey his ideas in writing. Communication seemed to him to present an insurmountable barrier. He wrote of the almost ‘total darkness of paper pen and ink’ and the ‘crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.’”24 This is a stark contrast to the articulate, fluent, and confident style of Emerson and other writers of the period. Although Joseph eventually gained confidence as a writer, he continued to rely on the words and rhetorical styles of others more than on his own. Jesse provides an example of the significant contrast in rhetorical styles between Joseph’s own writing

and that of his clerk Willard Richards, the one (1835) ungrammatical and unpolished and the other (1843) quite the opposite.25

Over the past five decades, a number of scholars have documented the complex, complicated, and at times even convoluted structure of the Book of Mormon. In his excellent study, Understanding the Book of Mormon (2010), Grant Hardy has identified the reason the Book of Mormon cannot be read as critics have been reading it for nearly two hundred years: rather than the book revealing the style and point of view of a single author, it is instead told through the point of view and style of three primary narrators/editors — Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni — each of whom has a unique and distinctive expressive style.

As I summarized in a review of Hardy’s book, “By focusing on the three major narrators of the Book of Mormon, Hardy is able to demonstrate that each has ‘a particular point of view, a theological vision, an agenda, and a characteristic style of writing, all of which can be found within the confines of the text itself.’ Such a ‘narrator-centered approach. … opens up the Book of Mormon to literary appreciation.’ Although it traditionally has been accused by outside critics of extreme incoherence, what emerges from this approach is a clear demonstration of rhetorical and spiritual coherence both within the sub-narratives as well as in the book as a whole.”26

In a previous article I have tried to demonstrate that the proposition that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon under some kind of a spell or through the process known as automatic writing simply does not stand up when one compares the book with other texts claimed to have been written in this way.27 In another article I tried to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon contains abundant evidence of highly sophisticated rhetorical and dramatic irony, evidence of which is absent in Joseph Smith’s known writing both before and after the publication of the Book of Mormon.28 Elsewhere, I make an argument similar to the one in this paper, although in addition to comparing Smith’s and Milton’s education, cultural background, and literary talent, I address the further

25   Ibid.
26   Robert A. Rees, “The Figure in the Carpet: Grant Hardy’s Reading of the Book of Mormon,” The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal 31:2 (Fall/Winter 2011), 137
issue of dictation, a process used in the composition of both the Book of Mormon and Paradise Lost.  

While one could argue that it is impossible to compare Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon with Smith’s contemporary writers and their major works, nonetheless each constitutes a major compositional achievement, a major written composition, whether autobiography, biography, fiction, history, philosophical treatise, poetry, or some other genre, each with a significant cultural and compositional history and context. This is why Emerson, holding a copy of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass for the first time, could say, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty.”

Had Joseph Smith sent Emerson a copy of The Book of Mormon when it came off the press in 1830, though perplexed by its content and style, Emerson might have said something similar — it “must have had a long foreground somewhere.” He certainly would not have believed that it was created out of whole cloth, especially by a writer as uneducated, inexperienced, and unsophisticated as Smith was at the time of the book’s publication. While the “long foreground” of Leaves of Grass as with the other masterworks under consideration here can be established from available historical and critical evidence, that of the Book of Mormon cannot. Further, to explain the book as a consequence of its author’s purported deep and thorough acquaintance with the Bible is to understand neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon.

Each of the writers of each of the masterpieces under consideration here, with the exception of Joseph Smith, had a long gestation period during which he “tried out” his ideas, metaphors, allusions, coloring (tone), points of view, personae, and rhetorical styles before tackling a larger, more complex, and more sophisticated form, whether as a collection of poems and essays (Emerson), an extended personal narrative (Thoreau), a novel (Hawthorne and Melville) or a major poem (Whitman). There are no parallel try works for Joseph Smith, nor any evidence of his apprenticeship as a writer. In fact, all evidence points in the opposite direction. Unless and until some hitherto undiscovered record demonstrating that Joseph Smith did in fact leave evidence of the

reading, thinking, writing, and imaginative expression — the try works — required to write a book like the Book of Mormon, we are left with the choice of accepting his explanation of the book’s origin or making the case for some alternative explanation, which to my mind no one has done satisfactorily. Such a case would seem to require consideration of the main argument of this paper, i.e., examining the biographical and authorial history of any proposed author or authors in relation to what we understand of the compositional process required to produce a book like the Book of Mormon.

Abstract: From the beginning, Latter-day Saints have rejected the notion that science and religion are incompatible. In this article, we give an overview of studies that have surveyed the professional participation of Mormons in science and the views of American academics and scientists on religion in general, Mormons in particular, and why many thoughtful people in our day might be disinclined to take religion seriously. We conclude with a brief survey of current LDS perspectives on science. Our brief survey demonstrates that it is not only futile for religion and science to battle each other; it is also unnecessary.

We often hear claims that science and religion are separate, incompatible domains waged in all-out war. For example, in a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 59% of Americans say that science and religion are “often in conflict.”

Yet the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have rejected this notion from the beginning. As Brigham Young explained, “The idea that the religion of Christ is one thing, and science is another, is a mistaken idea, for there is no true religion without true science, and consequently there is no true science without true religion.” He later elaborated on this point as follows, contrasting the LDS Church’s
teachings on science with those prevailing among numerous other Christian denominations at the time.\(^3\)

I am not astonished that infidelity prevails to a great extent among the inhabitants of the earth, for the religious teachers of the people advance many ideas and notions for truth which are in opposition to and contradict facts demonstrated by science, and which are generally understood. … In these respects we differ from the Christian world, for our religion will not clash with or contradict the facts of science in any particular. … Whether the Lord found the earth empty and void, whether he made it out of nothing or out of the rude elements; or whether he made it in six days or in as many millions of years, is and will remain a matter of speculation in the minds of men unless he give revelation on the subject.

In a recent study, Latter-day Saints (50\%) were more likely than atheists or agnostics (13\%), and than any other religious group surveyed (31-48\%) to believe that science and religion can work together in collaboration.\(^4\)

Another precept taught from early on in the Restoration — and also in sharp contrast to prevailing religious discourse at the time — is that God operates within the bounds of natural law rather than by contravening natural law. As Elder James E. Talmage, a twentieth-century Apostle, wrote:\(^5\)

Miracles are commonly regarded as occurrences in opposition to the laws of nature. Such a conception is plainly erroneous, for the laws of nature are inviolable. However, as human understanding of these laws is at best but imperfect, events strictly in accordance with natural law may appear contrary thereto. The entire constitution of nature is founded on system and order.

Subsequent Presidents and General Authorities of the Church have advanced similar views about the ultimate compatibility of religious and scientific truths and, with notably few exceptions, have maintained markedly positive attitudes toward both the methods and conclusions of mainstream science and the advance of modern technology. Selected LDS perspectives on these issues are explored later in this article.

**What Can Be Said About the Professional Participation of Mormons in Science and Academia?**

In the 1990 listing of 120,000 individuals in *American Men and Women of Science*, “Utah stood 21% above the second place state, which was Delaware.”\(^6\) This was despite the fact that there were more Mormon
scientists outside of Utah and Idaho than inside, that practicing Mormons no longer constituted the majority population in Utah, and that there has been an increase in the overall orthodoxy of Mormon scientists. Noel B. Reynolds reports his informal observation that: “The overwhelming majority of LDS academics and intellectuals are active, faithful Latter-day Saints.”

Such findings about LDS scientists are consistent with other studies affirming an exceptional proportion of Mormons in American university faculties across all disciplines. A major survey published in 2007 reported that while non-LDS “Christians are underrepresented among faculty,” Mormons are “overrepresented compared to the general public.”

The reasons for the attraction of science and academia for members of the Church have not received the formal study they deserve. However, BYU professor and administrator Noel B. Reynolds offers a personal opinion on the matter: In spite of occasional eruptions of anti-intellectualism in the LDS community, the long-term reality has been that Mormons, perhaps more than any other religious group, seek and respect learning. Joseph Smith set the example himself, establishing schools for adults and studying biblical languages. The LDS community has always produced far more than its share of highly educated people, … [and in the LDS community] the more educated a person is, the more likely he or she is to be fully observant and faithful.

There may be good reasons for this surprising characteristic of the Latter-day Saints. Mormonism is a religion of both the spirit and the intellect. Mormon missionaries tell their investigators that they have answers to the great human questions. Conversion stories are always stories of learning and inspiration. … Mormonism is not a religion that tells its members they have no right to know the divine mysteries. Rather, it tells them to seek knowledge of all things. There is nothing that God is not willing to reveal to his children, even to the point of showing himself to them on special occasions.

In line with what Reynolds expresses above, Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote: “For the disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and disciple-ship seriously and, likewise, gospel covenants.” Gerald Stott similarly
concludes from his research that “Latter-day Saint theology appears to negate the secularizing impact of education by sacralizing it.”

**What Do American Academics and Scientists Think of Religion in General and Mormons in Particular?**

In 2013-2014, Rice University sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund conducted the largest study to date of American views on religion and science, including a nationally representative survey of 10,000 Americans along with over 300 in-depth interviews with Christians, Jews, and Muslims. She found that the size of the segment of American scientists characterizing themselves as “very religious” and engaged in some key traditional religious practices — though different from the public at large — was still in the same general ballpark. Roughly 18% of the scientists in her sample attended weekly religious services, compared with 20% of the general population; 15% considered themselves “very religious,” compared with 19% of the population; 13.5% read some religious text weekly, compared with 17% of the population; and 19% prayed once or more per day, compared with 26% of the population.

Although Ecklund’s survey revealed that the sizable segment of U.S. scientists involved in religious practice and identifying themselves as “very religious” was not too different from the general public, another segment of scientists described themselves as indifferent to religion and skeptical of a belief in God. In a study of university faculty published in 2007, 75% of the sample said that religion was not important to them. Only about 36% of scientists have no doubt about God’s existence, compared to 55% of the general population. However, it still should be recognized that 36% represents a significant segment of American scientists.

In the 2007 study previously mentioned, 53% of university faculty surveyed held unfavorable views of evangelical Christians, “leading Mormons as the least liked religious group by 20%.” Notably, faculty opinion about the LDS tended to be much more polarized than that of the general public, with significantly fewer reporting neutral feelings (20% vs. 42% of the general population) and 40% (vs. 33%) reporting favorable feelings.

One of the possible reasons for such polarization is suggested in a 2007 poll of the general public. The results revealed that “having an acquaintance who is Mormon is linked with more positive opinions of Mormons and Mormonism. The large majority of those who know a Mormon (60%) express a favorable view of Mormons, compared with
fewer than half (44%) of those who do not personally know a Mormon. And those who are acquainted with a Mormon are 11 points more likely than others to say that Mormonism and their own religion have a lot in common.”18

**Why Might Many Thoughtful People Be Disinclined To Take Religion Seriously?**

Among the reasons for this state of affairs is the fact that popular religious understanding often solely “rests on a caricature of religious fundamentalism” which is seen “as a reactionary movement bent on reversing all the progressive measures achieved over the last … decades.”19

In addition, many scientists who consider themselves spiritual (comprising 51% of the believers, 27% of the agnostics, and 22% of the atheists20) reject institutional religion because of its deep dependence on authority as a primary source of truth (e.g., church leaders, scriptures). “Spirituality,” according to Ecklund’s study, “has more potential to align with scientific thinking and reasoning” because it is “open to being shaped by personal inquiry.”21 The study also elaborates on reasons why, for many scientists, science trumps religion of any sort:22

When scientists take the norms they perceive as governing science and apply them to all of life, religion is weighed against science, and it does not measure up. Religious views are not based on the kind of information that can be judged impartially, such scientists would argue. There is a personal bias in religion; religious individuals have a stake in findings that support their faith (they lack the disinterest that scientists have). These scientists … compare all religion to science and find it wanting.

Scientists who have this view think that in all spheres of life, only knowledge that is found through science is reliable. Likewise, for them, only questions answerable through science are worth exploring. Questions concerning the meaning of life are not even worth asking.

Some scientists have become disenchanted with religion because of experiences similar to non-scientists. These include negative encounters with leaders and teachers who have dismissed or ridiculed their sincere questions, unsatisfying struggles with the problems of evil and pain in a world that religion claims is created and managed by God, and what are perceived as harmful social and political consequences of some religious beliefs and practices.23
Moreover, as fewer people in America than ever before are being raised in homes where religion is regularly discussed and practiced, many of the influences and much of the knowledge of religion formerly obtained in childhood are waning.\textsuperscript{24} It is not surprising that many people today simply don’t connect with religion, since they may not have anyone in their family or close circle of acquaintances who is at all religious.\textsuperscript{25} In such cases, their perspective may be shaped in large measure from current events noteworthy enough (i.e., extreme or unusual) to make the daily news or humorous enough to be remembered and repeated. Data points of this sort provide little insight on the lives and views of the more typical believer.

According to sociologist Rodney Stark, thoughtful people may be put off from religion in knowing “that many illusory or even fraudulent religious claims have been advanced” over the course of history.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, “comparisons among religions can easily be corrosive to faith because one must confront the fact that, since they disagree, not all religions can be entirely true. From there it is a small step to conclude that all religions are false, that ‘all are refuted by all,’ as the renegade monk Jean Bodin put it in 1593.”\textsuperscript{27} Conversely, “similarities among the world’s religions … [sometimes may be] taken as ‘proof ’ that they all are human inventions.”\textsuperscript{28} Finally, some people are swayed by arguments that religious belief is nothing more than a combination of biological, psychological, and/or cultural imperatives.

While ultimate satisfaction of such concerns cannot be obtained by reasoned argument alone, perhaps at least a few fallacies can be swept aside. First, no serious believer would hold that each of the sundry, contradictory collections of spiritual beliefs and practices held at one time or another by individuals are rooted in divine revelation. “Some revelations are of God,” the Prophet Joseph Smith is remembered as saying, “some revelations are of man: and some revelations are of the Devil.”\textsuperscript{29}

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that even authentic revelations may be “subject to misunderstanding, exaggeration, and faulty transmission.”\textsuperscript{30} Regarding religious similarities among diverse groups, many believers are prepared to accept the possibility that “authentic revelations underlie many of the major faiths.”\textsuperscript{31} Finally, with respect to the “insufficiency of all biological approaches to explaining religion, or any other aspects of human culture,” the most important consideration in Stark’s view “is that they are unnecessary! The fundamental biological
basis of all culture is general intelligence, and nothing more needs to be postulated.”

“Thus,” writes Stark, “we reach the fundamental question: Does God exist? That is, have we discovered God? Or have we invented him? Are there so many similarities among the great religions because God is really the product of universal wish fulfillment? Did humans everywhere create supernatural beings out of their need for comfort in the face of existential tragedy and to find purpose and significance in life? Or have people in many places, to a greater and lesser degree, actually gained glimpses of God?” Once the possibility of authentic divine revelations is granted, attention can be turned to the “immense and humbling challenge” of determining “which ones are valid.”

**LDS Perspectives on Modern Science**

A survey of LDS discourse on modern science yields numerous very positive assessments, such as the following:

> True science is a discovery of the secret, immutable and eternal laws, by which the universe is governed.

> Every discovery in science and art, that is really true and useful to mankind, has been given by direct revelation from God, though but few acknowledge it.

> Truth is truth forever. Scientific truth cannot be theological lie. To the sane mind, theology and philosophy must harmonize. They have the common ground of truth on which to meet.

> We should all be interested in academic research. We must go out on the research front and continue to explore the vast unknown. We should be in the forefront of learning in all fields, for revelation does not come only through the prophet of God nor only directly from heaven in visions or dreams. Revelation may come in the laboratory, out of the test tube, out of the thinking mind and the inquiring soul, out of search and research and prayer and inspiration.

> Religion and science have sometimes been in apparent conflict. Yet the conflict should only be apparent — not real — for science should seek truth, and true religion is truth. There can never be conflict between revealed religion and scientific fact. That they have often occupied different fields of truth is a mere detail.
The gospel accepts and embraces all truth; science is slowly expanding her arms and reaching into the invisible domain in search of truth. The two are meeting daily — science as a child, revealed religion as the mother. Truth is truth, whether labeled science or religion. There can be no conflict. Time is on the side of truth — for truth is eternal.39

[The twentieth century] has been the best of all centuries. … The life expectancy of man has been extended by more than twenty-five years. Think of it. It is a miracle. The fruits of science have been manifest everywhere. By and large, we live longer, we live better. This is an age of greater understanding and knowledge. … This has been an age of enlightenment. The miracles of modern medicine, of travel, of communication are almost beyond belief.40

The last statement, which was made by President Gordon B. Hinckley, is particularly interesting in light of the pervasive talk that is often heard of the inexorable decline of society. He acknowledges that such talk can be self-defeating; to the contrary, there is much to celebrate, and the progress due to science and technology is certainly among the proudest achievements of our society.

The comments we have cited above are certainly not exhaustive, and there are certainly instances of LDS leaders voicing critical comments towards certain aspects of modern science (e.g., evolution). Such comments are often highlighted by critics of the LDS movement who attempt to portray the LDS movement as anti-scientific. But a larger study of LDS discourse reveals such comments to be in the minority, easily outnumbered by much more positive commentary.

It should be noted that Brigham Young University has strong departments in numerous arenas of modern science, certainly including astronomy, botany, zoology, geology, physics, chemistry, computer science, and mathematics. With regard to the Church’s “official” position on the age of the Earth, a good source is the Encyclopedia of Mormonism’s article “Age of the Earth,” which starts with the noncommittal statement, “The scriptures do not say how old the earth is, and the Church has taken no official stand on this question. … Nor does the Church consider it to be a central issue for salvation.”41

With respect to evolution, the first formal class on the subject was instituted at BYU in the fall of 1971 with the First Presidency’s approval, and is currently a required part of the core curriculum of all BYU students.
in the biological sciences. Evolutionary biology has since become “one of the largest and most successful graduate programs at BYU,”\textsuperscript{42} with professors publishing in major evolutionary conferences and journals. Terryl Givens has summarized efforts of Mormon scientists that “not only incorporate evolutionary science, but break new ground in the field.”\textsuperscript{43} Elsewhere he specifically cites the contributions of Keith Crandall, Michael Whiting, and Jack Sites in molecular evolution, noting that all three are “major players in the National Science Foundation’s ‘Tree of Life’ project.”\textsuperscript{44} Given adds: “Neither Creationism nor Intelligent Design find a home in the science departments of the LDS-owned school.”\textsuperscript{45}

The Church’s view on evolution has “evolved” somewhat over time. In 1909, the First Presidency released a statement entitled “The Origin of Man,” which included a comment skeptical of the notion that “the original human being was a development from lower orders of the animal creation.” However, in 1925 the First Presidency released another statement, largely a condensation of the 1909 statement, which omitted this language.\textsuperscript{46}

In 1930, Elders Joseph Fielding Smith, Brigham H. Roberts, and James E. Talmage became engaged in a discussion over whether there were “pre-Adamites” or other living organisms before Adam. After several manuscripts were circulated, the First Presidency concluded that additional discussion would be fruitless and released a letter to all general authorities. It noted that the statement that pre-Adamites existed was “not a doctrine of the Church” and similarly for the opposite assertion. It concluded with the instruction:


Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the world. Leave geology, biology, archaeology, and anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church.\textsuperscript{47}

In 1992, this passage was included as part of a brief article on “Evolution” in the \textit{Encyclopedia of Mormonism.}\textsuperscript{48} Though the 1931 First Presidency minutes were prepared in specific response to the question of death before the Fall that was raised by Elder Roberts’ manuscript, its application to the broader context of evolution was deemed appropriate by later Church leaders. At the initiative of the First Presidency and members of the Twelve — and specifically by the action of then-First Counselor Gordon B. Hinckley — it was included in the “Evolution” article.\textsuperscript{49} Subsequently this article, together with the 1909 and 1925
statements and one other document were assembled to form what is now known as the BYU Packet on “Evolution and the Origin of Man,” approved by BYU Board of Trustees and LDS First Presidency.50 As far as we are aware, this packet, including the Encyclopedia article, is the latest word on the subject.

We are convinced that the noncommittal approach taken by the Church is a wise one. Just as it is important for science to stay “scientific,” focused on studying natural laws, processes, and empirical data, so it seems important for the Church to avoid accommodating its teachings to whatever scientific theories or worldviews happen to be in vogue at the time. As Holmes Rolston observed, “The religion that is married to science today will be a widow tomorrow. ... Religion that has too thoroughly accommodated to any science will soon be obsolete.”51

Conclusion

We have presented here a brief survey of issues relating to perceived conflicts between science and Mormonism. Certainly there are many specific questions and issues that have not been treated. What’s more, this article only briefly discusses how these specific issues connect to LDS scriptures and discourse. But we hope that the series of Interpreter symposia on Science and Religion, along with the published volumes that follow these meetings, will be helpful in the process of working out a framework within which such a dialogue can begin.

The overall consensus of respected writers from both the science and religious worlds, including several LDS writers, is that it is not only futile for religion and science to battle each other; it is also unnecessary. Most major religious denominations, including the LDS Church, have either made peace with the scientific world or at least have recognized that it is pointless to attack the world of science. Most leading scientists either affirm a religious faith in some general sense or at least recognize that it is pointless to attack the world of religion.

And both scientists and religious believers can stand in awe at the majesty of the universe, which is now known to be much vaster, more intricate, and more magnificent than any of us previously might have imagined.

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Endnotes

1. C. Funk et al., Religion and Science. A 2013-2014 study by Ecklund concluded that “27 percent of Americans feel that science and religion are in conflict” (E. H. Ecklund, Religious Communities, p. 16. Cf. R. David, Misconceptions). According to the same study, nearly 20 percent of the general population and 22 percent of scientists think that religious people are hostile to science, and nearly 22 percent of the general population think that scientists are hostile to religion (E. H. Ecklund, Religious Communities, pp. 17-18. Cf. R. David, Misconceptions). That said, in Ecklund’s large 2005-2008 study of science and religion, she found only “five (!) of the atheist scientists [she] talked to were so hostile that they were actively working against religion” (E. H. Ecklund, Science vs. Religion, p. 150).

2. B. Young, 3 May 1874, p. 52.

3. B. Young, 14 May 1871, pp. 115


5. J. E. Talmage, Articles of Faith, p. 20.


8. G. A. Tobin et al., Religious Beliefs, p. 20. Other groups specifically noted as being overrepresented were Jewish faculty, faculty espousing atheism or no religion, and Buddhist faculty (ibid). Similar results were found in Ecklund’s 2013-2014 study, which ranked proportions of scientists in various religious traditions as follows: Muslims/Hindus/Buddhists/Sikhs/Jains (13.7%), Jews (10.1%), Atheists/Agnostics/No Religion (7.7%), Mormons (4.6%), Mainline Protestants (4.5%),
Catholics (3.9%), and Evangelical (3.6%) (E. H. Ecklund, Religious Communities, p. 9).


10. While national data indicate that, overall, the most educated are the least religious, among some denominations — and most dramatically among Mormons — a strong positive correlation has been reported. “Highly educated Mormons are more likely to pray frequently, to have strong religious beliefs and to attend meetings, suggesting that devotion is even more important for those with higher levels of education than those with lower educations” (S. L. Albrecht et al., Secularization, p. 308). This is due at least in part to the fact that from its very beginning, the Church has placed significant emphasis upon education. “One result of this has been a standard of educational attainment that is significantly higher than the national average. … For both males and females, the percentage of Mormons who have completed post-high-school education is significantly higher than is the case for the [U.S.] population as a whole. For Mormon males, 53.5 percent have some post-high school education compared to 36.5% for the U.S. population. For females, the figures are 44.3 for Mormons and 27.7 for the U.S. population generally” (ibid., p. 302). That said, “the results are not consistent across college majors (philosophy and religion majors do not fare well in maintaining ‘high orthodoxy,’ for example)” (T. L. Givens, Paradox, p. 238, citing Armand Mauss) — though it is possible that LDS students fare better in religiosity than students with such majors from other Christian denominations.


15. E. H. Ecklund, Religious Communities, p. 11; D. Ruth, Misconceptions. In a different study by Ecklund conducted in 2005-2008 (E. H. Ecklund, Science vs. Religion) that included 1,700 natural and social scientists at elite universities (a much more narrowly defined and less religious set of scientists than the ones sampled in the 2013-2014 study), results were significantly different. In this earlier study only “about 64 percent of scientists at elite research universities either are certain that they do not believe in God, the classic atheist position,
or they do not know whether or not there is a God, the classic agnostic view,” compared to about 6 percent of the general public (ibid., p. 16). Put another way, “only 9 percent of scientists say they have no doubt that God exists, compared to well over 60 percent of the general public.” Of course, “agnosticism may mean something different to scientists than it does to members of the general public. By definition, their life-work of science requires insurmountable evidence. … A scientist is rarely absolutely convinced about anything!” (ibid., p. 36). That said, 71 percent of scientists were willing to grant that there are basic truths in many religions (ibid., p. 35).

Results of religious surveys can be appreciated fully only if a nuanced view is taken of the findings. For example, Ecklund’s survey found that nearly 50% of American scientists identify with a religious label, compared to 84% of the general population (ibid., p. 33). However, of those who believe, “the highest proportion are Jewish (about 16 percent), but many of these identify as Jewish as an ethnicity, not in terms of an active religious faith” (ibid.). This is why nearly 50% of scientists surveyed could identify themselves with a religious label, even though 64% declared themselves to be atheists or agnostics.

17. A September 2007 Pew opinion poll (Public Expresses Mixed Views of Islam, Mormonism), taken of the general American public following a period of greater visibility of Mormonism during the Mitt Romney presidential campaign, gave the following Favorable-Unfavorable-No Opinion breakdowns: Jews (76-9-15%), Catholics (76-14-10%), Evangelical Christians (60-19-21%), Mormons (53-27-20%), Muslim Americans (53-29-18%), Muslims (43-35-22%), Atheists (35-53-12%).
19. C. Lasch, Revolt, p. 215. E. H. Ecklund, Science vs. Religion, pp. 153-155. See also D. Kinnaman et al., Unchristian. The authors of this book are evangelical Christians who think that it’s important to understand some of the stereotypes (all admittedly having some basis in reality) that people of the Mosaic (born 1984-2002) and Buster (born 1965-1983) generations have of religion. Some of the chapters are entitled: “Hypocritical,” “Get Saved!,” “Antihomosexual,” “Sheltered,” “Too Political,” and “Judgmental” — thus making clear many of the issues that make it difficult for religion to get a serious hearing among some people today.

21. Ibid., p. 56.

22. Ibid., p. 17. For example, Robert T. Pennock writes (R. T. Pennock, *Tower*, pp. 178, 179):

   To the faithful, having faith means sustaining belief despite the lack of [observable] evidence and sometimes even in the face of countervailing evidence. This accounts for the difference between a scientific test of a hypothesis and a theological test of faith. In the former case, we believe a proposed hypothesis only because it is supported by [observable] evidence and has survived attempts to disconfirm it [through the scientific method], and we reject it if the evidence opposes it. In the latter case, to survive a test of faith means to hold fast to one’s belief even when everything goes against it. … [S]cience, far more than any of its specific conclusions, is fundamentally scientific method. Creationists would have us turn science on its head and replace scientific reasoning based on observable evidence with human interpretations of revealed truth. The confusion of human languages would be nothing compared to the great confusion that would result from such a program.

23. See ibid., pp. 20-24. In an article in *The Instructor*, for many years the Church’s magazine for teachers, we read (E. L. Poulsen, *Make Your Teaching*, pp. 179, 199):

   The Sunday School teacher who makes a pastime of ridiculing men of science, and of holding them up as the arch enemies of religion, usually loses the respect of the most intelligent members of his class. Others, who for the time being accept his conclusions, are forced later on to believe they must choose one or the other. Sometimes, they don’t choose religion. And if they don’t, the deceptions of unscrupulous and irreligious teachers of science may have been one of the causes; but it’s equally true that the Sunday School teachers themselves may have been the worst offenders.

   Little good comes from overstressing immature, childish versions of the creation, or from castigating unpopular political and economic theories, though this sort of thing is frequently done. Perhaps such a tendency is the second line
of defense for those teachers who find themselves facing their classes without adequate preparation for the lesson at hand.

Many notable men and women, as everyone knows, have given the Sunday School credit for successfully laying the spiritual foundations of their lives, or of guiding them through periods of doubt and uncertainty when they were wavering. …

There are safeguards, however, with which the Sunday School teacher can surround himself so that he will almost certainly be able to inspire youth. The first of these is humility. Nothing so completely disarms an opponent or softens the edge of an argument as the removal or all sham and pretense from one’s character, revealing a mind willing to learn, and eager to enlarge its own horizons, and a heart beating with good will for every individual God has created.


25. Some years ago in Edinburgh, the city of the common sense philosophers where Charles Darwin’s interest in natural history had budded, where his father and uncle and grandfather had studied before him, and where Elder Orson Pratt poured out his soul in discouragement on the top of Arthur’s Seat for the Lord to give him just 200 Scottish converts (J. B. Allen et al., Men, pp. 163-164), Bradshaw remembers having lunch with a few colleagues:

The topic of religion came up, and though the comments were derisive, I held my peace for the moment. Later, sitting with the faculty on the hard wooden pews of the 300-year old chapel waiting for a lecture to begin, an opening came for me to share the fact that I was an active member of the LDS Church with a friend seated to my left. In shock, the friend expressed his sincere apologies for his comments at lunch. He said that the idea that I was a believer had never occurred to him, that there was only one other person he knew at work who had any kind of religious belief, that both he and his wife were both raised without any religion, as were their parents before them. Once rare, this situation has become commonplace.


27. Ibid., pp. 1-2.

28. Ibid., p. 2.


31. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

32. Ibid., p. 43.

33. Ibid., p. 20.

34. Ibid., p. 8. See, however, the findings of Guy Consolmagno, who concluded from his interviews that while younger scientists and engineers often saw religion as a source of truth, older ones, already settled in what they believe, tended to see it principally as a source of community (G. Consolmagno, *God’s Mechanics*, pp. 102-118).

35. H. Tate to J. Taylor, p. 46.

36. B. Young, 31 August 1862, p. 369.


41. M. S. Petersen, *Earth*. See also M. S. Petersen, *Fossils*.


44. T. L. Givens, *Wrestling*, p. 369 n. 132

45. Ibid., p. 219.

46. These and other LDS statements on evolution and the origin of man by the First Presidency and the Presidents of the Church, along with explanatory notes, can be found in D. H. Bailey et al., *Cosmos, Earth, and Man*, pp. 445-484. Another convenient source for many of these statements is W. E. Evenson, et al., *Mormonism and Evolution*.


50. BYU Packet on Evolution and the Origin of Man.

LATTER-DAY SAINT YOUTHS’ CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED TEXTS

Eric D. Rackley

Abstract: The texts that religious youth negotiate are often deeply embedded in their sociocultural practices, which can have profound influences on their religious literacy development, construction and manifestation of religious identities, and the development of their faith. Yet, although 85% of American youth claim a specific religious tradition, literacy research has not explored how these youth construct their views of sacred texts. In this two-year qualitative study of the literacy practices of nine Latter-day Saint youth, interviews and observations were used to explore what texts these youth considered sacred and how their views of these texts were informed by their religiocultural beliefs, values, and practices. Analyses indicate that views of sacred texts were informed by the regularity with which the youth engaged with these texts and their specific personal experiences with them. This work breaks new ground in the study of religion as social practice by exploring how religiocultural ways of doing and being influenced the development of young people’s construction of sacred texts. Implications for religious instruction are provided.

Religion has influenced — and continues to influence — politics, popular culture, the speech of public figures, educational policy

and practice,4 and nearly every aspect of American life.5 As Manseau and Sharlet put it, “the Bible is always there .... [It’s] in your bones before you crack its binding.”6 Given that a majority of youth in the United States participate in religious organizations7 and that the predominant faiths around the world have strong text-based traditions, it stands to reason that millions of young people in the USA are engaging in religious literacy practices with the texts that are integral to their faiths. The muscle of these texts and their accompanying practices are seen in the manner in which young people employ them in the construction of their identities; use them to find meaning in their lives; and negotiate social, cultural, and religious spaces.8

Given the importance of religion and religious texts as well as the sizable population of religious youth, attention to the place of religious texts in youths’ lives may be warranted. To date, however, precious little research has explored how religious youths’ views of sacred texts are formed by their religiocultural experiences. In the Church we often assume that youth consider certain texts sacred, such as scripture, but we have no empirical evidence about how they develop those views. This study attends to that gap by examining how Latter-day Saint youth develop their conceptions of scripture as sacred text.

4 See Nila Banton-Smith, American Reading Instruction (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002); and Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, The American University in a Postsecular Age (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5 See Peter Manseau and Jeff Sharlet, Killing the Buddha: A Heretic’s Bible (New York: Free Press, 2004); Moore, Touchdown Jesus.

6 Ibid., 4.


Informed by social and cultural theories, this study sheds light from a new angle on how Latter-day Saint youths’ social and cultural values, practices, beliefs, and experiences influence their views of scripture. The knowledge produced from this study may be a precursor to developing more effective religious literacy practices that are more responsive to youths’ histories with scripture. Moreover, knowing how Latter-day Saint youth construct their views of sacred texts may offer additional lines of inquiry into young peoples’ reading practices, the motivations that drive them, and how texts are used in the Church and the home to help youth develop gospel knowledge and testimony. Failing to develop a more robust understanding of the issues addressed in this paper may seriously undermine parents’ and religious educators’ efforts to draw upon the important social and cultural values, beliefs, and practices that can be important in effectively and responsibly educating today’s youth.9

To address this study’s purpose, I draw from relevant research to discuss (a) the importance of texts in youths’ experiences; (b) the critical place of religious literacies — including religious texts — in young peoples’ lives; (c) a sociocultural perspective of texts, and (d) my theorization of the sacred in relationship to the social and cultural practices of the participants of this study. The research methods section provides details on the site, participants, processes of data collection, and data analysis procedures. Following this, the findings identify the importance of scripture in Latter-day Saint youths’ lives and how the youth constructed their notions of sacred texts. I then provide implications of this work for religious instruction, and end with some concluding remarks about the importance of understanding youths’ constructions of sacred texts.

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

A Sociocultural Construction of Texts

In this study, I approach texts as social and cultural constructs, which include closely connected views of what counts as texts and how texts are created. As social constructs, texts are tools created in social contexts and used for social purposes, such as developing and maintaining group connections, making sense of one’s environment, producing knowledge,

and enacting one’s sense of self. Texts, from social and cultural perspectives, are created in specific contexts for specific purposes and must be agreed upon and negotiated by individuals familiar with and invested in those contexts. For example, within the Church the importance of the Book of Mormon as a sacred text has been socially constructed over time as prophets proclaim its value, as we read from it in church and at home, use it to solve problems, find peace, draw closer to God, and share these experiences with others. These and other experiences with the Book of Mormon influence how the Book of Mormon is understood as a specific kind of sacred text within the Church.

A social and cultural view of texts highlights the manner in which youth in this study constructed their views of what counts as sacred texts. Although they privileged print texts, they developed what counted as sacred, print texts in terms of their experiences with them and how they cohered with their religiocultural beliefs, histories, and practices. It is naive to assume that Latter-day Saint youth consider scripture sacred simply because it is important to the Church as a religious institution. This study interrogates this assumption, drawing upon the youths’ own experiences with scripture as set within their religiocultural contexts to explore how scripture became sacred for them. To help frame the exploration of these youths’ social and cultural construction of texts, the next section looks more closely at the literacy research that focuses on the place of texts in youths’ everyday lives.

**Texts in Young Peoples’ Lives**

Texts play a critical role in students’ experiences inside and outside of school. In their everyday, out-of-school experiences, young people often

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engage with texts on their own terms, in their own ways, for their own purposes. This can have a positive influence on youths’ motivations for reading and give them access to knowledge and ways of thinking and doing not available elsewhere. Moreover, the texts that young people read and write on their own terms are often deeply embedded in their social and cultural practices, values, and experiences. This means that the


way young people conceptualize, use, and produce texts are influenced by where and how they live and the circumstances surrounding their experiences in the world. Elizabeth Moje, for example, demonstrated how gang-affiliated youth enacted sophisticated literacy practices by writing poetry in order to “take hold” of their lives, express their fears and frustrations, and create and position themselves in specific ways.15

Young peoples’ negotiation of texts can also shape their identities and give them the tools to navigate their social and cultural experiences16 as well as help them obtain and hold on to social power. Scholars have demonstrated how youth use and produce texts in their lives as a way of highlighting the value of these texts and the accompany literacy practices for specific groups of young people, such as adolescent girls,17 ethnic minorities,18 tech-savvy teens,19 and gang members or gang-affiliated


youth. These studies demonstrate the ubiquity and power of texts in the lives of diverse groups of young people. But what about the place of sacred texts in the lives of religious youth?

**Religious Literacies and Religious Texts**

A growing body of research indicates that youths’ religious reading and writing practices — their religious literacies — can be powerful forces in their lives. In her classic work, *Ways with Words*, Heath demonstrated the importance of religious texts such as the Bible in raising children, developing conceptions of good parenting, directing oral storytelling, and affecting social interactions across generations. Heath’s work suggests the centrality of religion, religious practices, and religious texts in the lives of individuals and communities. Religious literacies can also facilitate youths’ learning of religious discourses, clarify the differences between sacred and secular texts, and demonstrate the authority of religious texts, even at a young age. For some youth, religious oral and print discourses influence the way they talk and write for academic purposes. For other youth, religious literacies influence identity development and the way they negotiate their place in the world. In a 26-month study, Sarroub identified how Muslim youth negotiated their places in and out of school through their use of religious texts.

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24 See Sarroub, “In-Betweeness.”
The youth organized their overall behaviors and speech into categories derived from the Qur’an. For these youth, religious texts and religious literacies were profound and important means of making sense of their experiences in and out of school. By living their lives in accordance with their religious traditions, as derived from religious texts, the youth were “endowed [with] a state of spiritual grace.”

A recent comparative study of Methodist and Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices found important differences in the ways in which these groups of youth read religious texts, as influenced by their social and cultural experiences, traditions, beliefs, and commitments. The religious literacies of the Methodist youths, for example, were informed by a culture of interpretation, which was characterized by active participation in the construction of meaning of scripture. These youth actively engaged in extended discussions about scripture with their peers and the adult leaders in their congregation. Their discussions focused on constructing possible meanings of scripture. The Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices were informed by a culture of listening that privileged limited and infrequent involvement during literacy events, such as reading and talking about scripture. The Latter-day Saint youth sought to find “right answers” in scripture, repeat what scripture said, read with the intention of believing what they read, and memorize scripture. As one of very few published studies of Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices, this research suggests that Latter-day Saint youths’ interaction with sacred text was primarily passive and limited.

A recent study seeks to extend this work by investigating how Latter-day Saint youth read self-selected scripture passages. This research identified five ways that Latter-day Saint youth read scripture. One of the participants primarily summarized what he read by translating each phrase into a modern-day English equivalent. Another participant privileged fact-based comments as she read. A third made numerous connections between his prior knowledge and what he was reading, essentially focusing on the similarities between scripture and other things that he had read. Another youth’s reading of scripture was characterized by inferences or logical interpretations based on textual evidence and his own thinking. This young man was

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25 Ibid., 145.
26 See Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths,”
attempting to draw life lessons from his reading. The final participant engaged in a problem-solving relationship with scripture by seeking to solve text-based or personal problems as she read. This required her to construct on-going, conditional knowledge about what scripture might mean.

The existing literature on youths’ religious literacy practices suggests the importance of young people’s faiths and the work they do to make sense of their worlds. It also highlights the importance of religious texts in the lives of religious youth. But with the exception of the last two studies, we know very little about Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices and nothing about how they construct their views of sacred texts.

**Construction of the Sacred**

In his historic work with the Australian Arunta aborigines, Emile Durkheim did not equate the sacred with divinity as represented by gods or supernatural powers; rather, the sacred was sacred because it was set apart from the ordinary, what Durkheim called the profane.\(^{28}\) To understand what is sacred, then, is to understand what is profane, and vice versa. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto used the Latin *numinous* to describe the power, presence, and majesty of the holy, or sacred.\(^{29}\) The numinous is not understood, nor can be understood, in terms of other experiences. It is truly “out of this world.” For Otto, experiencing the numinous produces feelings of profound unworthiness and a sense of the insignificance of everyday life. He called this the “feeling of absolute profaneness.”\(^{30}\) Mircea Eliade argued for the existence of sacred space, time, nature, and self.\(^{31}\) Using religious man and non-religious man to demonstrate how individuals might understand the sacred and profane, Eliade discussed such sacred spaces as home, temple, and cosmos, and the sacred time invoked during religious rituals.

For Eliade, Otto, and Durkheim, the sacred exists in opposition to the ordinary. Indeed, the sacred-profane polarity may be a common

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\(^{30}\) Ibid., 51.

religious construct, yet what counts as sacred and profane can vary from one person and context to another. For some, the body, as a temple, is sacred. For others, the body, as impure, is profane. For some, their responsibilities as spouses or parents are sacred as well as relationships with God and others, global issues such as climate change or food shortage, and even reading and writing. If the sacred is understood in opposition to the profane, then, as Durkheim states, “anything can be sacred” that is set apart from the ordinary. For this study, I conceptualize the sacred as that which stands in contrast to the profane. Because this may differ from one culture or individual to another, conceptions of the sacred come from the participants themselves; specifically, their conceptions of sacred texts, as influenced by their social and cultural values, experiences, and practices.

**Summary of Background Literature**

Together, these perspectives suggest that texts and the sociocultural construction of texts may be an important part of young peoples’ lives and that religious texts can have powerful influences on youths’ experiences in the world. Yet, the extant research has yet to address important questions about the intersection of youth, religion, and the construction of sacred texts. How, for example, do religious youth conceptualize sacred texts, and what influences do social and cultural experiences and commitments play in their conceptualizations of these texts? This study addresses these questions in the hope of opening a dialogue among religious educators about how youth construct their views of sacred texts, which might inform their literacy practices, including their use of scripture.

**Research Design and Methodology**

**Participants and Sites**

Nine Latter-day Saint youth participated in this study. I selected Latter-day Saint participants because Mormonism has identifiable

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34 Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 52.
texts as part of their faith and because Latter-day Saint youth typically demonstrate moderate to high levels of religious involvement and use of texts;\textsuperscript{35} therefore, they met the key criteria of this study. Also, the limited research base on Latter-day Saint youth and their literacy practices, including how they construct their views of sacred texts, warrants additional attention.

Each participant was between 12–17 years old at the beginning of the two-year study, and all of them attended local public middle or high schools. Participants had been involved in the Church for their entire lives. During the study they regularly participated in worship services and youth-oriented activities throughout the week. All of the participants indicated that their faith was an important part of their lives and that it influenced much of what they did on any given day. A central part of their religious experiences was reading scripture. All of the participants stated that they had scripture in their homes and that it was an essential part of their lives.

This study was located in a mid-sized college town in the Midwestern United States. After receiving written informed consent from parents and religious leaders, I began observing and interacting with the youth at church and during their early morning seminary classes. In each site youth engaged with scripture in the company of their religious peers and under the direction of local religious leaders. Youth and adults interacted warmly in these environments, often talking casually before and after scheduled events. All of the youth indicated that they attended religious services voluntarily.

**Data Collection**

Data consisted of five interviews with each participant over a two-year period and one academic year of observations.

**Semi-structured interviews.** The questions in the five interviews developed over the course of the study and were informed by observations and conversations with the participants. The first interview gathered critical background information about the youth, such as their views of religion, their religious literacy practices, and the religious and academic activities in which they participated. The second interview explored participants’ motivations for academic and religious literacies. Throughout the interviews and observations, discourse appeared to play an important role in the youths’ experiences; therefore, the purpose of

\textsuperscript{35} See Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching.*
the third interview was to explore the role of discourse and participants’ views of what constituted the sacred in their experiences. The fourth interview focused on youths’ views of sacred texts and how they read them. In the final interview I explored participants’ views of non-religious texts, and as with the fourth interview, how youth actually read them. I made an audio recording of the interviews and transcribed them prior to analysis. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes.

Table 1. Description of Individual Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Grade in School</th>
<th>Interests” or Hobbies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jonah</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>skateboarding video games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>basketball, video games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>reading, sports, music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priscilla</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>reading, playing guitar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>science fiction, blogging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>karate, volunteering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>basketball, music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timothy</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>science fiction, fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Acting, playing drums</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations. I observed the youth during their Sunday worship services, their early morning and Sunday evening classes, and church-related activities for an academic year. I used narrative description in the form of detailed field notes drawn from direct observations as the

36. Jonah and Sophia are siblings. They grew up in the same home and at the time of the study lived together with their parents and younger sibling.
principle data of the observations. I took descriptive notes about what individuals did and said during the course of each class, meeting, or event. I made particular note of the talk, texts, and religious practices youth engaged in as part of their activities. I tried to document interactions verbatim, while also noting physical gestures, facial expressions, and to whom participants were speaking. Together, interviews and observations challenged emerging findings and helped develop a view of the youths’ notions of sacred texts and how they constructed them.

**Analytic Procedures**

The following questions guided the analysis of the interviews and observations: What counts as sacred texts for Latter-day Saint youth and how do Latter-day Saint youth develop their conceptions of sacred texts? To address these questions, I analyzed the data iteratively as it was collected. This back and forth process informed subsequent data collection because it allowed me to quickly follow up on participants’ responses and explore potentially promising leads as they related to the construction of sacred texts. After all of the data were collected, the most intensive data analysis occurred, informed by methods of constant comparative analysis.

During the first round of coding after data collection was complete, I coded interviews and observational field notes by marking lines and events that related to sacred texts or how they were constructed. These codes tended to focus on why scripture was important to the youth, primarily manifest through specific personal experiences with scripture. Through microanalysis, or line-by-line analysis, I was able to establish the critical nature of scripture in the youths’ experiences. It was, in their words, “freaking awesome,” “a cool book,” “a holy text,” “important, for sure,” and the means through which some youth formed their opinions of the world.

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37. Samantha and Timothy are siblings. They grew up in the same home and at the time of the study lived together with their parents and younger sibling.


40. See Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

Closely analyzing the youths’ responses revealed that their views of scripture were often embedded within specific experiences, or stories, that helped to illustrate the value of scripture in their lives. Identification of these contextual stories and experiences was facilitated by utilizing the basic components of the “paradigm.” Corbin and Strauss explain the paradigm as an analytic strategy or tool for exploring the relationships between context, the conditions that influence the nature of situations, and process, the interactions that occur in response to situations. Specifically, the paradigm focuses attention on the sets of conditions that influence participants’ responses, the actions and emotions of the participants themselves, and the consequences of the participants’ responses to events or conditions. Using the paradigm as an analytic tool allowed me to draw out and more clearly explore the stories and experiences that the youth used to convey and contextualize their views of what made scripture sacred.

Additionally, creating relational statements among the developing codes helped demonstrate how the codes fit together into larger, more integrated categories across the data. I created the following relational statements, using previously identified concepts (in quotation marks below), drawn from the codes:

- Because youth had specific “important (religious) experiences” with “religious texts” that were situated within their “religious practices and values,” the “construction of sacred texts” seemed to be influenced by these “religious practices and values.”
- When youth “read scripture” as part of “family scripture study” and “individual scripture study” they were more likely to see the “value of scripture” in their own lives and “construct notions of sacred texts” based on those “interpersonal experiences.”

Writing relational statements about what I was observing helped me see how some of the concepts fit together, which provided clarification.
about the relationships among the data. Relational statements helped explain the what, why, where, and how of the data.

On the face of it, the data analysis process may appear to have progressed in a linear fashion; in practice, it was disjointed as subsequent analyses of the data influenced the development of existing codes and new data informed developing insights. Over time, the continual revisions of the constant comparison codes helped me identify themes that I believe explained Latter-day Saint youths’ views of sacred texts and how they constructed them, as influenced by their social and cultural experiences.

**Exploratory Qualitative Research**

Because “thinking statistically about qualitative research” privileges one way of seeing how the world works without sufficient attention to the different foci and applications of different research paradigms, it may be theoretically and methodologically suspect. Judging one research method in terms of another can be like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. For its part, qualitative research grows out of an interpretive tradition which focuses on understanding, or interpreting, actions in social contexts by attending to “how” and “why” questions rather than “how many” or “how much” questions. The goal of qualitative forms of research is to provide in-depth understanding of the meaning of human action through non-numeric forms of data such as interviews, observations, and the collection and analysis of relevant artifacts. Because qualitative forms of research are designed to produce hypotheses rather than test them, they do not demand large numbers of participants nor is there an attempt to generalize findings beyond the target population of the study. Hypothesis-generating, qualitative research is particularly appropriate for gaining critical insights into important phenomena about which little is known, such as the manner in which youth develop their views of sacred texts.

As an exploratory qualitative study, this paper identifies and describes the processes by which nine Latter-day Saint youth constructed

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their views of scripture as sacred text through their social and cultural experiences in one Latter-day Saint community. It does not suggest that this is the only way for youth to understand scripture as sacred or even that this way represents the way other Latter-day Saint youth construct their views of scripture as sacred text. However, as one of the only empirical studies to examine this phenomenon, this study is significant because it opens up an important area in need of further research, refocuses attention on youths’ sociocultural relationship with scripture, and explores how youth can actually come to believe scripture is sacred to them. Moreover, this small-scale, qualitative study can spark conversation about the nature of LDS youths’ experiences with scripture, including how their religiocultural beliefs and practices can influence how they feel about scripture. Given the exploratory nature of the current study and the unique question that it addresses at the intersection of youth, scripture, and the sacred, this study is consistent with the focus and intent of exploratory qualitative research. Additional research may seek to verify or generalize this study’s findings, which may require a larger sample size, several research contexts, and a testable hypothesis.

**A Regular and Important Part of My Life:**

**Constructing Sacred Texts**

Scripture was a foundational element in the youths’ lives. All of them stated that they read scripture every day and valued it as a critical part of their social and cultural religious literacy practices. The major assertion of this study is that Latter-day Saint youth constructed their views of sacred texts in terms of the regularity and importance of these texts in their lives. This section explores the nature of youths’ experiences with scripture and how these experiences informed their construction of it as sacred texts.

**A Regular Part of My Life**

The youth in this study had grown up reading scripture. It was in their blood. Samantha said that she and her family have “always read scriptures.” Vincent stated that he had been reading scripture “as long as I can remember.” Paul said that he had been reading scripture, “probably, my whole life.” Stephen stated that scriptures were important to him because “I’ve been using them for — I guess ever since [I was]

49 See Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths.”
eight when I was baptized.” He added, “And [scripture] will probably be even more important next year because of seminary, and studying it even further.” Jonathan remembered his mother telling him that she used scripture to help him learn to read. For as long as these youth could remember, scripture was a regular part of their lives as Latter-day Saints. Scripture seemed to always be around them. During the interviews they talked about seeing scripture lying around their houses; hearing it read at home and church by peers, siblings, parents, and leaders; and reading it themselves individually and as families.

But how does scripture as a regular part of their lives inform their construction of it as a sacred text? In a word, the youth in this study had been socialized into the sacredness of scripture by being around it regularly in ways that reinforced its religious, social, and personal value to them, their family, and their faith. Scripture became sacred to these young people as they experienced it regularly in their lives. The connection between youths’ social and cultural construction of sacred texts and their experiences with scripture as Latter-day Saints is represented in Timothy’s response to a question about the place of scripture in his life:

Timothy: [Scriptures] are a pretty big part of my life, mostly once again because I was raised in the Church, with the Church in my life.

Interviewer: Are there other books that are as or more important to you than the scriptures?

Timothy: I don’t know why any single book or even a series could be something as big as the scriptures in my life. Especially when … I was raised with the Church, with the Church in my life.

Interviewer: So you’re saying that the scriptures would be the most important books in your life. Did I hear that correctly?

Timothy: Yes.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Timothy: Didn’t we just go over the whole “raised with the Church”?
Interviewer: I’d like more details on that. You mentioned that quite a few times, “because you were raised in the Church,” which is important . . .

Timothy: It just kind of became a regular part of my life. And the other principles I was taught as a kid were kind of based with the Church.

In his response, Timothy stated five times that being raised in the Church or having the Church part of his life explained why scripture was so important to him. Yet he struggled to tease this apart. Even when pressed, Timothy explained that scripture was important because it had always been part of his experience as a Latter-day Saint. He could not even comprehend why, for him, “any single book or even a series [of books] could be something as big as the scriptures.” He did hesitate a moment, however, as he tried to explain this point but then returned to his “raised in the Church” response.

When I asked for clarification about why scripture was the most important set of texts for him, he raised his voice and with some frustration reminded me that we just covered that: “Didn’t we just go over the whole ‘raised in the Church’?” Careful attention to Timothy’s words suggests that although they may have sounded repetitive, he may have been making a larger point that became more salient through repeated analyses. Timothy’s words represent how being raised in the Church made scripture an important part of his life. That is, Timothy explained that as a result of being raised as a Latter-day Saint scripture became important to him because it “became a regular part of [his] life.” Scripture may not have started out as important to Timothy; in fact he said that it did not but over time and through repeated experiences with it, it had become sacred because it began to stand out from every other text in his life. Over time, the distance between sacred texts and profane texts may have become more apparent for Timothy.

It makes sense that Timothy’s experiences with scripture influenced how he viewed it because learning, from a sociocultural perspective, is a social process through which we make sense of the world around us, including what to value and why, as we interact with our environments.50

Christian writer and youth pastor, Kenda Creasy Dean, articulated the notion of learning as a sociocultural process for Latter-day Saints by arguing that “Mormons rigorously and unapologetically plunge teenagers into [their faith] and surround them with religiously articulate adults who demonstrate how to … enact a Mormon way of life.”\(^{51}\) And as most Mormons know, Mormonism is “a way of life.”\(^ {52}\) For Timothy, his interactions with scripture at home and at church, and on his own and with family and friends over the course of his life, may have influenced how he felt about scripture as sacred texts.

Timothy did not learn about scripture or the value of scripture in a vacuum. He experienced day-by-day what it meant to his family and his faith to understand scripture as sacred. As demonstrated in his interview, Timothy struggled to articulate the details of how that happened. The best he could do was try to convey that there was something important about the relationship between being raised in the Church and scripture being a regular part of his life. From a sociocultural perspective, scripture as sacred text seemed to be part of Timothy’s religious wallpaper. Because it was all around him, he may have struggled to see how it became sacred to him because it may have happened slowly, seemingly naturally, and without his being aware of it as he grew up in the Church.

Vincent helped to address the specific social and cultural practices and influences that seemed to make scripture a normal and frequent part of Timothy’s and his peers’ lives when he stated, “I mean it is encouraged — to read your scriptures every night and … I think that’s a big reason why I [read] them — because [we’ve] been encouraged to.” Recognizing the influence of parental and church leader encouragements, Vincent identified one of the ways scripture became a regular and important part of his life. Yet, it seems to run a little deeper that mere encouragement. Vincent’s simple — and single — reference to being encouraged to read scripture may belie the frequency with which he heard and observed religiocultural messages about reading scripture and the importance of scripture. Consider that he and his peers:

- Brought personal copies of scripture to church each Sunday and to seminary each school day,
- Read scripture every Sunday at church, each weekday at seminary, and most days on their own at home,

\(^{51}\) Dean, *Almost Christian*, 60.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 52.
• Observed each other reading scripture and using scripture in talks and lessons,

• Heard General Authorities of the Church, local leaders, and parents talk about the importance of scripture and the importance of reading and studying scripture daily,

• Heard these same individuals share their personal witnesses of the importance of scripture and scripture study, and

• Observed these same individuals use scripture in their talks and lessons.

Although Vincent and his peers may have been “encouraged to read [their] scriptures,” these encouragements were bolstered by repeated experiences with and examples of scripture reading by numerous individuals at church, seminary, and home. As Paul stated, “Reading the scriptures and stuff is a big thing in our church. Our leaders taught us to read the scriptures and to ponder them.” Given the frequent formal and informal attention to scripture in this congregation, these youth were literally surrounded by a scripture-reading culture from an early age, which helped to create the impression of scripture reading as a normal part of their experiences in church and at home. Reading scripture was simply what one did as a believing Mormon youth in this congregation. It was an important way of being “one of us” in this religious community. As Timothy said, “I just [read scripture] because I was raised a Mormon.”

Moving closer to home, Timothy’s sister, Samantha, provided some insight into what scripture study looked like in practice in one Latter-day Saint family:

**Samantha:** We’ve always read scriptures as a family. And we used to just read them chapter by chapter, but now my parents have us ask gospel questions because when we read them chapter by chapter we weren’t really paying attention.

**Interviewer:** Now your parents have you ask gospel questions?

**Samantha:** Mh-hm.

**Interviewer:** So, how does that work?

**Samantha:** Timothy made a box, so we write a gospel question down and then we draw a question out of the box each night.
and we talk about them and sometimes we look up scriptures for them.

Samantha stated that as a family they approached scripture study in different ways to try to keep everyone interested and attentive during this critical religiocultural practice. Although the question box may have been a novel approach to family scripture study, daily scripture reading was a common practice for Samantha, and Timothy, as well as the other Latter-day Saint youth in the study. It marked familial and individual adherence to an institutionally and personally important cultural experience. Because of the consistent social and institutional support of and attention to scripture study, being raised in the Church could make scripture a regular part of the youths’ lives; therefore, cultural beliefs, values, and practices could help explain these Latter-day Saint youths’ conception of sacred texts as those texts that they had grown up reading in the context of their religious traditions.

**An Important Part of My Life**

In addition to youths’ regular experiences with scripture at home, church, and seminary, they identified certain personally important experiences with scripture that helped them construct their views of it as sacred text. Their personal experiences with scripture served as evidence of the significant place scripture could have in their lives as they read it, thought about it, and tried to live what they were learning from it. Specifically, the youth said that they knew scripture was important to them because it made them feel good and helped them perform better in school.

When I asked Vincent about the place of scripture in his life, he explained the academic value of scripture, sandwiching it between the work he had to do to receive that benefit. He said, “I’ve really taken a concerted effort to read them more frequently. And I definitely think that’s helped me a lot more this year with school. Just taking the time to read the scriptures and to try and understand them better.” One reason that scripture was important to Vincent was because reading it — putting forth a “concerted effort to read” it — improved his academic performance. I was curious how this worked, so I asked him how reading scripture helped him in school. He said simply, “the Lord’s blessings.” Wanting to know more, I asked for an example of how reading scripture helped him progress academically. He responded energetically:
I mean, I’ll take fifteen minutes, and oh man! I mean, I could just take ten, fifteen minutes, maybe even a half-hour depending on how much [time] I can [read my scriptures] that night. And I know that the next day I’m able to concentrate more. And understand the concepts that are being taught in school better. I can focus on doing my homework a lot quicker and so then I have time the next night to do my homework.

The importance of scripture in Vincent’s experience seemed clear. He was almost effusive explaining how he felt the Lord blessed him for reading scripture: He could concentrate better the next day in school, was able to understand academic concepts better, developed an improved focus on his homework that helped him complete it faster, and felt that he had more time to do his homework the day after he read scripture. Vincent said that these blessings became more apparent when he began attending seminary and reading scripture more regularly.

Likewise, Jonathan identified the blessings of reading scripture when he said that he read scripture because “I know that I’ll be blessed if I do it.” I asked him to say more about those blessings. He explained, “I’ve been doing better in school, like ever since I started reading my scriptures regularly, and so, that’s just one kind of big thing.” Jonathan said that one evidence of the importance of scripture in his life was the role it played in his academic achievement; namely, reading scripture improved his grades. This, he said, was one of the blessings of regular scripture study or “one kind of big thing” that let him know that scripture was sacred to him and different than other things that he read.

For Vincent and Jonathan scripture did things that other texts did not do by improving their school work. They both called it a blessing that the efforts they put forth to read scripture translated into academic achievement. Both young men were willing to entertain the idea that reading scripture may have improved their ability to do better in school because scripture reading was developing their reading and thinking skills; however, they still called it a blessing and gave credit to the Lord for the academic benefits they received. Both young men stated that other texts did not help them like this and that there was no other text that they would consider as or more important than scripture. It may be the case, then, that for these young people scripture’s ability to “bless” them in personal and important ways, such as academic learning, helped them see scripture as sacred text in their lives.

Jonah and Sophia identified another aspect of the sacred nature of scripture when they characterized the importance of scripture in their
lives by how it made them feel. Jonah stated that he read scripture every
day and that “you just kind of feel great” when you do. I asked him to
say more:

Well, when I decide to read I get my scriptures. I open them. I
read and then the feeling comes. Not only while I’m reading, but
afterwards [too]. It feels like you —. You just feel better. You feel
better after you read the scriptures.

For Jonah, scripture was an essential part of his life because of the
way it made him feel. When he read he felt “great.” And when he read,
he felt “better” than he did before he read. These feelings were affective
evidence for Jonah that scripture was sacred. No other text, Jonah said,
made him feel this way. Later in the interview, Jonah explained that
when he would get home from school, he would do his homework as
quickly as possible so that he could read scripture. As he read, he tried to
capture that “great” feeling as a way of renewing his faith and his belief
that scripture was sacred text.

Jonah’s sister Sophia said that scriptures were “hugely important
[and] a big, guiding factor in [her] life. They kind of, how can I say this?
They’re like a daily reminder to me … that I’m loved.” Similar to her
brother, Sophia’s evidence of the importance of scripture in her life was
informed by how it made her feel. Scripture reminded Sophia that she
was loved. It was a daily reminder that she was important and that she
meant something to someone. Sophia’s feelings of love were one reason
that she believed scripture was sacred and quite different than other
things that she might read. “If I didn’t have scripture in my life,” she
said, “I wouldn’t believe in [the gospel] the same way. I wouldn’t believe
a lot of the things that I do.”

For Jonah and Sophia, scripture was sacred because it made them
feel different than other texts. It made Jonah “feel great” and it made
Sophia “feel loved.” For these youth, feeling great and loved as they
read appeared to be unique to scripture and one indicator of the sacred
nature of scripture. Neither of these two young people stated that other
texts made them feel like this. Scripture was distinctive in this regard.
For Jonah and Sophia, feeling loved and feeling great by engaging with
scripture represented affective evidence that they were reading sacred
texts.

The youth in this study developed their conceptions of sacred
texts by how they functioned in their lives. They not only had frequent
experiences with scripture that reinforced its special place in their lives
and their faith, they also had deeply personal experiences with scripture
that led them to believe that it was more than words on a page. Through these experiences, the youth in this study constructed a view of scripture as sacred text. Surprisingly, youth did not indicate that they developed their conceptions of sacred texts according to theological principles of scripture or tenets of Mormonism. For them, scripture was sacred because their regular experiences with it helped them see and feel its importance in their lives and how it was different — and did different things to them — than other texts.

Clearly, doctrinal evidence for the sacredness of scripture is important, but for these youth the heart and soul of their belief in the sacredness of scripture rested on how they interacted with it, what it did for them, and what it did for those around them. The youth talked about scripture experientially, explaining that believed that it was sacred because they had personal evidence of it in their lives.

Implications and Conclusion

Recent research suggests that young people’s faith may act as a “constant lens” through which they see the world and their place in it and “serves as a reference point for everyday life.” As such, religious youth not only carry their faiths with them; their faiths may influence how they see the world, what they see in the world, and how they choose to interact with the world. Therefore, the manner in which religious beliefs, traditions, values, and experiences influence young peoples’ selection and use of texts, interpretation of texts, and construction of texts may require renewed attention by religious educators. The current study attends to the nature of Latter-day Saint youths’ construct of scripture as sacred texts, which can inform how we think about youths’ relationship with scripture and how it might be developed. Moreover, if religious educators seek to engage youth with institutionally sacred texts, which are a critical part of learning and teaching in the Church, then they may need to understand youths’ views of these texts, which can — and should — mediate textual practices. In drawing out the implications that follow, I have careful considered the primary assertion of this study, the current state of scripture literacy instruction, and where and how I believe scripture literacy instruction can contribute to the development of students’ gospel knowledge and the development of their faith.

Youths’ Scripture Reading Processes

Scripture-based instructional practices are important because they can influence the degree to which youth feel connected to the institutional practices surrounding sacred texts, which may have consequences for how youth take up these texts, textual practices, and perhaps the content of these texts. Currently, we know that youth in seminary are reading scripture, but the research base on the processes that Latter-day Saint youth use to navigate scripture is very small, consisting of two published studies. Clearly, greater understanding of how youth read and understand scripture would be valuable for teachers and parents who seek to improve youths’ scripture reading practices. Therefore, it may not be enough to focus on what youth in the Church are taught. More attention may need to be paid to how it is taught and how youth learn it. And that means focusing on the processes that youth use to read and construct knowledge and testimony of the truths in scripture. The textual practices that parents and teachers in the Church model for youth, give them time to practice in class, and encourage them to use on their own may matter just as much as the doctrine itself because the doctrines of the gospel can only do their work on youths’ hearts and minds when youth understand them, embrace them, and live them. And that happens in part through the manner in which youth are taught to read scripture. As a Church, we cannot get away from the methods of scripture literacy instruction if we hope to foster youths’ deep and transformative learning of gospel truths.

Youths’ Experiences with Scripture

For those who seek to develop youths’ commitments to specific religious beliefs and practices as contained within scripture, first understanding youths’ views of these texts may have tremendous consequences for

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56 See Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths,” and Rackley, “How Young Latter-day Saints Read the Scriptures: Five Profiles.”
the development of their faith. For example, knowing that youth value scripture for what it has done — and can do — in their lives, may make religious educators in the Church more sensitive to the experiences that youth are having with scripture in religious classrooms. This can change the focus from telling youth what scripture means — which often puts the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual responsibility for learning on the teacher — to helping youth develop the tools to discover personally important truths in scripture for themselves — which helps youth take on more of the responsibility for developing their gospel knowledge and their faith. When we understand that youth construct their views of scripture as sacred text through repeated and important experiences with it, then we may be more attentive to the nature of the experiences that they have with scripture, especially those experiences that they have in our classrooms. Failure to understand and attend to youths’ experiences with scripture and their views of scripture may leave them feeling alienated from the very religiocultural practices and experiences that appear to mean so much to them.

Given that this study demonstrates the sociocultural development of Latter-day Saint youths’ conceptions of scripture as sacred texts, religious educators may seek to help youth see how their experiences with scripture are influencing their understanding of it as sacred text. This can occur as religious educators encourage youth to be more attentive to their experiences with scripture: namely, how they read it, why they read it, where they read it, what they get out of it, what it does to them, how they feel about it, what they say about it, what role it plays in their lives, and so forth. Regularly devoting a few minutes each class period for students to share their experiences with scripture, not just what they learned from it, may help attune students’ hearts and minds to the role of scripture in their lives and the experiences that they are having with it as they read it, ponder it, and talk about it. This can be a small, but effective way to help youth begin to see that they are developing a view of scripture as sacred text as they interact with it.

**Scripture vs. Non-Scripture**

Drawing on the conception of the sacred as that which stands in opposition to the profane, another way to help youth understand the sacredness of scripture is to draw their attention to the differences between scripture and other texts. This can be done, for example, by helping youth see how

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reading scripture does things to their hearts and minds that other texts do not; helping them see how thinking about scripture draws them to Heavenly Father, connects them to the Savior, and invites the Holy Ghost into their lives in a way that other texts do not; and helping them see how scripture, unlike other texts, contains “principles of truth that will resolve every confusion and every problem and every dilemma that will face the human family or any individual in it.”58 The differences between scripture and other texts may act as evidence for youth of the sacredness of scripture because they can highlight the difference between what scripture can do to them, and what other texts, by comparison, cannot.

The current study contributes to a finer-grained understanding of how social and cultural factors influence young peoples’ notions of texts. For the Latter-day Saint youth in this study, scripture was not necessarily sacred because it was written by prophets, spoken by God, or because reading it would get them to heaven. For them, scripture was sacred because of how it functioned in their lives and how well it aligned with important religiocultural values, such as the experiential quality of religious truth. In the end, we may be able to do a better job of developing youths’ religious literate practices, such as reading scripture, if we have a clearer understanding of how their lived experiences help them construct their notions of scripture as sacred text.

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58 Boyd K. Packer, “Teach the Scriptures,” in Charge to Religious Educators (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 1994), 89.
**TELLING THE STORY OF THE COMING FORTH OF THE BOOK OF MORMON**

Stephen O. Smoot


Abstract: *The book From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* by Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat is an outstanding resource for anyone interested in early Latter-day Saint history and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. It provides a compelling narrative about the recovery, translation, and publication of the Book of Mormon that utilizes the most cutting-edge historical scholarship available today.

**Telling the Story of Faith**

The Iranian-American author Reza Aslan, writing in *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, made the point that religious apologetics need not necessarily be an overt systematic refutation of criticism. Responding to his critics, who have accused him of being a Muslim “apologist” (in the pejorative sense), Aslan wrote, “There are those who will call *[No god but God]* an apology [for Islam], but that is hardly a bad thing. An apology is a defense, and there is no higher calling than to defend one’s faith, especially from ignorance and hate, and thus help shape the story of that faith.”

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Daniel C. Peterson’s articulation of “positive apologetics,” 2 Aslan insists that there is room for relating the history of one’s religious community in an informed, responsible, and uplifting manner. Indeed, if in so doing one is able to dispel common misunderstandings or diffuse ignorant or bigoted attacks on one’s faith, all the better.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long recognized the need to produce history that will tell the story of the Restoration in a way that counters the many hostile (and often irresponsible or misinformed) narratives and claims of its detractors. This impulse began early. When the Book of Mormon rolled off the press in 1830, Joseph Smith voiced his frustration at the “many false reports [that] have been circulated respecting the [Book of Mormon],” in addition to the “many unlawful measures taken by evil designing persons to destroy me, and also the work.” 3 His preface to the Book of Mormon, in large part, was intended to quell the spurious rumors about the coming forth of the book that were already swirling in the upstate New York air. Despite his efforts, this early antagonism did not abate, and in his 1838 history the Prophet once again felt it necessary to preface the account of his early life and prophetic career with an apologetic emphasis. “Owing to the many reports which have been put in circulation by evil disposed and designing persons in relation to the rise and progress of the Church,” Joseph informed his readers, “I have been induced to write this history so as to disabuse the publick mind, and put all enquirers after truth into possession of the facts as they have transpired in relation both to myself and the Church as far as I have such facts in possession.” 4 Whatever else

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2 “Positive apologetics seek to demonstrate that a given religious or ideological community’s practices or beliefs are good, believable, true, and/or in some cases, superior to those of some other community. … In fact, knowing of the existence of competing doctrines that contradict its own teachings, representatives of a religious community might proceed to a positive apologetics, seeking to demonstrate that one or more of their claims are, in fact, very believable or even, perhaps, superior to rival views.” Daniel C. Peterson, “The Role of Apologetics in Mormon Studies,” Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture 2 (2012): xxxii–xxxiii. See also Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: An Unapologetic Apology for Apologetics,” FARMS Review 22, no. 2 (2010): xxxiii–xxxv.


Joseph’s motives were in producing his history, clearly he had an apologetic interest in telling the story of the Restoration in a reliable manner.

Today the Church continues to recognize the need to produce accurate, responsible history that is faith-affirming and corrective to the hostile narratives or claims still being promulgated.

Recognizing that today so much information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be obtained from questionable and often inaccurate sources, officials of the Church began in 2013 to publish straightforward, in-depth essays on a number of topics. The purpose of these essays, which have been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has been to gather accurate information from many different sources and publications and place it in the Gospel Topics section of LDS.org, where the material can more easily be accessed and studied by Church members and other interested parties.5

So reads a statement prepared by the Church that prefaces the “Gospel Topics” essays that address sensitive issues in LDS history and theology. “The Church places great emphasis on knowledge and on the importance of being well informed about Church history, doctrine, and practices,” the statement concludes. “Ongoing historical research, revisions of the Church’s curriculum, and the use of new technologies allowing a more systematic and thorough study of scriptures have all been pursued by the Church to that end.”6 Far from wincing at the onslaught of criticism and skepticism found online and elsewhere, the Church is tackling the main issues raised by those with questions head-on by revamping its emphasis on producing the best historical scholarship possible.

From Darkness unto Light

From out of this historiographical renaissance has arisen a number of important books and articles touching on Church history and theology. Arguably the most impressive work on pre-1830 Mormon history to appear out of this milieu is Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat’s 2015 volume From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon.7 This book, the product of “new

5 “Gospel Topics Essays,” online at https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng
6 “Gospel Topics Essays,” online at https://www.lds.org/topics/essays?lang=eng
7 Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon (Provo, UT, and
knowledge [the authors] developed at the Joseph Smith Papers Project” (viii), seeks to tell the story of the early days of the Restoration in a way that lets the participants in those events (what Oliver Cowdery famously deemed “days never to be forgotten”) practically speak for themselves. “Our book attempts to capture the first-person point of view of Joseph Smith and those who witnessed the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon,” MacKay and Dirkmaat write. “Though we have taken into account the perspectives of detractors and nonbelievers in our analysis, the purpose of our book is to understand the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as a miracle, which can best be understood through the accounts of those closest to the process and by those who believed” (xv).

This is an entirely respectable historiographical track to take, all things considered. It was no less than Richard Bushman, Joseph Smith’s premier biographer, who observed that the near-thoroughgoing naturalism of some of the Prophet’s commenters has hindered their (and our) understanding of early LDS history. “These everyday details [about the witnesses’ involvement with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon] are besides the point for secular historians,” Bushman remarked. “Most of the detailed sources were written by believers, and to follow them too closely infuses a narrative with their faith. Secular historians are, therefore, more inclined than Mormons to suppress source material from Joseph’s closest associates.” The suppression of sources that do not comport to the assumptions that underlie one’s reconstruction of the past would be wholly unacceptable in any other historical pursuit. Why is it, then, that naturalistic writers of early Mormonism or the life of Joseph Smith seem to get a pass on this? Whatever the answer, it is hard not to suspect that it has something to do with the ideological bias towards secularism and naturalism that has firmly planted itself

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Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015). All subsequent citations of this volume will be in parentheses in the body of this review.

8 Oliver Cowdery, “Letter I,” Messenger and Advocate 1, no 1., October 1834, 11.


in academia and has seeped into Mormon Studies itself (which, while unfortunate, is altogether not entirely surprising).11

MacKay and Dirkmaat inform us that “to Joseph Smith and his friends and family, the miraculous translation process was a reality” (xv). This may be uncomfortable to modern secular academicians or otherwise to those who may wish to allegorize away the foundational claims of the Prophet,12 but it is an incontestable truth. There should thus be no shame in historiographically treating it as such or at the very least allowing some level of deference to the participants in this process to tell their own story. This is precisely what our authors do, straightforwardly reporting the testimony of those involved in the production of the Book of Mormon. To be sure, “no work of history nor any examination of sources that speak of heavenly manifestations and the visitations of angels can demonstrate the reality of these miraculous events.” While it is true that “miracles are by definition events that cannot be replicated by mortal beings,” and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was and is believed by Latter-day Saints to be a miracle, this does not mean that one should shy away from telling the story as faithfully to the historical sources as one can (xvi). “What historians can demonstrate,” MacKay and Dirkmaat clarify, “is how the witnesses to these events explained them, how they understood them, and how they came to believe … that Joseph Smith had been called by God to translate gold plates and publish that translation as the Book of Mormon” (xvi).

So how did Joseph Smith’s early followers come to accept him as a seer? What was it about this miracle that inspired faith strong enough to lead people to follow the young prophet across half a continent and to social, political, and religious ostracism? Undoubtedly a major factor was that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was grounded in the tangible, real-world, day-to-day experience of those involved. Joseph was not a mystic who mused on his ineffable encounter with the Divine. He was, rather, a farmhand who on the evening of September 21, 1827 brought home a set of plates and spectacles. Those who knew him the best believed his account of how he retrieved those artifacts. As MacKay and Dirkmaat meticulously document, there were many involved in this

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12 On the efforts of some to categorize the Book of Mormon as “inspired fiction,” including a critique of such efforts, see Stephen O. Smoot, “The Imperative for a Historical Book of Mormon,” online at http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-imperative-for-a-historical-book-of-mormon/. 

recovery process, including Joseph’s wife, his mother, father, siblings, close friends, relatives, and even hostile neighbors (1–24). So credible was Joseph’s claim to have recovered a set of physical plates in the eyes of those who knew him that efforts were undertaken by some to steal them. The presumptions of modern skeptics who derogatorily look down on those of the past as superstitious simpletons notwithstanding, it must count for something that even Joseph’s enemies took him seriously enough to try to pilfer the artifacts. “Compelling stories and news about the plates enveloped local Palmyra residents who heard about the stone box on the hill,” MacKay and Dirkmaat explain (9). These reports spurred on Willard Chase, Lorenzo Saunders, and others to harass the Smith family to the point that Joseph and Emma fled to Harmony, Pennsylvania to seek respite (25–38).

It was while in Harmony, MacKay and Dirkmaat report, that the Prophet began his translation efforts in earnest. There he made copies of the characters on the plates for Martin Harris to take to the celebrated “wise men of the east” — Luther Bradish, Charles Anthon, and Samuel Mitchell — for their inspection (34–35, 39–59). It was also in Harmony where Joseph began refining his ability as a translator, including becoming accustomed to the use of the Nephite interpreters and his own individual seer stone (61–78). MacKay and Dirkmaat explain the history behind the seer stone Joseph used in translating the Book of Mormon, which has commanded considerable attention in the media as of late with the first-time publication of photographs of the stone in 2015. They write:


14 See Michael Hubbard MacKay, “‘Git Them Translated’: Translating the Characters on the Gold Plates,” in *Approaching Antiquity,* 83–118.

15 See “Church History Department Releases Book of Mormon Printer’s Manuscript in New Book,” online at http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-history-department-releases-book-of-mormon-printer-s-manuscript-
Joseph’s possession of additional seer stones is generally not included in traditional LDS history, which focuses upon the use of the “Urim and Thummim.” Some LDS histories and art typically depict Joseph with the spectacles as if they were the only device Joseph Smith used in the translation. Yet Church leaders and Church-sponsored histories have identified the fact that Joseph did not use just the spectacles. Recently, historians of the Joseph Smith Papers Project carefully analyzed all of the known accounts about the translation to document the use of the seer stone. It turns out that Joseph’s seer stone was prepared by God, according to the Book of Mormon, and like the Nephite interpreters, was buried in the earth where Joseph would eventually find it. (67)

Contrary to the misinformed claims one might encounter on some parts of the Internet, there is no actual evidence for an institutional conspiracy on the part of the Church to suppress information about Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone in translating the Book of Mormon.16 While it is true that traditional Latter-day Saint dramatic, artistic, and narrative depictions of the translation of the Book of Mormon have typically omitted the seer stone, as Anthony Sweat explains in the book’s appendix, this can more plausibly be explained as the result of artistic license, lack of knowledge, or innocent neglect rather than an intent to deliberately deceive. (More on this later.) In any event, From Darkness unto Light chronicles the Prophet’s use of the seer stone as well as other translation instruments and explores implications such hold for understanding the production of the Book of Mormon (67–71, 123–130).

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The second third of From Darkness unto Light concerns itself with such incidents as the translation and loss of the Book of Lehi (79–04), the return to Palmyra and the enlisting of Oliver Cowdery as a scribe (105–139), and the experience of the Three and Eight Witnesses (141–161). Concerning the latter, MacKay and Dirkmaat convincingly argue that the experience of multiple witnesses firmly establishes the historicity of the plates. Whether the plates were ancient artifacts or modern forgeries can be debated, but what cannot seriously be debated on historical grounds is their existence and Joseph Smith’s possession of them between the years 1827 and 1830. The accounts of those who handled the plates in some way are reliable and consistent enough that we’re actually able to fairly easily reconstruct their physical dimensions. MacKay and Dirkmaat, piecing together the eyewitness testimony, summarize:

From the accounts of the Three and Eight Witnesses, along with those given by others who interacted in some way with the plates, a fairly complete description of them can be made. They apparently weighed somewhere between forty and sixty pounds. The shape of the plates was reported as being between six and seven inches wide and around eight inches long. They were also four to six inches thick, with two-thirds of the plates being sealed, most likely by one solid piece of metal that covered the whole two-thirds of the plates. The plates that were not bound together were apparently “thin leaves of gold” about the thickness of tin or “about as thick as parchment.” Both the sealed portion and the loose-leaf portion were bound together by three rings in the shape of a capital D. (154, internal citations removed)

So compelling, in fact, is the historicity of the plates that Joseph Smith’s critics have been forced to invent ad hoc rationalizations for their existence that involve, for example, the Prophet (or perhaps some unknown assailants) forging a set of bogus plates. Fawn Brodie dismissed the experience of the Three Witnesses as a hallucinatory vision “conjured up” by the Prophet but was forced to reluctantly concede that “perhaps Joseph built some kind of makeshift deception” to fool the Eight Witnesses and others.17 Dan Vogel likewise has brushed aside

17 Fawn M. Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 78, 80.
the experience of the Three Witnesses as more or less hallucinatory but has gone so far as to speculate how Joseph could have fabricated a set of tin plates to satisfy the unequivocal testimony of those who handled the artifacts. This explanation, ingenious though it may be, is of course highly debatable — it is nothing more than a hypothesis developed to meet the *a priori* demands of a naturalistic worldview. Regardless, what's significant for our purposes here is that the historical evidence is so compelling for the existence of actual, physical plates in Joseph Smith’s possession that even his skeptics are forced to account for their existence in some manner. This much is therefore clear: one cannot


19 See Dan Vogel, “Joseph Smith Brings the Plates Home – Dan Vogel,” online at https://youtu.be/mmX-H1GBivk (27:00–31:13). Vogel has elsewhere waffled on the experience of the Eight Witnesses being visionary or not, suggesting the possibility that it was an experience that combined visionary and non-visionary elements. See Dan Vogel, “The Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 99–105. Vogel, *American Apocrypha*, 108, also suggests “it would have been possible for [Joseph Smith] to make plates out of tin — which would be consistent with the reported weight of between forty and sixty pounds — and allow the chosen few to feel them through a cloth.” Vogel's reluctance to fully commit to one or the other (hallucinatory vs. physical but fabricated) may serve as a clever debating trick (heads Vogel wins; tails the apologists lose), but it isn't very convincing. Against a mountain of historical evidence, at least one other popular anti-Mormon author still holds out to the possibility that the Eight Witnesses simply hallucinated their experience. See Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 205–207. For a response to Vogel and Palmer, see Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49.

simply dismiss the physicality of the plates without doing gross violence to responsible historiography.

The final part of *From Darkness unto Light* touches on the publication of the Book of Mormon, including the details behind Joseph’s attempt to secure a copyright and printer for the text. There are many deeply interesting insights provided by MacKay and Dirkmaat in this part of the book as well as insights that correct previous misunderstanding. For instance, with the work of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, as reported in the book, the dating of Doctrine and Covenants 19 has been pushed back from 1830 to circa August 1829 (190–193). So compelling is the evidence for re-dating this revelation that it has been “changed in the newest edition of the scriptures” (193). Similarly, the details of the once-enigmatic Canadian copyright revelation have emerged thanks largely to the efforts of the Joseph Smith Papers Project (213–215). Far from being a “failed prophecy,” as David Whitmer (mis)remembered,21 “the revelation hinged the success of the mission to Canada on the righteousness of those they would encounter there” (214). As explained further by Marlin K. Jensen, “Although we still do not know the whole story, particularly Joseph Smith’s own view of the situation, we do know that calling the divine communication a ‘failed revelation’ is not warranted. The Lord’s directive clearly conditions the successful sale of the copyright on the worthiness of those seeking to make the sale as well as on the spiritual receptivity of the potential purchasers.”22

But perhaps the most fascinating insight to be found in this section of the book is the discussion of Jonathan A. Hadley’s 1829 account of his visit with Joseph Smith. Printer of the *Palmyra Freeman*, Hadley reported in August 1829 that the Prophet had recently come to him seeking to contract the publication of the Book of Mormon. Although he contemptuously dismissed his account of the recovery of the plates, Hadley nevertheless reported Joseph’s description to him of the physical dimensions thereof. “The leaves of the Bible were plates of gold, about eight inches long, six wide, and one eighth of an inch thick, on which were engraved characters or hieroglyphics,” Hadley conveyed. He likewise


reported one of the earliest accounts of the translation method of the Book of Mormon, again as it was related to him by Joseph Smith: “By placing the Spectacles in a hat, and looking into it, Smith could (he said so, at least,) interpret these characters.” Hadley’s early report is “almost identical” in these two regards to the accounts left by participants in later years, thus reinforcing the overall credibility of the eyewitnesses who were associated with Joseph in the production of the Book of Mormon (167–168).23

By the Gift and Power of Art

Finally, it is worth highlighting the appendix written by Anthony Sweat, assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and a “part-time professionally trained artist” (229). Titled “By the Gift and Power of Art,” this appendix explains, among other things, how Sweat came to blend his historical and artistic training to produce his 2014 painting By the Gift and Power of God (Figure 1). Sweat begins by explaining the inherent difficulty in balancing historical accuracy and artistic imagination. “True art and true history rarely, if ever, fully combine,” he writes. This difficulty is often inescapable because “the aims of history and the aims of art are not aligned, often pulling in entirely different directions” (229–230).

This discord, however, is rarely, if ever, because of a deliberate attempt by an artist to “deceive” those viewing historical artwork. It is rather because the “the two disciplines speak different native languages.” What Sweat calls “the language of history” involves “facts and sources,” whereas “the language of art” is composed of “symbolic representations in line, value, color, texture, form, space, shape, and so forth” (230). Sweat uses Emanuel Leutze’s famous painting Washington Crossing the Delaware (Figure 2) to illustrate this. In almost every particular, Leutze’s painting is historically inaccurate. “However, artists often have little to no intent of communicating historical factuality when they produce a work. Artists want to communicate an idea, and they want to use whatever medium or principle and element of art that it takes to communicate that idea to their viewers” (231). This is perhaps why nobody particularly cares that Leutze’s piece is historically inaccurate; it still hangs proudly in many government buildings, schools, museums, and private homes without anyone batting an eye.

23 See also the discussion in Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and Michael Hubbard MacKay, “Joseph Smith’s Negotiations to Publish the Book of Mormon,” in The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon, 155–171.
Sweat relates this to Latter-day Saint artistic depictions of the translation of the Book of Mormon. It is true that Mormon artists, including those commissioned to produce artwork for Church publications, have traditionally avoided depicting Joseph translating with the seer stone. What is far less likely to be true is that this was motivated by deception. “It is easy for critics to assume a coordinate cover-up or historical rewrite when looking at the images,” Sweat acknowledges, “but the unjuicy reality may have more to do with a preference for speaking artistic language that is ‘truer’ in its communication, even if the depicted events contain historical error” (237). As it turns out, the Church actually did try to commission artwork from Walter Rane depicting the translation of the Book of Mormon with the seer stone. However, Rane explained that he wasn’t able to capture the right aesthetic or artistic feel, and the project fell flat (236).

Similarly, Sweat himself reports that when he first tried rendering an artistic depiction of the translation that conformed to historical reality, his viewers were confused and thought Joseph looking into the hat was him actually vomiting. “It didn’t communicate anything about inspiration, visions, revelations, miracles, translations, or the like — just stomach sickness” (237). The point to all of this is to say the angst that many feel over inaccuracies in Church-commissioned artwork is largely misplaced. There does not appear to be any intention to deceive people, and anyone aware of the how art functions knows that historical accuracy is not typically at the top of an artist’s aesthetic agenda. As such, members of the Church and others should enjoy Church artwork for what it is and not be upset when an artist does not meet all of our (sometimes unreasonable) expectations.
Conclusion

I cannot recommend *From Darkness unto Light* highly enough. It is absolutely essential reading for anyone interested in early LDS history and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. MacKay and Dirkmaat have accomplished a prodigious feat of scholarship with this volume, which is a respectable model for all future stand-alone monographs that may evolve out of the work being done by the Joseph Smith Papers Project or the Church History Department. With their book MacKay and Dirkmaat have told the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in a way that is testimony-strengthening, intellectually exciting, and historically responsible.

As I have thought more about this book, my mind has been called up to reflection on two points. First, it is remarkable how well Joseph Smith’s account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon holds up under scrutiny. I frequently hear the claim that Joseph Smith was some kind of fool for starting a religion in the modern era. Whereas the origins of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are largely lost to the realm of the quasi-mythic past, so I’ve heard, Joseph Smith was audaciously foolish to found a religious movement in the era of the printing press, where historians and other scholars could easily fact-check his claims. The default assumption for the Prophet’s skeptical critics, of course, is that
modern scholarship has largely exploded Joseph’s outlandish claims or has otherwise cast an indelible shadow of suspicion over his credibility.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The sort of work accomplished by MacKay and Dirkmaat (and they are by no means alone) highlights how almost airtight the evidence is for the chronology of the early Restoration. The best and strongest historical evidence supports the claims of Joseph Smith concerning the Book of Mormon: that in September 1827 he returned home one evening with a set of physical metal plates found at a nearby hill; that he recovered those plates and showed them to others, who not only testified to having encounters with a divine being, but also incessantly testified of the plates’ tangibility; that he claimed these plates were delivered to him by an angel of God and that he translated them by the gift and power of God; that he dictated without notes or manuscript a book of nearly six hundred printed pages in one go and with practically no revisions in about sixty working days; and that this dictated manuscript was then copied line by line and printed in roughly six months. However one accounts for this, one must acknowledge that the most compelling historical evidence clearly indicates this was what happened between the years 1827 and 1830, precisely as Joseph Smith claimed. We can therefore confidently assert that as our knowledge of early Mormon history increases, there is an increasingly shrinking gap in the historical timeline for skeptics to fit contrived conspiracies and ad hoc secular explanations into the picture.

The second point is related to the first, and has to do with what I have come to perceive is a near-fatal weakness in the hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to Joseph Smith. From a historiographical perspective, skeptics of Joseph Smith who wish to dismiss the Prophet’s claims out of hand must scale a much more difficult mountain than they have perhaps supposed. For they not only have to dismiss the testimony of Joseph Smith but must also dismiss the testimony of his wife Emma and the rest of the Smith family, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and the rest of the Whitmer family, Martin Harris, Joseph Knight, Josiah Stowell, and many others in order to maintain the hermeneutic. And this is to say nothing about the manuscript and textual-critical evidence.

24 For more thoughts along these lines, see also Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction: Not So Easily Dismissed: Some Facts for Which Counterexplanations of the Book of Mormon Will Need to Account,” FARMS Review 17, no. 2 (2005): xi–xlix
that has been convincingly marshalled by Royal Skousen in support of Joseph Smith’s claims.25

But in what is something of a historiographical Catch-22, if they do wish to dismiss the multitude of these accounts, skeptics are left with practically nothing to reliably reconstruct the pre-1830 history of Joseph Smith. After all, who can seriously argue that the firsthand eyewitness testimony of those directly involved in the production of the Book of Mormon should take a backseat to the often dodgy and contradictory hearsay offered by non-eyewitnesses?26 Were it any other historical event, say the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in 1914, such a suggestion would be unthinkable. And yet, most likely because it involves miraculous elements that clash with the reigning secular worldview of today’s academia, this double standard is liberally applied by many writers when it comes to the history behind the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. That being so, as Steven C. Harper argues, one is free to ignore the strongest historical evidence for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but one must do so at one’s own historiographical risk:

When it comes to the Book of Mormon witnesses, the question is which historical documents is one willing to trust? Those whose faith has been deeply shaken sometimes find it easier to trust lesser evidence rather than the best sources or the overwhelming preponderance of the evidence. But that choice is not a foregone conclusion. It is neither inevitable nor irreversible. … Why not opt to believe in the direct statements of the witnesses and their demonstrably lifelong commitments to the Book of Mormon? This choice asks us to have faith in the marvelous, the possibility of angels, spiritual eyes, miraculous translation, and gold plates, but it does not require us to discount the historical record or create hypothetical ways to reconcile the compelling Book of Mormon witnesses with our own skepticism.27

25 For a summary of Skousen’s work, including links to access his scholarship, see “Are There Mistakes In The Book Of Mormon?” online at http://www.knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/are-there-mistakes-book-mormon.


Ultimately, belief or disbelief in Joseph Smith’s claims will come down to a matter of subjective choice after one has personally weighed and evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the competing paradigms. There is no single, definitive, knockout argument in either direction. That being said, those who default to skepticism must be intellectually honest enough to admit that their skepticism does not derive solely, or even mostly, from objective historical analysis. For if the outstanding scholarship of MacKay and Dirkmaat in *From Darkness unto Light* has proven anything, it’s that the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is arguably best told and understood from a hermeneutic of trust and a position of faith.

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“MY PEOPLE ARE WILLING”:
THE MENTION OF AMINADAB IN THE
NARRATIVE CONTEXT OF HELAMAN 5-6

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: Aminadab, a Nephite by birth who later dissented to the Lamanites, played a crucial role in the mass conversion of three hundred Lamanites (and eventually many others). At the end of the pericope in which these events are recorded, Mormon states: “And thus we see that the Lord began to pour out his Spirit upon the Lamanites, because of their easiness and willingness to believe in his words” (Helaman 6:36), whereas he “began to withdraw” his Spirit from the Nephites “because of the wickedness and the hardness of their hearts” (Helaman 6:35). The name Aminadab is a Semitic/Hebrew name meaning “my kinsman is willing” or “my people are willing.” As a dissenter, Aminadab was a man of two peoples. Mormon and (probably) his source were aware of the meaning of Aminadab’s name and the irony of that meaning in the context of the latter’s role in the Lamanite conversions and the spiritual history of the Nephites and Lamanites. The narrative’s mention of Aminadab’s name (Helaman 5:39, 41) and Mormon’s echoes of it in Helaman 6:36, 3 Nephi 6:14, and elsewhere have covenant and temple significance not only in their ancient scriptural setting, but for latter-day readers of the Book of Mormon today.

Like the mention of a woman named “Abish” in Alma 19:6,1 Mormon’s abrupt, threefold mention of a man named “Aminadab” in Helaman 5:39-41 draws attention to an individual whose life and legacy might otherwise have remained anonymous and thus forgotten. As noted elsewhere, the mention of Abish is remarkable since she is one of few women and servants in the Book of Mormon whose personal name is given.2 While it is not evident from the text that the man Aminadab


was a servant, neither is it evident he was a leader — unless calling the attention of the multitude and answering their questions constitutes such evidence (Helaman 5:37-41). Mormon tells us he was merely “one among” those in that prison, though “a Nephite by birth.”

Nevertheless, Mormon emphasizes the fact he considers crucial — namely, that Aminadab was a “dissenter” (“they that were in the prison were Lamanites and Nephites who were dissenter,” Helaman 5:27; he had “belonged to the church of God but had dissented from them,” 5:35), hardly an auspicious characterization, given what Mormon has recorded up to this point in his history regarding notorious religio-political dissenters like Zerahemnah, Amalickiah, Ammoron, Coriantumr, and others. Mormon shows that Aminadab differs from those earlier dissenter predecessors in that his rebelliousness and unwillingness to believe became righteousness, faith, and willingness, and he facilitates the acquisition of these same qualities by many others, both Lamanites and Nephites.

Mormon introduces and incorporates Aminadab — his name, biography, and salient role in the conversion of three hundred Lamanites and Nephite dissenters (and subsequently many others) — into his narrative in such a way as to give the impression that he is drawing on Aminadab’s eyewitness knowledge of those events. For example, Mormon describes some of what was seen in the prison from Aminadab’s own perspective (Helaman 6:36), including details only Aminadab himself could have known. Aminadab’s words are preserved and properly attributed (6:41). He knew Aminadab’s backstory (6:35). Indeed, the fact that Aminadab’s name is known and remembered suggests that Mormon (and probably others) considered it important.

In other words, Mormon draws on an account of these events recorded by Aminadab himself or accesses the record of someone who preserved Aminadab’s account. Aminadab, though only briefly

303; see also Bowen, “Father is a Man,” 77-78.
3 Alma 31:8; 43:4-6, 13, 20, 44.
5 See Alma 31:8; 54:24.
6 Helaman 1:15-32.
7 Alma 43:14, original manuscript: “Now those desenter [dissenters] were as numerous nearly as were the Nephites.” See Royal Skousen, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Four: Alma 21–55 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2007), 2463-2464. Considerable “dissension” from the Nephites had been occurring almost from the beginning: “And it came to pass that two hundred and thirty and eight years had passed away — after the manner of wars, and contentions, and dissensions, for the space of much of the time” (Jarom 1:13).
mentioned in the text and only in this pericope, plays a pivotal role in Lamanite and Nephite spiritual history. Thus, while Mormon clearly considered Aminadab’s name and biography important, additional textual evidence throughout Helaman 5–6 suggests that all this is more than just historical reminiscence on the part of Mormon and his source(s).

In this article, I propose that Mormon’s mention of the name Aminadab in Helaman 5:39-41, like his mention of the name Abish in Alma 19:6, served an important narratalogical function. Mormon, like his source, appears to have been aware of the Hebrew meaning of Aminadab — “my kinsman is willing” or “my people is/are willing” — and the ironic importance of the meaning of this name in the context of the socio-religious shifts of that epoch: the Nephites, from whom Aminadab had dissented, becoming an increasingly wicked people (like Nephite dissenters had in previous generations)8 and the Lamanites and Nephite dissenters with them becoming more righteous. This narratological trajectory reaches its apex in Helaman 6:39, where Mormon says of the “people” of the Lamanites that the Lord poured out his blessings “because of their easiness and willingness to believe in his words.” Although this remark at 6:36 occurs at some remove in the text from the mention of Aminadab in 5:39-41, it constitutes a seemingly deliberate echo of his name. Aminadab was not only a fitting name for the figure who bore it — in view of his personal story of repentance and conversion — but also because of the role he played in the conversion of so many others — a “people” who became “willing.”

“My Kinsman Is Willing” / “My People Are Willing”

The name “Aminadab” is a Semitic/Hebrew name with a straightforward etymology. Aminadab, Amminadab,9 or Amminadib,10 taken as a

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8 See especially Mormon’s comment in Alma 47:36: “Now these dissenters, having the same instruction and the same information of the Nephites, yea, having been instructed in the same knowledge of the Lord, nevertheless, it is strange to relate, not long after their dissensions they became more hardened and impenitent, and more wild, wicked and ferocious than the Lamanites — drinking in with the traditions of the Lamanites; giving way to indolence, and all manner of lasciviousness; yea, entirely forgetting the Lord their God.”

9 In transliteration the “m” in Aminadab or Amminadab is traditionally doubled, although in ancient (pre-Masoretic) Hebrew writing, the doubling of consonants was not indicated. In any case, it would not have been doubled as spelled out on the plates. See https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/AMINADAB note 1.

10 Amminadib: this form of the name is attested in Song of Solomon 6:12.
theophoric\textsuperscript{11} name — as names in the Ancient Near East commonly were — denotes “My kinsman is willing”\textsuperscript{12} — i.e., Yahweh as “my (divine) kinsman” [\textit{ʿammî}] “is willing [nādāb].”\textsuperscript{13} However, Aminadab can also be taken as a non-theophoric name, meaning, “my (non-divine) kinsman is willing,” “my people are willing”/“noble,” or “my kin are willing”/“noble” (\textit{ʿammî “my people” + nādāb “willing”}). This range of possible meanings is important to what shall be discussed below.

Aminadab is one of a handful of nādāb names born by Israelites in the scriptures, including Abinadab (“my father is willing/generous”),\textsuperscript{14} Nadab (“willing,” “generous,” “noble”),\textsuperscript{15} and its longer form Nedabiah (“Yahweh is willing,” “Yahweh is generous,”\textsuperscript{16} “Yahweh is noble”).

The onomastic elements of “Aminadab” or “Amminadab” occur together in the Song of Deborah and Barak (“Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel, \textbf{when the people willingly offered themselves [bēhitnaddēb ʿam]” — Judges 5:2). They also occur together in Psalm 110:3, a temple hymn in which it is said of the Davidic king, “\textbf{Thy people shall be willing [ʿammĕkā nĕdābōt} in the day of thy power.”\textsuperscript{17} The Persian-era Chronicler, perhaps having some reference to Psalm 110 in its temple context, emphasizes the “willingness” of David and the people

\textsuperscript{11} Amminadab can be taken as belonging to a class of West Semitic theophoric names that include \textit{ʿam(m)} as a divine name-bearing (theophoric) element. West Semitic Hammurapi (\textit{ḥammurāpi = ʿammurāpi = “the [divine] kinsman is a healer”), possessed by the one for whom the famous law-code is named, is perhaps the most famous example of one of these names. Nevertheless, the morphology is ambiguous and there are additional, non-exclusive ways to understand the \textit{ʿam(m)-element}.


\textsuperscript{13} Compare the names Ammiel (“\textit{el [God] is my (divine) kinsman)”; Numbers 13:12; 2 Samuel 9:4-5; 17:27; 1 Chronicles 3:5; 26:5); Ammishaddai (“\textit{Shadday [the Almighty] is my kinsman}; Numbers 1:12; 2:25; 7:66, 71; 10:25); and Ammizabad (“\textit{My [divine] kinsman has bestowed [him/her]”} 1 Chronicles 27:6).

\textsuperscript{14} Noth (\textit{Personennamen}, 193) suggests that Abinadab means “Father has proven himself generous,” cf. Ugaritic, Abu-nadib (KAT 483); see HALOT, 5.

\textsuperscript{15} BDB (p. 621), Nadab (nādāb) = “generous, noble.”

\textsuperscript{16} Noth, \textit{Personennamen}, 193; see HALOT, 672.

\textsuperscript{17} The New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation of Psalm 110:3 reads: “your people come forward willingly on your day of battle.”
in making offerings for the building of the temple as preparations were made, a project later carried out and completed by his son Solomon. In 1 Chronicles 29 the verb *ndb occurs seven times alone, repeatedly in juxtaposition with the noun ’am: “Then the people [ha’am] rejoiced, for that they offered willingly [’al-hitnaddēbām], because with perfect heart they offered willingly [hitnaddēbû] to the LORD: and David the king also rejoiced with great joy” (1 Chronicles 29:9); “But who am I, and what is my people [’ammî], that we should be able to offer so willingly [lĕhitnaddēb] after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. (1 Chronicles 29:14); “I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of mine heart I have willingly offered [hitnaddabtî] all these things: and now have I seen with joy thy people [’ammĕkā] which are present here, to offer willingly [lĕhitnaddeb] unto thee” (1 Chronicles 29:17).

In all this, the Chronicler insists, the people of Israel in David’s time met the Mosaic Law’s “willingness” requirements in their sacrifices and offerings. In Exodus 25:2, the Lord had commanded Moses: “Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring me an offering: of every man that giveth it willingly [yiddĕbenû] with his heart ye shall take my offering.” Similarly, the Book of Ezra’s description restored cultic practices at the newly-rebuilt temple in Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile (the temple of Zerubbabel) specifically mentions the freewill offering, suggesting its importance: “And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered [mitnaddēb] a freewill offering [nĕdābâ] unto the Lord” (Ezra 3:5). These biblical passages suggest a close connection — perhaps an ideal connection — between the identity of Yahweh’s “people” and their “willingness,” all this in the context of temple. In the end, what else would (or should) distinguish a “people of the Lord” from other people other than their “willingness” to bear his name, to keep covenant and his commandments, and to do his will?

Aminadab: Man of Two “Peoples”

As a Nephite dissenter, Aminadab was a man of two peoples: the Nephites, whose culture and religion had been his prior to his dissention,
and the Lamanites, whose culture he had adopted. Mormon recognized
the fact that Aminadab, on this occasion, serendipitously bridged the two
cultural/religious worlds, serving as an instrument in the Lord’s hand in
converting the Lamanites and other Nephite dissenters in the prison:

Now there was one among them who was a Nephite by birth, who
had once belonged to the church of God but had dissented from
them. And it came to pass that he turned him about, and behold, he
saw through the cloud of darkness the faces of Nephi and Lehi;
and behold, they did shine exceedingly, even as the faces of angels.
And he beheld that they did lift their eyes to heaven; and they were
in the attitude as if talking or lifting their voices to some being
whom they beheld. And it came to pass that this man did cry
unto the multitude, that they might turn and look. And behold,
there was power given unto them that they did turn and look;
and they did behold the faces of Nephi and Lehi. And they said
unto the man: Behold, what do all these things mean, and who is
it with whom these men do converse? Now the man’s name was
Aminadab. And Aminadab said unto them: They do converse
with the angels of God. And it came to pass that the Lamanites
said unto him: What shall we do, that this cloud of darkness
may be removed from overshadowing us? And Aminadab said
unto them: You must repent and cry unto the voice, even until
ye shall have faith in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma,
and Amulek and Zeezrom; and when ye shall do this, the cloud of
darkness shall be removed from overshadowing you. And it came
to pass that they all did begin to cry unto the voice of him who had
shaken the earth; yea, they did cry even until the cloud of darkness
was dispersed. (Helaman 5:35-42)

The phrase “now there was one among them” recalls Mormon’s
introduction of several other important figures into his narrative: Alma the
Elder,20 Zeezrom,21 and Abish.22 Alma, Zeezrom, and Abish had belonged
to groups who were not living according to the Lord’s commandments,

20 Mosiah 17:2 (“But there was one among them whose name was Alma”); see
Aaron P. Schade and Matthew L. Bowen, “To Whom Is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?”
21 Alma 10:31 (“And there was one among them whose name was Zeezrom.
Now he was the foremost to accuse Amulek and Alma, he being one of the most
expert among them, having much business to do among the people”).
22 Alma 19:10 (“... save it were one of the Lamanitish women, whose name was
Abish ...”).
and all three became converted to the Lord, undergoing full personal transformations. Moreover, all three became instruments in the Lord’s hand in bringing about the conversions of many others: Alma founded a church, Zeezrom helped reconvert many Zoramites, and Abish participated in the conversion of many other Lamanites. The language here suggests that Aminadab belongs to this class of persons and that his role was similarly important. Mormon also plays on the name Aminadab (see below), as he does the names of these three.23

Mormon stresses that Aminadab was both “a Nephite by birth” and a “dissenter” from “the church of God.” In other words, he had evidently repudiated both his cultural and religious heritage. Mormon also describes what Aminadab saw on this occasion in great detail — even from the latter’s own perspective in Helaman 6:36, so much so that we get the impression that Mormon drew directly on Aminadab’s own account or reminiscence of this event. Aminadab “saw through the cloud of darkness” (6:36). This “cloud of darkness”24 evokes the theophanic cloud which was said to surround Yahweh and which Yahweh was said to reside (Psalm 97:2, 1 Kings 8:12/2 Chronicles 6:1) … as well as the “cloud” in the storm-god imagery sometimes used to describe Yahweh’s presence in the Hebrew Bible (see Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1; Jeremiah 4:13; Ezekiel 38:9). The cloud that initially veiled the Lord from the brother of Jared (Ether 2:4-15; 14) and through which the Lord “stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his finger” as “the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared” (Ether 3:6; cf. 3:19-20) functioned similarly.

Aminadab himself does not behold a theophany, per se, but he is a key witness to the theophany that Nephi and Lehi themselves “beheld” (i.e., “some being whom they beheld”). While perhaps he does not see through the veil25 in precisely the same way that the brother of Jared does on Mount

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24 The “cloud of darkness” is mentioned eight times in Helaman 5:29, 31, 34, 36, 40-44.

Shelem in Ether 3, nevertheless Aminadab sees enough (and has enough spiritual insight) to recognize the sacred nature of what was transpiring and has enough wherewithal to draw the attention of the Lamanites and Nephite dissenters to Nephi and Lehi and the theophany that the latter were experiencing. The fact that Aminadab quickly recognized what was happening suggests that his knowledge of the gospel (as taught among the Nephites) and of spiritual things had been great and that not all had been forgotten.

“Who Is It with Whom These Men Do Converse?”

The Divine Kinsman of Helaman 5

In the ancient Zeniffite prison in the land of Nephi about three hundred Lamanites and Nephite dissenters — Aminadab among them — heard the voice of God declare: “Repent ye, repent ye, and seek no more to destroy my servants, which I have sent unto you to declare good tidings” (Helaman 5:29). Mormon then describes the divine voice as “not a voice of thunder, neither … a voice of great tumultuous noise, but … a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper” (5:30; cf. “a pleasant voice, as if it were a whisper, v. 46), language that evokes or depends upon 1 Kings 19:12 and 1 Nephi 17:4 (i.e., “a still small voice,” Heb. qôl dĕmāmâ daqqâ, literally: “voice of a thin whisper”) and language that foreshadows his description of the voice of the Father in 3 Nephi 11 (see Helaman 5:30-31; cf. 5:46). The voice then comes again, declaring “Repent ye, repent ye, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand; and seek no more to destroy my servants” (Helaman 5:32). Mormon states that the voice came a third time “and did speak unto them marvelous words which cannot be uttered by man” (5:33). The Lamanites and Nephite dissenters are immobilized by “the cloud of darkness” and the “fear” that it produced (5:34).

Thereupon, Aminadab counsels the men in the prison: “you must repent and cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ.” Aminadab, as a Nephite dissenter and lapsed member of the church that had originally been (re)established by Alma the Elder, understood the meaning of the voice’s reiterated command, “repent.” He also apparently understood the importance of repentance in the context of the doctrine of Christ (2 Nephi 31–32) as evident in his counsel that they “cry unto

26 See Helaman 5:21.
27 Study forthcoming.
28 See, e.g., 3 Nephi 5:12.
29 The content of the small plates of Nephi was known to Alma the Younger (compare Alma 36:22 with 1 Nephi 1:8ff ). The “very points of [Christ’s] doctrine” mentioned by Nephi in 1 Nephi 15:14 are presumably the “points of doctrine” that
Aminadab knew that crying unto the voice would instill faith in the one whom he had formerly understood to have the power to dispel darkness (see, e.g., Lamoni’s experience in Alma 19:6 and Alma’s experience as recounted in Alma 36:17-20; cf. 26:3, 15). Thus, Aminadab’s counsel has the added effect of centering their understanding of the phenomena — and thus the Lamanites’ and dissenters’ nascent faith — in Christ.

They heed Aminadab’s counsel with marvelous results: “the cloud of darkness [is] dispersed” and they are all “encircled about … by a pillar of fire” (Helaman 5:42-45; cf. Alma 26:15). They become — like Nephi and Lehi — partakers of and participants in the theophany.30 It is important to note here that the one to whom the voice belonged — Christ — is also the source of the ensuing blessings: Christ dispersed the overshadowing cloud of darkness, Christ sent the encircling (i.e., embracing) theophanic “fire” (Helaman 5:43; cf. Alma 26:15) — the one in whom “there should come every good thing” (Moroni 7:19-22), the “redeemer” and “rock” in whom Nephi and Lehi believed (cf. Helaman 5:9-12).

Here we recall that Aminadab’s name means both “my kinsman is willing”/“generous”/ “noble” and “my people [kin] are noble.” There is ample evidence in the Israelite onomasticon for Yahweh’s being considered the “divine kinsman” of Israel. Yahweh was conceived as

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30 To be clear, I am using theophany (Greek theos “god” + phaneia “appearance,” “manifestation”) in a very broad sense to include the appearance or manifestation of any being (God, god, angel, etc.) from the divine realm.
a divine father, a divine brother; in other words, a kinsman. The concept may be tribal in origin. Frank Moore Cross observes:

The Israelite league was ... a religious organization or society. Priestly families, linked by genealogy to create a priestly “tribe,” were set aside [i.e., “set apart”] to conduct rituals and sacrifices to preserve religious lore. The league was called ‘am Yahweh, which we generally translate the ‘people of Yahweh.’ However, ... ‘am(m) is a kinship term, and for our purposes here is perhaps better translated the ‘kindred’ of Yahweh. Yahweh is the god of Israel, the Divine Kinsman, the god of the covenant. ... The ‘am Yahweh, ‘kindred of Yahweh,’ in some contexts must be translated ‘the militia of Yahweh,’ and in some contexts the ‘am Yahweh is a community of worshipers, a cultic association.

The “kinship” relationship between Yahweh and Israel is presupposed in statements made throughout the Book of Mormon that the Lord (Yahweh) would “redeem his people.” Such a statement occurs in Helaman 5:9-10, where Helaman identifies Jesus Christ as Yahweh the kinsman redeemer:

O remember, remember, my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people; yea, remember that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, remember that he cometh to redeem the world. And remember also the words which Amulek spake unto Zeezrom, in the city of Ammonihah; for he [Amulek] said unto him [Zeezrom] that

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31 E.g., the name “Abijah” means “Yahweh is my father.” The name is attested in 1 Kings 14:1; Nehemiah 10:7; 12:4, 17; 1 Chronicles 24:10; 2 Chronicles 11:20, 22; 12:16; 13:1-4, 15-22; 14:1; 29:1.


the Lord [Yahweh] surely should come to redeem his people, but that he should not come to redeem them in their sins, but to redeem them from their sins.

Helaman’s statement to his sons, Nephi and Lehi, constitutes an important backdrop against which the theophany and the miraculous conversions of Helaman 5 take place. The Hebrew divine epithet ָgōēl ("redeemer") or ("kinsman redeemer") implies kinship with the redeemed.37 The mere presence of the name Aminadab in the text of this narrative and in the context of Helaman’s declarations to Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5:9-12) draws potential attention to Yahweh ("the rock of our redeemer who is Christ, the Son of God," 5:12) and his role as the divine ʿam (kinsman”) in relationship to his ʿam (“people,” “kin”) and his showing himself “willing” or “generous” in that role (see Helaman 5:43-45).

The divine voice speaks again in Helaman 5:47: “Peace, peace be unto you because of your faith in my Well Beloved, which was from the foundation of the world.” It is the divine kinsman — the divine “kinsman” for whom Aminadab conceivably had been named38 — who speaks. The repetition “peace, peace” here corresponds to the twofold repetition of “repent, repent” in Helaman 5:29, 32.

The term “peace,” in fact, indicates that repentance has taken place and that peace has been created between Yahweh and the Lamanites (and Nephite dissenters) in prison, just as “peace” is created between Gideon and Yahweh in Judges 6:23-24. The initially diffident Gideon who had sought a confirmatory sign that it was in fact Yahweh or his messenger that was speaking with him, was terrified at the theophanic fire and the sight of the divine messenger upon seeing them, since such theophanic manifestations were potentially fatal.39 Yahweh himself voices the reassurance that Gideon needs: “And the Lord [Yahweh] said unto him, Peace be unto thee [šālôm lĕkā]; fear not: thou shalt not die.

37  Cf. Numbers 5:8; Ruth 3:9, 12-13; 4:1, 3, 6, 8, and 14.
38  We know almost nothing regarding Aminadab’s parents, but the fact that he had been given a good Hebrew/Israelite name during a time in which Jaredite and other non-Nephite/Israelite names are well-attested, is suggestive of the idea that Aminadab’s parents were, like Samuel the Lamanite and his parents, well-connected to both the Nephite and the older Israelite traditions.
Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-shalom [Yahweh-sālōm = “He creates peace”]: unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abi-ezrites” (Judges 6:23-24). Robert Boling suggests, on analogy with Frank Moore Cross’s etymology for Yahweh-ṣēḇāʾōt (“He creates the [heavenly] hosts,” frequently rendered “Lord of Hosts” or “Lord of Sabaoth”) that the name Jehovah-Shalom means “He creates peace.” Just as Yahweh — the Savior himself — created lifesaving peace between himself and Gideon (cf. the lifesaving “at-one-ment” [tēkuppār] of Isaiah’s “sin” during the theophany that attended his calling to be a prophet [Isaiah 6:7]), he also created “peace” between himself and Aminadab and the three hundred in the prison (“peace, peace be unto you”) by virtue of their faith and the atonement (“because of your faith in my Well Beloved, who was from the foundation of the world”).

With the “peace” or atonement necessary for surviving a theophany thus created, all three hundred men become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) or “partakers of the heavenly gift” (4 Nephi 1:3; Ether 12:8) as they participate in the divine council as it descends to them: “And now, when they heard this they cast up their eyes as if to behold from whence the voice came; and behold, they saw the heavens

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42 If Yahweh-ṣēḇāʾōt — “Lord of Hosts” or “Lord of Sabaoth” — means “He creates the hosts,” compare the glossing of “Lord of Sabaoth” in D&C 95:7, “the creator of the first day, the beginning and the end.”
43 Boling, Judges, 134.
44 Theophanies presented the danger that that those who beheld them might die if the divine glory irrupted upon them (Exodus 24:9-11; JST Exodus 33:20; Leviticus 10:1-3; Judges 6:13; 13:21-23; Isaiah 6:5).
open; and angels came down out of heaven and ministered unto them” (Helaman 5:48). The participation of these “men” in, and their instruction (their being “ministered unto”) by, the divine council constitutes a kind of endowment. Like prophets Isaiah, Lehi, and Ezekiel in the divine council, they become endowed with the knowledge of God and commissioned to go forth and bear an incontrovertible testimony of him. They become empowered to “minister unto the people” (Helaman 5:50) — they become “ministering angels” like the angels who ministered to them in the divine council.

The some three hundred witnesses subsequently all receive a kind of prophetic or angelic commission: “they were bidden to go forth and marvel not, neither should they doubt” (Helaman 5:49; cf. Isaiah 6:9: “go and tell this people [ʿām]”). Their subsequent “go[ing] forth and minister[ing] unto the people [cf. Hebrew haʾam]” indicates their “willingness” in response to this commission. Like Isaiah, Abraham, and the Lord himself, they were commissioned in a divine council setting — in this instance, they do not ascend into heaven, but rather the divine council (or a portion thereof) descends to them, as it does to Isaiah (Isaiah 6). Their response to their commissioning compares well to the response “here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27; Isaiah 6:8) or “here am I” (Genesis 22:1, 11; 1 Samuel 3:4-21, see especially 3:4-6, 8, 16). They have become “angelicized” — that is, divinely-sent messengers from the divine “kinsman” to their own “people” — their kindred. They will emerge as “willing” messengers who instilled “willingness” in the kinsfolk who hear their message.

“They Did Go Forth and Did Minister unto the People” (Helaman 5:50): The Making of a Willing People

The Lamanites and Nephite dissenters in the prison — perhaps in no small part because many of them were Nephite dissenters — became a missionary juggernaut. Commissioned to “go forth” and minister, they taught and bore testimony effectively and gained converts quickly:


47 See Isaiah 6 in its entirety.
48 See 1 Nephi 1:5-15, 18.
49 See Ezekiel 1–3; 10.
And there were about three hundred souls who saw and heard these things; and they were bidden to go forth and marvel not, neither should they doubt. And it came to pass that they did go forth, and did minister unto the people [cf. ha’am] declaring throughout all the regions round about all the things which they had heard and seen, insomuch that the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them, because of the greatness of the evidences which they had received. And as many as were convinced did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers. And it came to pass that they did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession. (Helaman 5:49-52)

The Lamanites readily recognized the “greatness of the evidences which they had received,” which suggests both teachability and willingness. The “greatness of the evidences” consisted in the greatness of the testimonies that these Lamanites and dissenters bore: they were testimonies of surpassing faith. Jesus himself specifically cites these Lamanites as examples of “faith” and offering the “broken heart and a contrite spirit” that became the required sacrifice when the Mosaic cultic requirements were “done away” (see 3 Nephi 9:20). These Lamanites had been “willingly” offering the true sacrifice — the sacrifice of a “broken heart and a contrite spirit” — even before the coming of the Christ (cf. Psalm 51:16-17).

A Tale of Two Peoples: The Lamanites Become a Righteous People vis-à-vis the Nephites

Mormon’s focus in the material that follows theophany and miracles of Helaman 5 is clearly the state of the “the people” (Hebrew ha’am). After the theophany and the concomitant conversion of so many

50 3 Nephi 9:20: “And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost, even as the Lamanites, because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion, were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not.”
51 See 2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:19-20; Ether 4:15; Moroni 6:2; D&C 59:8.
Lamanites and Nephite dissenters, the collective spiritual trajectory of the Lamanites trends upward for more than a generation:

And it came to pass that when the sixty and second year of the reign of the judges had ended, all these things had happened and the Lamanites had become, the more part of them, a righteous people [*am, or “kin”] insomuch that their righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites, because of their firmness and their steadiness in the faith. For behold, there were many of the Nephites who had become hardened and impenitent and grossly wicked, insomuch that they did reject the word of God and all the preaching and prophesying which did come among them. (Helaman 6:2)

The description “firmness and … steadiness in the faith” plays on and overturns the pejorative “unbelief” (cf. Hebrew *lōʾ ʿēmūn, Deuteronomy 32:20) frequently ascribed by the Nephites to the Lamanites. The Lamanites had become the more righteous — the more willing — people. On the other hand, the adjectival descriptions of many of the Nephites as “hardened,” “impenitent,” and “grossly wicked” describe the diametric opposite of a “people” who are “willing.” This unwillingness is exemplified in their wholesale rejection of the word of God, preaching, and prophecy. To the joy of the unified “people of the church,” however, opposite conditions prevail among the Lamanites:

Nevertheless, the people [*am] of the church did have great joy because of the conversion of the Lamanites, yea, because of the church of God, which had been established among them. And they did fellowship one with another, and did rejoice one with another, and did have great joy. And it came to pass that many of the Lamanites did come down into the land of Zarahemla, and did declare unto the people of the Nephites the manner of their conversion and did exhort them to faith and repentance. Yea, and many did preach with exceedingly great power and authority, unto the bringing down many of them into the depths of humility, to be the humble followers of God.

and the Lamb. And it came to pass that many of the Lamanites did go into the land northward; and also Nephi and Lehi went into the land northward, to preach unto the people. And thus ended the sixty and third year. (Helaman 6:3-6)

Mormon’s use of the phrase “people of the church” illustrates that there was at this time, as had been developing for several generations, a sociology that transcended the traditional Nephite/Lamanite divisions. The “church” or “the people of the church” were comprised now of large numbers of ethnic Lamanites.⁵⁴ The Lamanite testimonies were difficult, if not impossible to dismiss. There were so many witnesses all testifying of the same thing, all of whom had gone from a state of radical “unbelief” to “preach[ing] with exceedingly great power and authority.” This same total reversal was, in part, what made Alma and the sons of Mosiah such impressive and powerful missionaries in their generation.

Moreover, Mormon here stresses that the missionary activity undertaken in the sixty-third year of the reign of the judges in “the land northward” was a concerted effort: the Lamanites and Lehi and Nephi are all the subject of the verb “preach.” Their united “preach[ing] unto the people [cf. ʿam]” made a more righteous “people” out of both ethnic groups. Unprecedented unity and prosperity followed.

In spite of — and evidently because of — the almost-utopic prosperity (“peace”) of the Nephites and Lamanites described in Helaman 6:7-9 (cf. the benediction of “peace, peace” in Helaman 5:47),⁵⁵ wickedness sets in again rather quickly among the Nephites. That same Cezoram, the judge whom the increasingly wicked Nephites had chosen in place of Nephi the son of Helaman (Helaman 5:1-4, note the emphasis there on the people: “voice of the people,” “a stiffnecked people”), is assassinated. However, instead of choosing a righteous judge, the people chose that man’s son, who is also subsequently assassinated:

⁵⁴ This transcendent sociology probably — at least in part — explains Mormon’s comments on race/ethnicity in 3 Nephi 2:14-16 and later in 4 Nephi 1:10.

⁵⁵ Helaman 6:7-9: “And behold, there was peace in all the land, insomuch that the Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites. And it came to pass that the Lamanites did also go whithersoever they would, whether it were among the Lamanites or among the Nephites; and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain, according to their desire. And it came to pass that they they became exceedingly rich, both the Lamanites and the Nephites; and they did have an exceeding plenty of gold, and of silver, and of all manner of precious metals, both in the land south and in the land north.”
And it came to pass that in the sixty and sixth year of the reign of the judges, behold, Cezoram was murdered by an unknown hand as he sat upon the judgment-seat. And it came to pass that in the same year, that his son, who had been appointed by the people in his stead, was also murdered. And thus ended the sixty and sixth year. And in the commencement of the sixty and seventh year the people began to grow exceedingly wicked again. (Helaman 6:15)

Two chief judges chosen and appointed by “the people,” whose wickedness had so greatly wearied Nephi that he resigned his office (cf. Helaman 5:1-4), are assassinated in rapid succession by wicked members of Kishkumen and Gadianton’s secret combination. The instability of the Nephite leadership situation reflects the moral instability of the people and their rapid oscillation between wickedness and righteousness. The Nephites’ “willingness” at this stage of their history is best evident in their proclivity toward collective wickedness — extreme wickedness.

Mormon, with the benefit of hindsight, recognized that Cainitic secret combinations were lethal to a “people”: “Now behold, it is these secret oaths and covenants which Alma commanded his son should not go forth unto the world, lest they should be a means of bringing down the people unto destruction (Helaman 6:25). While making this record, Mormon himself had been a firsthand witness to the destruction of his own people, in no small part due to the Gadianton robbers (see Mormon 1:18-19), and the Nephites had long had the lessons of the destruction of the Jaredites available for their profit and learning. Mormon leaves no doubt here as to the “authorship” of these secret combinations:

And also it is that same being who put it into the hearts of the people to build a tower sufficiently high that they might get to heaven. And it was that same being who led on the people who came from that tower into this land; who spread the works of darkness and abominations over all the face of the land, until he dragged the people down to an entire destruction, and to an everlasting hell. (Helaman 6:28)

Satan works hard on the heart (i.e., anciently, the seat of thoughts and emotions) since it is particularly susceptible to his corrupting influence.

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56 In citing secret combinations as a major reason for the destruction of the Nephites, Mormon also had the benefit of Alma the Younger’s foresight, the latter having recorded a prophecy in which he foretold that very problem (see Alma 37:21-34).
(see, e.g., Deuteronomy 29:19). In fact, Mormon states that Satan “is the author of all sin” and that “he doth carry on his works of darkness and secret murder, and doth hand down their plots, and their oaths, and their covenants, and their plans of awful wickedness, from generation to generation according as he can get hold upon the hearts of the children of men (Helaman 6:30). At the end of the Book of Helaman Mormon reports that “notwithstanding the signs and the wonders which were wrought among the people of the Lord, and the many miracles which they did, Satan did get great hold upon the hearts of the people upon all the face of the land.”

It should be noted here that Exodus 35 illustrates the connection between the “heart” and “willingness” (being nādāb). According to this text, the building of the wilderness tabernacle — Israel’s first temple — was enabled, or at least facilitated, by the “willingness” or “generosity” of the Israelites themselves to donate the required materials: “whosoever is of a willing heart [nēdīb libbō], let him bring … an offering of the Lord; gold, and silver, and brass” (Exodus 35:5); “And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing [nādēbə] … both men and women, as many as were willing hearted [nēdīb lēb], and brought bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold: and every man that offered[,] offered an offering of gold unto the Lord” (35:21-22); “The children of Israel brought a willing offering [nēdābə] unto the Lord, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, which the Lord had commanded to be made by the hand of Moses” (Exodus 35:29).

One people — the Lamanites — was willing, the other — the Nephites — was not. Willingness opens the path to increased faith and righteousness; unwillingness and hardheartedness ultimately result in destruction. For their part, the only “willingness” that many of the wicked Nephites demonstrated was in “build[ing] up unto themselves idols of their gold and their silver” (Helaman 6:31), the very opposite of the “willingness” described in Exodus 35.

57 Finally, when apostasy set in again among the Lehiters several generations after the coming of Christ, Mormon describes the rise of the church that “professed to know the Christ, and yet they did deny the more parts of his gospel, insomuch that they did receive all manner of wickedness, and did administer that which was sacred unto him to whom it had been forbidden because of unworthiness” (4 Nephi 1:28). Moreover, he suggests that “… this church did multiply exceedingly because of iniquity, and because of the power of Satan who did get hold upon their hearts” (4 Nephi 1:28).
“Because of Their Easiness and Willingness to Believe” (Helaman 6:36)

The Nephites’ ancestor Nephi, the son of Lehi, also connected the “heart” with “willingness.” In expounding the “doctrine of Christ” Nephi testified:

I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism … then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 31:13; cf. v. 10)

Mormon records that the voice of Christ explicitly stated that “the Lamanites” in the prison had, “because of their faith in [Christ] at the time of their conversion, [been] baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not” (3 Nephi 9:20). In other words, the “baptism of fire” had “come” to these Lamanites (and Nephite dissenters) because of their “willingness” to have faith in Christ and take upon them his name. Thus they, like Nephi and Lehi, “spoke with the tongue of angels” (and with angels).

This point finds marvelous confirmation at the end of Mormon’s excursus on the primeval origins of secret combinations and their relationship to the problem of the Gadianton robbers, to whom the Nephites had lent much support. There, Mormon summarizes the trajectories of both the Nephites and the Lamanites, the latter emerging as the more righteous people, the more “willing” people, and the people who are legitimated as the Lord’s people by their reception of the Holy Ghost:

And it came to pass that all these iniquities did come unto them in the space of not many years, insomuch that a more part of it had come unto them in the sixty and seventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. And they did grow in their iniquities in the sixty and eighth year also, to the great sorrow and lamentation of the righteous. And thus we see that the Nephites did begin to dwindle in unbelief, and grow in wickedness and abominations, while the Lamanites began to grow exceedingly in the knowledge of their God; yea, they did begin to keep his statutes and commandments, and to walk in truth and uprightness before him. And thus we see that the Spirit of the Lord began to withdraw from the Nephites, because of the wickedness and the
hardness of their hearts. And thus we see that the Lord began to pour out his Spirit upon the Lamanites, because of their easiness and willingness to believe in his words. (Helaman 6:32-36)

Here Mormon affirms the key connection between the “heart” and “willingness” described above: the Nephites hardened their hearts, while the Lamanites (and their hearts) were “easy” and “willing” to believe. The Lamanites emerge as a people upon whom the Lord could pour out his Spirit as well as his blessings and favor “because of their easiness and willingness,” a description that recalls the name Aminadab and its meaning: “my people are willing.” Terminology rendered “willingness” occurs only here in Helaman 6:36 and in Mosiah 29:37-38,58 suggesting that Mormon’s word choice here was deliberate. The Lamanites had become like the righteous and “willing” Nephites of Mosiah II’s time, while the Nephites of Aminadab’s time had become the very “people” that Mosiah had warned against (see Mosiah 29:26-27; Helaman 5:2-3).

We recall that Aminadab was a man of both the Nephite and Lamanite “peoples.” Ironically, it was his second people, the Lamanites who were “willing” while his first people, the Nephites — who had been favored by the Lord for centuries — by implication became unwilling. Mormon appears to have recognized that irony. Indeed, there is something marvelous about a Nephite dissenter whose name denotes “my kinsman is willing” or “my people are willing” giving spiritual direction to Lamanites and other Nephite dissenters who upon their conversion preached and testified to an increasingly hardhearted and unwilling Nephite nation, who saw themselves as the “good[ly]” or “fair ones”60 and believed the myth of inherent “chosen-ness.”

It is perhaps worth noting that the 1981 and 2013 LDS editions of the Book of Mormon provide a footnote for the word “willingness” in Helaman 6:36 that references Exodus 25:2. As noted above, the word translated “willingly” in Exodus 25:2 is a form of the word nādāb (yiddĕbennû). The concept of a “people [who] are willing,” then, fittingly

58 Mosiah 29:37-38: “And now it came to pass, after king Mosiah had sent these things forth among the people they were convinced of the truth of his words. Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins.”
59 Jacob 3:7; Mosiah 9:1.
punctuates an episode in which the key player ambiguously named “My kinsman is willing” or “My people are willing” (Aminadab) opens the way for Nephi and Lehi’s theophany-attended miracles to exert their maximum effect. The narrative deliberately exploits the ambiguity of the ʿammî-element in Aminadab to emphasize not only the “willingness” or “generosity” of the Lord, the divine “kinsman” who poured out his spirit abundantly on the Lamanites and Nephite dissenters, but also to emphasize how “willing” they became and the subsequent “willingness” of those who converted because of their testimonies.

As if to further emphasize the point, Mormon then cites a concrete example of just how “willing” or “generous” the Lamanites had become vis-à-vis their Nephite counterparts. He juxtaposes the Lamanite solution with the Gadianton problem to the Nephite non-solution:

And it came to pass that the Lamanites did hunt the band of robbers of Gadianton; and they did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them, insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites. And it came to pass on the other hand, that the Nephites did build them up and support them, beginning at the more wicked part of them, until they had overspread all the land of the Nephites, and had seduced the more part of the righteous until they had come down to believe in their works and partake of their spoils, and to join with them in their secret murders and combinations. And thus they did obtain the sole management of the government, insomuch that they did trample under their feet and smite and rend and turn their backs upon the poor and the meek, and the humble followers of God. And thus we see that they were in an awful state, and ripening for an everlasting destruction. And it came to pass that thus ended the sixty and eighth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. (Helaman 5:37-41)

The Lamanites “hunted” the Gadianton robbers, not for the purpose of doing violence to them or exacting revenge, but in order to “preach the word of God,” recalling Mormon’s earlier description about the “virtue of the word” (Alma 31:5).61 The results are nothing short of miraculous: the

61 Alma 31:5: “And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just — yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them — therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the
Gadiantons are “utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites,” making them an even more righteous and “willing” people. The Nephites not only “did build [the Gadianton robbers] up” but actively participated in or “join[ed]” their program of “seducing” the righteous. The result was an unjust and wholly corrupt government.

While the Lamanites preached the word of God “among the more wicked part of them [the Gadianton robbers]” the Nephites also began “at the more wicked part of them” but instead “buil[t] … up” and “support[ed]” them until the entire nation was overspread with that evil society. The Lamanites and Nephites more or less hold in this pattern until the time of the coming of the Savior’s ministry among “the people of Nephi who were spared, and also those who had been called Lamanites, who had been spared” (3 Nephi 10:18) as evident by Mormon’s comment in 3 Nephi 6:14, which I will now treat at length.

**A People “Willing with All Diligence”: Aminadab’s Legacy**

Amid the general apostasy that preceded the cataclysmic upheavals in the New World concomitant with the Savior’s death at Jerusalem, which is described in 3 Nephi 8-10, Mormon states that there was only one people that remained true and faithful — and that group was not the Nephites. Notwithstanding the breaking up of governments (3 Nephi 7) and even the breaking up of the church that had enjoyed a continuous existence since the time of Alma the Elder, one group of converted Lamanites remained faithful:

And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up; yea, insomuch that in the thirtieth year the church was broken up in all the land save it were among a few of the Lamanites who were converted unto the true faith; and they would not depart from it, for they were firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord. (3 Nephi 6:14)

Note here that Mormon describes them not only as “firm, and steadfast, and immovable” — a formula found elsewhere in connection virtue of the word of God.” Regarding this verse, President Boyd K. Packer stated: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. … That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1986, 20; or Ensign, Nov. 1986, 17). The Lamanite approach to the Gadianton problem in Helaman 5:37 is further evidence of this truth.
with Laman and Lemuel and their descendants62 — but also characterizes them as “willing with all diligence.” Mormon’s use of the term “willing” here harks back to his use of “willingness” at the close of Helaman 5–6. His use of “willing” further recalls the name Aminadab (“my people are willing”) and the chain of events that led to the Lamanites and the Nephite dissenters becoming a “willing” people over against the Nephites who became increasingly hard-hearted (i.e., unwilling) and wicked.

Just as Ammon left a legacy of faithfulness as an instrument in the Lord’s hands in the conversion of thousands of Lamanites, Aminadab too — albeit in a somewhat smaller capacity — left a legacy of having served as an indispensable instrument in the conversion of many souls and the improvement of many lives. Mormon and his sources were eager to recognize Aminadab in that role.

**Pragmatics and Conclusion: “Who Then Is Willing to Consecrate His Service This Day unto the Lord?” (1 Chronicles 29:5)**

This concept of “willingness” is fundamental to true covenant obedience. As documented by Moroni, the Lamanite-Nephite sacrament prayers included language in which the partakers “witness” or “testify” to the father of their “willingness”:

> O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it; that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen. (Moroni 4:3)

In similar language, the Lord revealed to Alma the Elder regarding the members of the nascent church: “Yea, blessed is this people who are willing to bear my name; for in my name shall they be called; and they are mine” (Mosiah 26:18). This ideal was fully achieved generations later when the Savior established his church among the Nephites and Lamanites with the result that “there were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God” (4 Nephi 1:17).

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62  See especially 1 Nephi 2:10. See also Helaman 15:8, 10.
The “willingness” of the Lehite people, for a time, achieved this ideal as they lived what Latter-day Saints often term the law of consecration as instituted by the Savior: “And they taught, and did minister one to another; and they had all things common among them, every man dealing justly, one with another” (3 Nephi 26:19); “And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift” (4 Nephi 1:3). Today, as anciently, covenant obedience and “willingness” are most evident in the degree to which we keep (or do not keep) the law of consecration.

Finally, we recall David’s words as reported by the Chronicler: “Who then is willing to consecrate his service this day unto the Lord?” (1 Chronicles 29:5). The answer to that question for the Lord’s people must collectively be “We!” and individually “Here am I.” Willingness to put everything on the altar, like Abraham (Genesis 22), is the great ideal to which the temple and its covenants leads us today, for we still “must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son. For all those who will not [i.e., are not willing to] endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified.” (D&C 101:4-5). If we are to be the Lord’s “people” — the kin of the divine kinsman, our Redeemer — we must be “willing” to serve him “at all hazards.” Aminadab and the three hundred in the Zeniffite prison became a willing people and helped numerous others become likewise. Latter-day Saints today should be inspired by their example and strive to follow it.

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64 The Prophet Joseph Smith declared: “After a person has faith in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized for the remission of his sins and receives the Holy Ghost, (by the laying on of hands), which is the first Comforter, then let him continue to humble himself before God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and living by every word of God, and the Lord will soon say unto him, Son, thou shalt be exalted. When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve Him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and his election made sure, then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter, which the Lord hath promised the Saints, as is recorded in the testimony of St. John, in the 14th chapter, from the 12th to the 27th verses” (History of the Church, 3:379-381).
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Abstract: The most likely etymology for the name Zoram is a third person singular perfect qal or pô’al form of the Semitic/Hebrew verb *zrm, with the meaning, “He [God] has [is] poured forth in floods.” However, the name could also have been heard and interpreted as a theophoric –rām name, of which there are many in the biblical Hebrew onomasticon (Ram, Abram, Abiram, Joram/Jehoram, Malchiram, etc., cf. Hiram [Hyrum]/Huram). So analyzed, Zoram would connote something like “the one who is high,” “the one who is exalted” or even “the person of the Exalted One [or high place].” This has important implications for the pejoration of the name Zoram and its gentilic derivative Zoramites in Alma’s and Mormon’s account of the Zoramite apostasy and the attempts made to rectify it in Alma 31–35 (cf. Alma 38–39). The Rameumptom is also described as a high “stand” or “a place for standing, high above the head” (Heb. rām; Alma 31:13) — not unlike the “great and spacious building” (which “stood as it were in the air, high above the earth”; see 1 Nephi 8:26) — which suggests a double wordplay on the name “Zoram” in terms of rām and Rameumptom in Alma 31. Moreover, Alma plays on the idea of Zoramites as those being “high” or “lifted up” when counseling his son Shiblon to avoid being like the Zoramites and replicating the mistakes of his brother Corianton (Alma 38:3-5, 11-14). Mormon, perhaps influenced by the Zoramite apostasy and the magnitude of its effects, may have incorporated further pejorative wordplay on the Zoram-derived names Cezoram and Seezoram in order to emphasize that the Nephites had become lifted up in pride like the Zoramites during the judgeships of those judges. The Zoramites and their apostasy represent a type of Latter-day Gentile pride and apostasy, which Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni took great pains to warn against.
"For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11)

First mentioned in 1 Nephi 4:35 as the name of the erstwhile “servant of Laban,” Zoram stands as one of the most prominent personal names in the Book of Mormon and as one of the most important names in Nephite civilization. Zoram himself emerges as a salient figure in Nephi’s small-plates narrative. First an unwitting aid in the latter’s effort to obtain the brass plates from Laban’s treasury, Zoram later became, in Lehi’s words, “a true friend unto … Nephi forever.”

As a patriarch of one of seven distinct tribes or clans that grew out of the Lehite-Ishmaelite party, the name “Zoram” became the basis for the gentilic name “Zoramites” borne by his descendants. Additionally, one or more of his descendants appear to have borne his name as personal names in his memory. Although Zoram is seen most prominently in the events of 1 Nephi 4, when Nephi obtained the brass plates with divine help, and Zoram was obliged to go with him, several of Zoram’s descendants (e.g., Zoram, Jacob, Amalickiah, Ammoron, and Tubaloth) became some of the most infamous and notorious figures in the long Lamanite-Nephite history as Mormon recounts it. The name Zoram receives distinctly pejorative treatment from the time of the great Zoramite apostasy and the rise of Amalickiah.

1 Nephi mentions Zoram in 1 Nephi 4:35, 37; 16:7; 2 Nephi 1:30 (in Lehi’s blessing) and 5:6.

2 Nephi records Lehi’s blessing to Zoram as follows: “And now, Zoram, I speak unto you: Behold, thou art the servant of Laban; nevertheless, thou hast been brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and I know that thou art a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever. Wherefore, because thou hast been faithful thy seed shall be blessed with his seed, that they dwell in prosperity long upon the face of this land; and nothing, save it shall be iniquity among them, shall harm or disturb their prosperity upon the face of this land forever. Wherefore, if ye shall keep the commandments of the Lord, the Lord hath consecrated this land for the security of thy seed with the seed of my son” (2 Nephi 1:30-32).

3 See Jacob 1:13; 4 Nephi 1:36-37; Mormon 1:18; D&C 3:16-17.

4 Gentilic name = the name of a people (a demonym). In ancient Israel, gentilic names or demonyms were often derived from ancestral figures.

5 See, e.g., Alma 16:5, 7; 30:59; 31:1 (see discussion further below).

6 Ammoron’s statement in Alma 54:3 (“I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem”) indicates that that both Amalickiah and his brother Ammoron were descendants of Zoram; thus, too, Ammoron’s son Tubaloth.
In this article I will begin by proposing two suggestions of possible etymologies for Zoram: the first, a modification of an earlier proposal, the second, a proposal — perhaps scientific but more likely midrashic7 — that fits with how the name Zoram and its gentilic derivative “Zoramites” are treated in several texts of the Book of Mormon. This study will further explore the narrative and rhetorical pejoration of the name Zoram in the Book of Mormon text that coincides with the Zoramite apostasy/schism described in Alma 31. Moreover, I will also raise the possibility that the Zoramite apostasy had earlier precedents — perhaps very early precedents beginning in the earlier years of Nephite society during the days of Jacob under the reign of its second king.

Two Suggestions Regarding the Name “Zoram”

The suggestion which Paul Hoskisson lists as the preferred etymology in the Book of Mormon onomasticon,8 that the name Zoram is comprised of ⱅûr + ʾām, “their rock,” while making sense from a grammatical standpoint,9 remains unlikely from an onomastic and etymological standpoint since it lacks attested analogies formed from nouns suffixed with plural possessive suffixes. In other words, it is not evident that Hebrew and Semitic names are formed that way. Better is Paul Hoskisson’s suggestion ⱅûr + ʿām, which he suggests means “rock of the people.”10 However, ʿām in this instance might be better taken as a theophoric element — thus, “(the divine) kinsman is a rock.” This suggestion has the benefit of having possible analogs11 like the Hebrew ʾam-names Jeroboam (“the [divine] kinsman has done justice”12 — i.e., the [divine] kinsman [Yahweh] has contended) and Rehoboam (“the [divine] kinsman has made wide” or “the people have become extensive”),13 which end with this element. Names ending in ʾam are otherwise fairly rare. For this reason, better alternatives are to be sought.

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7 I.e., what some would call “folk-etymological.” I resist this term for reasons that cannot be fully enumerated here. I will use the term midrashic (i.e., interpretive).
8 See https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/ZORAM.
9 See the epithetical “their rock” as attested in Deuteronomy 32:30-31; Psalms 78:35.
10 See https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/ZORAM.
11 Assuming one or either “Jeroboam” and “Rehoboam” are not deformations of -baʿal names. Cf. Jerubbaal and Meribaal/Mephibaal.
13 HALOT, 1214.
The ṣûr- element itself is not problematic. In fact, Biblical Hebrew attests the theophoric names Zuriel (ṣûrīʾēl, “El [God] is my rock”) and Zurishaddai (“The Almighty [šədāy] is my rock,” ṣûr + šədāy). However, the –ʿam, –am, or, as I shall propose, the –(r)am element requires a more convincing explanation.

1. “He Has Poured Forth in Floods”

Hugh Nibley suggested long ago that the name Zoram was akin to the Hebrew noun zerem, “refreshing rain.” William Hamblin also favors this suggestion. An etymology from zerem has the advantage of being simple. Nevertheless, this proposal requires finessing. An etymology along this line, that properly accounts for the vowels in Zoram, is that it derives from a third-person singular perfect pôʿal form of the verbal root *zrm, whence zerem derives.

As a verbal name like Jacob or Joseph, Zoram nicely fits both the qal and pôʿal stem formation patterns and would thus mean, “He [i.e., the deity] has [is] poured forth” or “He has flooded forth.” The verb *zrm is, in fact, attested as a pôʿal/pôʿēl form in Psalms 77:17 [MT 77:18]: “The clouds poured [zōrmû] water: the skies sent out a sound: thine arrows also went abroad.” The clouds’ “pouring out” here is in response to the divine presence. The verb *zrm is further attested as a qal form in Psalms 90:5: “Thou carriest them away as with a flood [zēramtām]; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.” The subject of the verb here is, of course, Yahweh who is often depicted in storm deity language in the Psalms.

2. “The One Who Is High/Exalted” or “He of the Exalted One”

Despite the apparent facility of the name Zoram as a third person masculine singular pôʿal stem formation of *zrm, another possibility needs to be considered. Surprisingly little consideration has been given

14 Zuriel the son of Abihail, see Numbers 3:35.
15 Zurishaddai the father of Shelumiel, see Numbers 1:6; 2:12; 7:36, 41; 10:19.
18 See also, e.g., Psalms 29:3, 10; 68:9; 33; 104:3, 13; 107:29.
to Zoram as belonging to — or at least understood as belong to — a well-attested class of Hebrew –rām names. Given the paucity of names built from the verb *zrm, and the abundance of –rām names, it is not unlikely that an Israelite would have heard and interpreted it as one of the latter. Given the great flexibility and creativity with which ancient Israelites played with names and their meanings,19 whether scientific meaning or midrashic meaning, I wish to suggest this as a strong possibility that Zoram was later treated and pejorated as a –rām name. The –rām element in these names denotes “high” or “exalted.” This approach, however, raises the question: how does one account for the midrashic element zo-?

The Hebrew Bible attests the names Abram (‘ab + rām = “Father is exalted”); Ahiram or Hiram (“my brother is exalted”); Joram or Jehoram (“Yahweh is exalted”); Malchiram (“my king is exalted”). A man named Ram (rām, “exalted,” “high” “lifted up”) is mentioned as the son of Hezron and the forefather of David in Ruth 4:19 and 1 Chronicles 2:9. These –rām names were primarily understood as theophoric; that is, names “bearing” divine names or titles and thus referring to God (God is “high” or “exalted”). The Book of Mormon name “Jarom” is similarly derived from the *rwm/rmm root and means “may [the Lord] be exalted.”20 Can zo- be classed as a theophoric onomastic element similar to ʿāb, ʾāḥî, yô/yĕhô/yāhô/yāhû, malkî, etc.?

Northwest Semitic languages attest a series of z- pronouns, derived from West Semitic *ðū,21 that could serve as relative pronouns, but were also used as demonstrative pronouns and substantives. Gary Rendsburg writes:

ABH [Archaic Biblical Hebrew] attests to two related relative markers ʾezè and ʾzu, more or less equivalent to ‘the one of.’ At one time, these forms may have been distinguished by case (the former as genitive, the latter as nominative), but in the few actual occurrences of these forms no such distinction can be

detected. These relatives clearly are related to the demonstrative pronouns.²²

Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor observe that in Biblical Hebrew, “the three forms of the z series … [zeḥ, zô (zōḥ), and zû] … are not common enough to make it possible to distinguish among them clearly.”²³ They further note that “from the use of יְהִי and its equivalents as an attributive demonstrative (e.g., ‘the person, this one’), there developed a substantive use: ‘the person, the one of (something),’ which is the equivalent to ‘the person who….’”²⁴

Given the above, the Book of Mormon names Zeram and Zoram could both plausibly denote “the one who is high/exalted”²⁵ or “He of the Exalted One.” Understood as theophoric names, “Zeram” and “Zoram” would have reference to deity — i.e., “[Yahweh is] the one who is exalted” or “He [i.e., the one so named is] of the Exalted One.” In the context of Zoram’s liberation from having been the “servant [i.e., slave] of Laban” to become a “free man” (1 Nephi 4:33), perhaps his name came to connote “the one lifted up” out of bondage.²⁶

If Zoram can be understood as the “the one who is lifted up/exalted,” the derived gentilic term, “Zoramites” could connote — and perhaps came to connote — “the ones who are high/exalted” or “lifted up” just as the term Jews (יְהוּדִים) as a gentilic derivative of Judah (יְהוּדָה, “praise,” “thanks”) denoted “praised/thanked ones” or those who are “to be praised out of a feeling of gratitude”²⁷ (see especially 2 Nephi 29:4). Similarly, the gentilic name Nephites seems to have connoted — or came to connote — “fair ones” or “goodly ones.”²⁸ All of these considerations

²⁴ Ibid., 337.
²⁵ Cf. Judges 5:5.
²⁶ I owe this suggestion to Neal Rappleye (personal communication, September 3, 2015) who considered what implications my proposed etymology (or “folk”-etymology) might have had for Zoram during his own lifetime. There is something approaching a precedent for the idea of being “lifted up” out of captivity in 1 Nephi 13:30.
become particularly important and relevant when we examine how the Zoramites are evaluated in later Book of Mormon narratives.

Hearts “Lifted Up”: The Deuteronomic Roots of the Later Zoramite Critique

In his tree-of-life dream, Lehi reports seeing a stark juxtaposition to the elevated tree: “And I also cast my eyes round about, and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26). The “great and spacious” building in Lehi’s dream stands as something of an antitemple opposite the tree of life (the “temple”). Mormon repeatedly refers to Lehi’s vision — which became something of a cultural narrative among the Nephites over the course of centuries — throughout his work. Mormon depicts the Zoramite Rameumptom in terms that recall Lehi’s and Nephi’s descriptions of “the great and spacious building” from the small plates (see further below).

When Nephi sees “the things which [his] father saw,” he sees the same “great and spacious building.” He also comes to understand both the meaning of the building and the meaning of why “it stood, as it were, high above the earth”:

And after he was slain I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb; for thus were the twelve called by the angel of the Lord. And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Behold the world and the wisdom thereof; yea, behold the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And it came to pass that I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (1 Nephi 11:34-36)

The “large and spacious building” or “great and spacious building” constitutes a representation of “the world and the wisdom thereof.” However, Nephi also recognized that this antitemple and its “st[anding], as it were in the air, high above the earth” also represented — “was,” in fact — “the pride of the world.” Almost all of the Hebrew words for pride and its synonyms (e.g., haughtiness) denote “height,” “highness,” or elevation — i.e., being “lifted up.”

Nephi also comes to see that the “great and spacious building” (or “large and spacious building”) was something of a prophecy regarding his own people — his descendants and the descendants of those who followed him, including the descendants of Zoram. Nephi saw that his people came to be like those in that building. His people would “fall” just as that building “fell” and for the same reason — pride:

And the large and spacious building, which thy father saw, is vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men. And a great and a terrible gulf divideth them; yea, even the word of the justice of the Eternal God, and the Messiah who is the Lamb of God, of whom the Holy Ghost beareth record, from the beginning of the world until this time, and from this time henceforth and forever. And while the angel spake these words, I beheld and saw that the seed of my brethren did contend against my seed, according to the word of the angel; and because of the pride of my seed, and the temptations of the devil, I beheld that the seed of my brethren did overpower the people of my seed. (1 Nephi 12:18-19)

Having foreseen that pride — whose perfect hypostasis was the high and lifted up “large [great] and spacious building” — would be the cause of his people’s fall, Nephi lamented it. That eventuality devastated him: “And it came to pass that I was overcome because of my afflictions, for I considered that mine afflictions were great above all, because of the destruction of my people, for I had beheld their fall” (1 Nephi 15:5).

After the division of Lehi’s family (2 Nephi 5) and the founding of Nephite society in the eponymous “land of Nephi,” Jacob describes distinct tribal identities that had already emerged by the second

30 Cf., e.g., cf. Hebrew gāʾā and its cognates — gēʾā, gēʾeh, gaʾāwā, gāʾôn, gēʾūt (see HALOT, 168-169); gabāh and its cognates — gāḇēah, gāḇōah, gōḇāh, gabēhūt (see HALOT, 170-171); and rūm with its cognates (see HALOT, 1202-1206) and its bi-forms (see rāmā, HALOT, 1240; *rmm, HALOT, 1244-1245).
generation, as well as the potentially-fatal problem that was already emerging in their nascent society:

Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, **Zoramites**, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and **those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites**, or the people of Nephi, according to the reigns of the kings. And now it came to pass that the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, **began to grow hard in their hearts**, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as like unto David of old desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son. Yea, and they also began to search much gold and silver, and began to be **lifted up somewhat in pride**. (Jacob 1:13-16; cf. Deuteronomy 8:14; 17:20)

Jacob here admits that his use of the gentilic designations “Nephites” and “Lamanites” — a practice adopted from his brother Nephi and used by his successors — would be a gross oversimplification of the emergent Lehite social picture. Historically speaking, the tribal divisions would have been more pronounced than the “Nephite”/“Lamanite” generalizations used by Book of Mormon writers appear to suggest.

Of the seven tribal or clan entities that Jacob lists here, the Zoramites occupy the conspicuous middle position. This probably reflects an historical reality. We get our best glimpse of this during Alma the Younger’s lifetime when the Zoramites (probably descended from and/or affiliated with the tribal Zoramites) occupied Antionum, which was actually a middle ground between the Lamanites and Nephites. Their apostasy and schism from the Nephites was deemed potentially catastrophic by the other Nephite tribes.

31 In 2 Nephi 5:14, Nephi invokes the general gentilic description “the people who were now called Lamanites.” The term “Nephites” first appears on the small plates in 2 Nephi 29:12-13.
32 Their leader, Zoram, probably bore his ancestor’s name. We see this phenomenon elsewhere in the Book of Mormon: a Lamanite king named Laman presumably descended from Laman (see, e.g., Mosiah 7:21, 9:10-13; 10:6, 18; 24:3, 9) and two men named Nephi descended from Nephi (in Helaman and 3–4 Nephi).
33 Alma 31:3; 43:5, 15, 22.
34 See especially Alma 31:4: “Now the Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites, and that it
I wish here to draw careful attention to Jacob’s description “those who are friendly to the Nephites.” There may be more to Jacob’s use of this language than is immediately apparent. We recall Lehi’s departing blessing to Zoram: “And now, Zoram, I speak unto you: Behold, thou art the servant of Laban; nevertheless, thou hast been brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and I know that thou art a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever” (2 Nephi 1:30). In the Book of Mormon, the terms “friend”/“friendly” and Nephi/Nephites are collocated in the same verse only here.

Lehi had referred to Zoram’s former status as Laban’s “servant,” emphasizing that his former life had been one of subordination and probably servitude — i.e., he had been Laban’s slave, but then emphasizes that he was now Nephi’s “friend,” a term that denotes much higher status (cf. the Egyptian administration title smr wʿty, “Sole Friend” — i.e., of the king). The term rendered “friend” used by Lehi almost certainly means more than in the simple sociological sense.35 In the ancient Near East, terms synonymous with “friend” also had a strong political dimension to them. Lehi’s declaration, “I know that thou art a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever” was also an express wish: Lehi hoped that Zoram and his posterity would support Nephi and his successors politically36 rather than his firstborn son Laman and his successors, as the sons of Ishmael eventually did.37

This political “friendship” language surfaces with some frequency in the cycle of stories that describe David’s ascent to the throne of Israel and Judah and his son Solomon’s reign — and note that Jacob specifically mentions these two in Jacob 1:15. The Deuteronomistic Historian describes the Phoenician king Hiram as a “friend” to David: “Hiram would be the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites.”

35 The term “friendly” as used later by Mormon has distinct political overtones. See Mosiah 24:5; 28:2; Alma 23:18. The term “friend” is used similarly in Alma 18:3; 20:4; and Ether 8:11.

36 Lehi rightly anticipated the political issue (the right to rule): “And I exceedingly fear and tremble because of you, lest he shall suffer again; for behold, ye have accused him that he sought power and authority over you; but I know that he hath not sought for power nor authority over you, but he hath sought the glory of God, and your own eternal welfare” (2 Nephi 1:25). In 2 Nephi 1:26-29, Lehi commands Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and the sons of Ishmael to “hearken” to (or “obey”) Nephi as their spiritual leader, if they wished to have Lehi’s “first blessing” — the right to preside or govern politically. According to Nephi’s account, the very next words are directed toward Zoram (2 Nephi 1:30-32).

was ever a lover of David.” (1 Kings 5:1 [MT 5:15]) or “Hiram had always been a friend to David” (NRSV, NAB = “David’s friend”). In other words, Hiram had always been a loyal political ally of David. Earlier narratives repeatedly describe Jonathan’s “love” for David, “love” that is not only to be understood as sociological, but as political.38

In stating that “those who are friendly to Nephi, I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi,” Jacob is describing those who had given their political loyalty and/or support to Nephi and his chosen successor39 as well as possibly invoking Lehi’s blessing upon Zoram as a second generation reference to the Zoramites (2 Nephi 1:30). Jacob has thus delineated the “people” among whom the severe problems of immorality and pride (that he next describes) crop up: “it came to pass that the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices … and began to be lifted up somewhat in pride.” Jacob here, as I will further argue below, has reference to Moses’s warning, upon the threshold of Israel’s entry into the land of promise, against allowing their “heart [to] be lifted up [rām]” and “forget[ting] the Lord” in the midst of their prosperity (Deuteronomy 8:14). Under their second king, the Nephites were doing the very things that Moses had warned against.

Notably, Jacob connects this behavior to the nascent Nephite kingship (“under the reign of their second king”). Deuteronomy 17:17 specifically warned against a king’s multiplying wives, gold, and silver.

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39 See Jacob 1:9: “Now Nephi began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings.” We assume that Nephi’s successor was one of his own sons because of a comment that Mormon makes in Mosiah 25:13: “And now all the people of Zarahemla were numbered with the Nephites, and this because the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi.”
But these were things which Nephites — or a certain segment of the Nephites — were doing. In the language of Deuteronomy 17:20, these prohibitions were given so that the king’s heart would not be “lifted up” (רֻם) above his brethren. Jacob indicates that this was not just a “royal” problem.

If Jacob is suggesting, however subtly, that these problems began and persisted among the Zoramites, the situation described in Jacob 1 may have important implications for the great Zoramite apostasy and schism that Mormon describes in Alma 31. Were the Zoramites ever truly “Nephite” in the same sense that the clans/tribes of the Nephites, Jacobites, and Josephites were “Nephite”?

Jacob, of course, is aware that the “people of Nephi” growing “hard in their hearts” and being “lifted up, … in pride” was what his brother Nephi had identified as the “great and spacious building” and the cause of the destruction of his people — i.e., the nation that had originally given him its political loyalty. Moreover, we recall that the name Zoram — or at least the phonemes evident in Zoram — evoke the idea of being “high,” “lifted up” or “exalted” (see above). This was the problem among the people described just previously as “those who are friendly to Nephi” (Jacob 1:14), which, as noted above, may have reference to Lehi’s blessing to Zoram in 2 Nephi 1:30-32.

Jacob’s subsequently recorded temple sermon, given at the still newly-built temple in the land of Nephi, sheds further light on the problem that Jacob was facing. He describes this problem in terms that closely parallel the situation among the apostate Zoramites during Alma’s time:

And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches; and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because of the costliness of your apparel, and persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they. (Jacob 2:13)

40  This is to suggest that Jacob would have wished to avoid overt polemic against the Zoramites for practical political reasons.

41  See 2 Nephi 5:16.

42  See Jacob 1:17; 2:2.

43  Jacob’s use of the phrase “because ye suppose that ye are better [lit. good] than they” (Jacob 2:13), like his question “how much better [good] are you than they…?” (Jacob 3:7) appear to be a rhetorical play on the idea of the Nephites as “good(ly) ones” or “fair ones.” Both Hebrew and Egyptian create a two-member
The issue of being “lifted up” in pride in the context of obtaining riches or wealth in a “promised land” with unacknowledged divine help is the precise situation warned about in Deuteronomy 8:14-19. Conceivably, it is to this very text that Jacob refers in his speech:

And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up [רָמ] and thou forget the Lord thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint; who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end; And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day. And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the Lord thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. (Deuteronomy 8:14-19)

There was a part of “Nephite” society that had become “lifted up” in their hearts within only a few years of inheriting their land of promise. Some believed that it was “the might of [their own] hand that had gotten [them their] wealth” and had forgotten that it was the Lord and “the hand of [his] providence” that had “smiled upon [them] most pleasingly” (Jacob 2:13).

has a religious contention — was a Zoramite. Thompson suggests that Zoram, like Nephi and probably Lehi, was a scribe and that Sherem was either a son of or near descendant of Zoram.

On the one hand, Jacob’s carefully-worded statement that Sherem “came among” Jacob’s people suggests that he was not a descendant of his or his brothers Sam, Nephi, or Joseph. On the other hand, the fact that he had a “perfect knowledge of the language of the people” suggests that he was not entirely an outsider either. Since their patriarch, Zoram, was not one of Lehi’s sons (he had married the eldest daughter of Ishmael), the relationship between Zoram’s clan and the other Nephite clans may have been quite different than the relationship between the other Nephite clans (Nephi/Sam’s, Jacob’s and Joseph’s) amongst themselves. The Zoramites evidently existed as (paradoxical) non-outsider “outsiders” — in the “middle ground” as mentioned earlier. Sherem, as far as the evidence of the text indicates, fits very well in this Zoramite non-outsider “outsider” space.

Moreover, Thompson suggests that Jacob deliberately suppresses Sherem’s identity as a Zoramite-Nephite to avoid giving him and his message credibility. There are even more practical reasons for downplaying any Zoramite connection. If the Zoramite clan — in part or in whole — is implicitly the focal point of Jacob’s earlier condemnation of those “lifted up in pride,” then Jacob would have wanted to avoid any overt polemizing that could exacerbate friction — especially religious friction — between the Zoramites and the other Nephite clans. The Nephites still desperately needed the political loyalty of the Zoramites. (The small plates were, among many things, a political document.)

If the Zoramites were part of a less-than-fully-integrated Nephite society and if Jacob’s condemnation of those “friendly to Nephi” who were nevertheless “lifted up in pride” and wore “high heads,” a criticism of not just the Nephites in general, but the Zoramites in particular, a number of subsequent Book of Mormon texts perhaps can be reevaluated in that light: see, e.g., Mosiah 11:5, 19; Alma 1:6, 32; 4:6-9, 12, 19; 6:13.

45 1 Nephi 16:7.
“Lifted Up in the Pride of Their Hearts”: The Zoramite Schism

The story of Alma’s life from his conversion onward is largely a succession of political (Amlici) and religious crises (Nehor, the Zarahemla “dilemma,” Ammonihah, Korihor, the Zoramites, etc.). Sherrie Mills Johnson sees the full eruption of the Zoramite schism addressed in Alma 31–35 as having occurred in the eighth year of the reign of the Judges. 48

She cites the evidence of Alma 4:6-10:

And it came to pass in the eighth year of the reign of the judges, that the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches, and their fine silks, and their fine-twined linen, and because of their many flocks and herds, and their gold and their silver, and all manner of precious things, which they had obtained by their industry; and in all these things were they lifted up in the pride of their eyes, for they began to wear very costly apparel. Now this was the cause of much affliction to Alma, yea, and to many of the people whom Alma had consecrated to be teachers, and priests, and elders over the church; yea, many of them were sorely grieved for the wickedness which they saw had begun to be among their people. For they saw and beheld with great sorrow that the people of the church began to be lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and to set their hearts upon riches and upon the vain things of the world, that they began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure. And thus, in this eighth year of the reign of the judges, there began to be great contentions among the people of the church; yea, there were envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride, even to exceed the pride of those who did not belong to the church of God. And thus ended the eighth year of the reign of the judges; and the wickedness of the church was a great stumbling-block to those who did not belong to the church; and thus the church began to fail in its progress. (Alma 4:6-10)

Some church members during Alma’s time were making the church like “the great and spacious building” of Lehi and Nephi’s vision, wherein the “great and abominable church” members “did point the finger of scorn” (1 Nephi 8:33) at those partaking of the tree of life. The

members of Alma’s church were being “scornful, one towards another” (Alma 4:8). What was the source of this scorn? The people of the church were becoming “lifted up” in pride — pride that was even worse than that of those outside the church.

Mormon here sets the stage for Alma the Younger’s great discourse delivered “to the people in the church which was established in the city of Zarahemla, according to his own record” (Alma 5:2). Alma pointedly asks, “Behold, are ye stripped of pride? I say unto you, if ye are not ye are not prepared to meet God. Behold ye must prepare quickly; for the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand, and such an one hath not eternal life” (Alma 5:28). The use of the verb “stripped,” here is a clothing allusion to the “very costly apparel” that Mormon mentions as evidence that the people of the church were “lifted up in the pride of their eyes” (Alma 4:6, 8). This is subsequently confirmed by Alma’s later question, “Can ye be puffed up in the pride of your hearts; yea, will ye still persist in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches?” (Alma 5:63) It is perhaps worth noting here that Alma in sermon twice describes “pride” in terms of clothing, which was specifically the Zoramites’ problem.

Following his inclusion of Alma’s sermon with its penetrating questions, Mormon reports the following:

And it also came to pass that whosoever did belong to the church that did not repent of their wickedness and humble themselves before God — I mean those who were lifted up in the pride of their hearts — the same were rejected, and their names were blotted out, that their names were not numbered among those of the righteous. (Alma 6:3)

Note that Mormon specifically notes the excommunication of “those who were lifted up in the pride of their hearts,” but he does not tell us what subsequently happens to this group of people. As noted previously, the gentilic term Zoramites — or at least the phonetic components — can reasonably be construed to denote “those who are high” or “those who are lifted up.” We should note that Mormon repeatedly uses the expression “lifted up” to refer to the excommunicants or dissenters, an expression that Alma does not use in his sermon, though he does indirectly allude to the proud Zarahemla-ites as those who were “lifted up in the pride of [their] hearts” (Alma 7:5). The question this raises is: what, if anything, does Mormon’s inclusion of this additional “lifted up” language signal? The next time we meet a concentration of this kind of language is in Alma 31 and the story of the Zoramite apostasy. The phrase
“those who were lifted up in the pride of their hearts,” thus possibly and plausibly points us forward to the narrative moment (Alma 31) where Mormon resumes the story of the excommunicants mentioned in Alma 4–6, the story of the Zoramites (“those who are high/lifted up”).

**“High” and “Lifted Up”: The Zoramite Prayer and the Rameumptom**

Alma has scarcely gotten the Korihor crisis (Alma 31) behind him when he is forced to deal — or resume dealing with — another religious crisis: a now full-blown Zoramite apostasy. As noted above, this crisis evidently has roots in earlier events, plausibly those described in Alma 4–6. Here the narrator (Mormon) includes pejorative wordplay on the name Zoram:

Now, when they had come into the land, behold, to their astonishment they found that the Zoramites had built synagogues, and that they did gather themselves together on one day of the week, which day they did call the day of the Lord; and they did worship after a manner which Alma and his brethren had never beheld; For they had a place built up in the center of their synagogue, a place for standing, which was high above the head; and the top thereof would only admit one person. Therefore, whosoever desired to worship must go forth and stand upon the top thereof, and stretch forth his hands towards heaven, and cry with a loud voice, saying: Holy, holy God; we believe that thou art God, and we believe that thou art holy, and that thou wast a spirit, and that thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever. Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ. But thou art the same yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast [cf. Heb. rmy] by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee; and we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren, which doth bind them down to a belief of Christ, which doth lead their hearts to wander far
from thee, our God. And again we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people. Amen. (Alma 31:12-18)

Mormon then names the cultic structure — previously described as the “place for standing, which was high above the head” — from which these self-exalting prayers were offered: “Now the place was called by them Rameumptom, which, being interpreted, is the holy stand” (Alma 31:21). The text here evidences a rich wordplay involving two names — the gentilic term Zoramites (interpretively, “the ones who are high/exalted”) and the Rameumptom — which is described as “a place for standing which was high [cf. rām] above the head.” While we cannot, from a strictly scientific standpoint, state the etymology of Rameumptom, the -ram- element would most naturally be related to Hebrew/Semitic rām (“high”). It is also interesting to consider -ram- as the element that Mormon is glossing as “holy” (leaving –umptom as somehow denoting “stand” or “place of standing,” cf. Hebrew, *md “to stand” + the nominalizing appellative –on/-om, thus “high [i.e., holy] place of standing”).

If so, Mormon makes a remarkable and poignant commentary on the Zoramite idea of “holiness” (cf. “for which holiness, O God, we thank thee,” Alma 31:17): Zoramite “holiness” was, from Alma’s and Mormon’s viewpoint, elevation or “highness.”

There appears to be an additional paronomasia on Zoram in the phrase “whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell” (Alma 31:17). The language of the Zoramite liturgical prayer here evokes, and perhaps represents a development of the ideas that originate in, the Song of the Sea and the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15:

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown [rāmâ, i.e., cast] into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation: he is my God, and I will prepare him an habitation; my father’s God, and I will exalt him [waʾārōmēmenēhû]. The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his host hath he cast [yārâ] into

49 David Calabro (personal note, October 2015) insightfully suggests that “perhaps Hebrew *md “stand’ undergoes devoicing of /d/, then epenthetic addition of /p/ (cf. English empty < Old English aemettig; Spanish hombre < Latin homine(m)).” He further suggests that “the final –om could be pronominal ‘their’, thus ‘their stand is high/holy’ or something along those lines.”
the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea. (Exodus 15:1-4)

And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider **hath he thrown** [rāmā] into the sea. (Exodus 15:21)

The overall literary effect of the wordplay on Zoram/Zoramites and rāmā (“cast,” “throw”), 50 or one of its synonyms, illustrates a kind of Zoramite doctrine of double predestination revolving around the name “Zoram.” The Zoramites are “exalted” (rām) in their election of “holiness,” a version of praedestinatio ad salutem — while everyone else is subject to a version of praedestinatio ad damnationem — “cast” (cf. rāmā) “down to hell.” The Zoramite liturgy thus represents a perversion of ancient Israel’s earliest liturgy and a perversion of its doctrine of election.

**The Day of the Lord versus the Zoramite “Day of the Lord”**

According to Mormon and his source (presumably Alma), the Zoramites literally exalted themselves atop the Rameumptom on what they called the “day of the Lord” (Alma 31:12-18). This presentation of the self-exalting Zoramites celebrating their self-styled “day of the Lord” (Alma 31) atop the Rameumptom inverts Isaiah’s description of the “day of the Lord” in Isaiah 2, with its presentation of the exaltation of the Lord and the temple. Alma had “received tidings” of rumored Zoramite idolatry — “perverting the ways of the Lord” in general and that “Zoram … their leader, was leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols” in particular (Alma 31:1).

Numerous biblical texts polemicize against idolatry. Isaiah 2, a text that was important to Nephi and the Nephites when they first established their central sanctuary in the more highly elevated51 land of Nephi, inveighs against the “pride,” “haughtiness,” or “loftiness” of idolators (sc. apostates):

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51 See Omni 1:27; Mosiah 20:7; 28:1, 5; 29:3; Alma 17:8; 20:2; 24:20; 26:33; 29:14; 47:1.
And the mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself: therefore forgive them not. Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness [rûm] of men [i.e., human pride] shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted [niśgab] in that day. For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud [gēʾeh] and lofty [râm] and upon every one that is lifted up [niśšāʾ] and he shall be brought low: and upon all the cedars of Lebanon, that are high [hārāmîm] and lifted up [hannîśšāʾîm] and upon all the oaks of Bashan, And upon all the high mountains [hehārîm hārāmîm], and upon all the hills that are lifted up [hannîśšāʾît], and upon every high tower [migdol gābōaḥ], and upon every fenced wall, And upon all the ships of Tarshish, and upon all pleasant pictures. And the loftiness [gabĕhût] of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness [rûm] of men shall be made low: and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. (Isaiah 2:9-19; see also 2 Nephi 12:9-19)

Using the word râm and several synonyms, Isaiah prophesies the destruction of everything that the “great and spacious building [that] stood as it were in the air, high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26) represents. Thus the Zoramites’ self-styled “day of the Lord” with its systematized self-exaltation stands in great ironic contradistinction to the reality of Isaiah’s “day of the Lord” to which the prophets of the Book of Mormon from Lehi to Moroni looked forward. Alma — who warns his son Shiblon against the Zoramites’ excesses (Alma 38, see below) — was conscious of this “day of the Lord” irony and Mormon wished his “high” and “lifted up” latter-day Gentile audience to recognize this irony as a warning.

“Their Hearts Were Lifted Up”/“He Lifted up His Voice”: the Juxtaposition of the Zoramites’ and Alma’s Prayers

Against the description of the Zoramites, the “high” Rameumptom, and their mode of prayer, Mormon judiciously and deliberately juxtaposes Alma and his prayer:
Now when Alma saw this his heart was grieved; for he saw that they were a wicked and a perverse people; yea, he saw that their hearts were set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods. Yea, and he also saw that their hearts were lifted up unto great boasting, in their pride. And he lifted up his voice to heaven, and cried, saying: O, how long, O Lord, wilt thou suffer that thy servants shall dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the children of men? Behold, O God, they cry unto thee, and yet their hearts are swallowed up in their pride. Behold, O God, they cry unto thee with their mouths, while they are puffed up, even to greatness, with the vain things of the world. Behold, O my God, their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things which they are ornamented with; and behold, their hearts are set upon them, and yet they cry unto thee and say — We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people unto thee, while others shall perish. (Alma 31:24-28)

Mormon contrapositions Alma’s “lifted up” voice with the Zoramites’ “lifted up” hearts. His emphasis on the elevation of the Zoramites’ hearts again recalls Deuteronomy 8:14 with its description of the heart “lifted up” (רָמָה). Alma’s list of the Zoramites’ fine apparel evokes Isaiah’s list of women’s finery in Isaiah 3:18-23 and the description of daughters of Zion as “haughty” (Isaiah 3:16). All of this contributes further to the picture established earlier in the text that the Zoramite conception of “holiness” is intrinsically bound up with “highness.”

“See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up”: Alma’s Counsel to Shiblon

In Alma 36–42, Mormon has included the final paranetic counsel that Alma gave his sons prior to his death. Alma’s onomastic wordplay on Zoramites in his similar counsel to Shiblon may have, at least in part, motivated his incorporation of similar wordplay in his account of the Zoramite apostasy and perhaps later.

The briefest advice that Alma gave was to his son Shiblon. Alma commends Shiblon for his faithfulness especially as manifested while serving as a missionary among the Zoramites:

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52 English “haughty” (< haught) comes by way of Old French (haut) from Latin altus (“high”).
I say unto you, my son, that I have had great joy in thee already, because of thy faithfulness and thy diligence, and thy patience and thy long-suffering among the people of the Zoramites. For I know that thou wast in bonds; yea, and I also know that thou wast stoned for the word’s sake; and thou didst bear all these things with patience because the Lord was with thee; and now thou knowest that the Lord did deliver thee. And now my son, Shiblon, I would that ye should remember, that as much as ye shall put your trust in God even so much ye shall be delivered out of your trials, and your troubles, and your afflictions, and ye shall be lifted up at the last day. (Alma 38:3-5)

Alma promises Shiblon that he will be “exalted” or “lifted up” in a much different way than the self-exalting Zoramites: God will lift him up. Although he makes a similar promise to Helaman, Alma’s promise to Shiblon becomes even more meaningful in view of his patient self-abasement among the proud Zoramites. Importantly, the idiom “lifted up at the last day” is first used by Nephi in 1 Nephi 13:37 — the immediate context of his vision of the tree of life and the fall of the “great and spacious building” (1 Nephi 11–12), which “stood … in the air, high above the earth” (1 Nephi 8:26).

That Alma has the pride and self-exaltation of the Zoramites in mind is confirmed by his admonition to Shiblon against committing “Zoramite” sins — sins that his younger brother Corianton had committed on their mission to reclaim the Zoramites: “See that ye are not lifted up unto pride; yea, see that ye do not boast in your own wisdom, nor of your much strength … Do not pray as the Zoramites do, for ye have seen that they pray to be heard of men, and to be praised for their wisdom” (Alma 38:12, 14). The two-fold juxtaposition of “lifted up” and “Zoramites,” constitutes a wordplay on a phonetically-derived meaning of — i.e., a polemical midrashic derivation of — the term

53 See Alma 37:37; in addition to Alma 37:37 and 38:5, the idiom “lifted up at the last day” occurs in 1 Nephi 13:37; 16:2; Alma 13:29; 36:3; 3 Nephi 27:22; Mormon 2:19. The Book of Mormon idiom is incorporated into the language a number of revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 5:39; 9:14; 17:8; 76:16, 22).
54 1 Nephi 13:37: “And blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost; and if they endure unto the end they shall be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb; and whoso shall publish peace, yea, tidings of great joy, how beautiful upon the mountains shall they be.” Cf. 1 Nephi 16:2.
“Zoramites” and can be seen as additional evidence of its pejoration among the Nephites.

**Further Trouble with Descendants of Zoram**

Mormon describes the Zoramite alliance with the Lamanites against the Nephites as a great detriment to the latter. He reports that when the Zoramites shifted their affiliation to the Lamanites (“it came to pass that the Zoramites became Lamanites,” Alma 43:4) that Zerahemnah, a Zoramite himself, was installed in the top military leadership post (Alma 43:5). Mormon then states that Zerahemnah made extensive use of Nephite dissenters: “Zerahemnah appointed chief captains over the Lamanites, and they were all Amalekites and Zoramites” (Alma 43:6).

In Alma 43:13, Mormon pauses to comment on the religio-ethnic situation during this period of time, giving a kind of summary picture of how things had changed since the time of Jacob: “Thus the Nephites were compelled, alone, to withstand against the Lamanites, who were a compound of Laman and Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael, and all those who had dissented from the Nephites, who were Amalekites and Zoramites, and the descendants of the priests of Noah.” To this Mormon adds that “those dissenters [descendants] were as numerous, nearly, as were the Nephites” (Alma 43:14). The Zoramite apostasy and defection to the Lamanites had made the Nephites’ already precarious existence all the more precarious.

For Mormon, the overall effect of the Zoramite/dissenter leadership on the Lamanites and the intensity of their fighting is clear: “And [the Lamanites] were inspired by the Zoramites and the Amalekites, who were their chief captains and leaders, and by Zerahemnah, who was their chief captain, or their chief leader and commander; yea, they did fight like dragons, and many of the Nephites were slain by their hands” (Alma 43:44). Thus, after his rise to kingship among the Lamanites, Amalickiah consciously continued Zerahemnah’s practice of using Zoramite military leaders against the Nephites (see Alma 48:5).


56 Alma 48:5: “And thus he did appoint chief captains of the Zoramites, they being the most acquainted with the strength of the Nephites, and their places of resort, and the weakest parts of their cities; therefore he appointed them to be chief captains over his armies.”
Unsurprisingly, the would-be king Amalickiah (cf. the evident wordplay on the Semitic root *mlk and “Amalickiah”)\(^{57}\) and his brother Ammoron were, according to the latter’s own words, descendants of Zoram: “I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem” (Alma 54:23). This statement seems to represent a longstanding belief that prevailed among the Zoramites that differed from Lehi’s recorded words to Zoram (“thou hast been brought out of the land of Jerusalem,” 2 Nephi 1:30) in the very same blessing in which he affirmed Zoram’s political loyalty to Nephi (“I know that thou art a true friend unto my son Nephi forever,” 2 Nephi 1:30).\(^{58}\)

Shortly after mentioning the death of Ammoron and the end of the long war(s) with the Lamanites that had been precipitated by the Zoramite apostasy and had been waged by Zoramites (Zerahemnah, Amalickiah, and Ammoron), Mormon poignantly observes: “But notwithstanding their riches, or their strength, or their prosperity, they were not lifted up in the pride of their eyes; neither were they slow to remember the Lord their God; but they did humble themselves exceedingly before him” (Alma 62:49). The Nephites had, at least for the moment, learned something from — or at least because of — the proud Zoramites.

**“Lifted Up Beyond That Which Is Good”: The Nephites During the Judgeships of Cezoram to Seezoram**

Additional possible examples of wordplay on variant forms of the name “Zoram” surface in the Book of Helaman, where Mormon describes the corruption of the Nephite judiciary and society at large as the Gadianton problem spread. In Helaman 4:12, Mormon ascribes the military disasters that had come upon the Nephites to the “pride” that had entered the “hearts” of many church members “because of their exceeding riches.” These disasters came “because of their oppression to the poor, withholding their food from the hungry, withholding their clothing from the naked, and smiting their humble brethren upon the cheek” (Helaman 4:12), among other things.

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\(^{58}\) The Zoramites’ tradition that their ancestor Zoram had been “pressed and brought out of Jerusalem” also differed from the Nephites’ tradition regarding themselves: namely, that the Nephites had been “brought out of Jerusalem” (Alma 9:9; 3 Nephi 10:17).
In Helaman 5:1, Mormon reports that in the sixty and second year of the reign of the judges that “Nephi delivered up the judgment-seat to a man whose name was Cezoram.” Mormon further indicates that during this time the Nephites crossed an important line: “For as their laws and their governments were established by the voice of the people, and they who chose evil were more numerous than they who chose good, therefore they were ripening for destruction, for the laws had become corrupted” (Helaman 5:2). Cezoram and subsequently his son are assassinated while carrying out affairs of state:

And it came to pass that in the sixty and sixth year of the reign of the judges, behold, **Cezoram** was murdered by an unknown hand as he sat upon the judgment-seat. And it came to pass that in the same year, that his son, who had been appointed by the people in his stead, was also murdered. And thus ended the sixty and sixth year. And in the commencement of the sixty and seventh year the people began to grow exceedingly wicked again. For behold, the Lord had blessed them so long with the riches of the world that they had not been stirred up to anger, to wars, nor to bloodshed; therefore they began to set their hearts upon their riches; yea, they began to seek to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another; therefore they began to commit secret murders, and to rob and to plunder, that they might get gain. And now behold, those murderers and plunderers were a band who had been formed by Kishkumen and Gadianton. And now it had come to pass that there were many, even among the Nephites, of Gadianton’s band. … And it was they who did murder the chief judge **Cezoram**, and his son, while in the judgment-seat; and behold, they were not found. (Helaman 6:15-19)

For Mormon, the assassination of Cezoram and his son are the sign of the people growing wicked to the point that they were “lifted up one above another.” The mention of Cezoram’s name in the context of the people being “lifted up” above one another recalls the Zoramite crisis from Alma 31 and subsequent disasters brought about by descendants of Zoram (Amalickiah, Ammoron, Tubaloth, etc.). Whether the ce- prefix on Cezoram is taken as a biform of ze- (“he of,” i.e., “he of Zoram”)

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59 The phrase “in this same year” has reference to “the sixty and second year of the reign of the judges” mentioned in Helaman 4:18.
or Egyptian s3/z3 (“son,” i.e., “descendant”), the name Cezoram very likely meant or connoted “son/descendant of Zoram,” a pejorative onomastic wordplay on Cezoram and -ram seems plausible here as in Alma 31 and 38. Perhaps to Mormon’s way of thinking, the “Zoramite” problem (pride) that plagued the Nephites in various ways, at least since the time of Alma the Younger, has surfaced yet again.

All of this, Mormon makes clear, was instigated by Satan, “the author of all sin” and the founder of secret combinations and antitemples like the Rameumptom, the great and spacious building, and the great tower: “It is that same being who put it into the hearts of the people to build a tower sufficiently high that they might get to heaven” (Helaman 6:28).

The narrative again reprises the apostate Zoramite concept of “holiness.” In a woe pronounced upon the Nephites that plays on the names Cezoram, Seezoram, the term Nephites (“good/“fair ones”) and perhaps his own name, Nephi the son of Helaman declares: “Yea, wo shall come unto you because of that pride which ye have suffered to enter your hearts, which has lifted you up beyond that which is good [an onomastic play on “Nephites”] because of your exceedingly great riches!” (Helaman 7:16). The rise of the now-assassinated Cezoram (Helaman 5:1; 6:15, 19), along with his son, had marked a change in the vox populi (voice of the people) from choosing good and that which is right to choosing evil and iniquity, this in fulfillment of king Mosiah’s prophecy and warning in Mosiah 29. The chief judge at the time of Nephi’s speech was Seezoram, whose own assassination was being carried out by his brother even as Nephi spoke (see Helaman 9:23, 26-27).

After noting the passing of the eighty-first though the eighty-fifth years of the reign of the judges, which saw the Nephites backslide into moral apostasy in spite of Nephi’s performance of many irrefutable miracles, Mormon launches into his famous rant on the nothingness of humanity (Helaman 12). Here he has the “lifted up” Nephites of

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60 See, e.g., Raymond O. Faulkner, A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 207.
61 For a fuller discussion of this name, see the entry for “Cezoram” in the Book of Mormon Onomasticon at https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/onoma/index.php/CEZORAM.
62 Helaman 6:30.
63 2 Nephi 26:22.
65 Helaman 11:38.
Cezoram’s and Seezoram’s time period in mind, and perhaps too the Zoramite apostasy (Alma 31), when he exclaims: “Yea, how quick to be lifted up in pride; yea, how quick to boast, and do all manner of that which is iniquity; and how slow are they to remember the Lord their God, and to give ear unto his counsels, yea, how slow to walk in wisdom’s paths!” (Helaman 12:5). This is the very opposite of the situation described in Alma 62:49. Here Mormon gives us another foreboding reminiscence of Deuteronomy 8:14 that calls to mind the warnings and curses of Deuteronomy against Israelites who violate covenants upon which their inheritance or possession of “promised lands” are predicated.

“There Began to Be Those Among Them Who Were Lifted Up in Pride”: A Fatal Replication of the Zoramite Apostasy

3 Nephi 1:29 confirms that the Zoramites were particularly connected with the Gadianton robbers, and thus remained a problem. Nevertheless, Mormon tells us that for decades after Jesus’s appearance among “the Nephites and those who had been called Lamanites” (3 Nephi 10:18), that there were no longer Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God” (4 Nephi 1:17). This condition prevailed until sometime between the one-hundred tenth and the one hundred and ninety-fourth year when, “a small part of the people who had revolted from the church and taken upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land” (4 Nephi 1:20). It was shortly after this that society again became highly stratified: “And now, in this two hundred and first year there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world” (4 Nephi 1:24).

The reemergence of “those who were lifted up in pride” coincides with the reemergence of old tribal distinctions and ethno-religious divisions, including “Zoramites”:

And now it came to pass in this year, yea, in the two hundred and thirty and first year, there was a great division among the people. And it came to pass that in this year there arose a people who were called the Nephites, and they were true believers in Christ; and among them there were those who were called by the Lamanites — Jacobites, and Josephites, and Zoramites; Therefore the true believers in Christ, and the true worshipers of Christ, (among whom were the three disciples of Jesus who should tarry) were called Nephites, and Jacobites, and Josephites,
and Zoramites. And it came to pass that they who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites, and Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites; and they did not dwindle in unbelief, but they did wilfully rebel against the gospel of Christ; and they did teach their children that they should not believe, even as their fathers, from the beginning, did dwindle. (4 Nephi 1:35-38)

Mormon consciously bases his description of the ethno-religious picture that existed during this time on Jacob 1:13. Again, the Zoramites are placed last in the list of Nephite tribes and stand in a kind of middle position between the other three Nephite tribes and the Lamanite tribes. Mormon essays to show how history is again repeating itself. Problems that first emerged under the Nephites’ second king (Jacob 1:15-16; 2:12-13) and eventually reached their climax during and after the time of the Zoramite apostasy again resurface:

And it came to pass that two hundred and forty and four years had passed away, and thus were the affairs of the people. And the more wicked part of the people did wax strong, and became exceedingly more numerous than were the people of God. And they did still continue to build up churches unto themselves, and adorn them with all manner of precious things. And thus did two hundred and fifty years pass away, and also two hundred and sixty years. And it came to pass that the wicked part of the people began again to build up the secret oaths and combinations of Gadianton. And also the people who were called the people of Nephi began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, and become vain like unto their brethren, the Lamanites. (4 Nephi 1:40-44)

Just as the Zoramite apostasy (Alma 31) was a precursor to the large-scale formation and proliferation of secret combinations in Nephite society at large before the advent of the Savior, the materialistic focus of the Nephites (including “Zoramites”) paves the way for the rebuilding of the same oath-bound secret combinations founded by Kishkumen and led and promulgated by Gadianton. In stating that the Nephites had “become vain like unto their brethren,” Mormon perhaps invokes the language of Jeremiah (language borrowed later by the Deuteronomistic historian who reflected on the downfall of Israel and Judah): 66 they

66  2 Kings 17:15: “And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that were round
had “walked after vanity, and [had] become vain” (Jeremiah 2:5). Zoramite-like apostasy was becoming the Nephites undoing.

Mormon, in a letter to Moroni (preserved for us by the latter), states the matter succinctly: “Behold, the pride of this nation, or the people of the Nephites, hath proven their destruction except they should repent” (Moroni 8:27). The Nephites, of course, did not repent. They fell just as Nephi foresaw regarding “the great and spacious building,” whose “fall thereof … was exceedingly great” (1 Nephi 11:36; 12:18-19).

Moroni, finishing his father’s record and describing the aftermath of his people’s destruction, declared in terms similar to Nephi’s words in 1 Nephi 11–12, 15: “And behold, the Lamanites have hunted my people, the Nephites, down from city to city and from place to place, even until they are no more; and great has been their fall; yea, great and marvelous is the destruction of my people, the Nephites” (Mormon 8:7). The Nephites became “lifted up beyond that which is good” to an incurable degree. The symptoms of the earlier Zoramite apostasy and their sick society became fatal to the Nephite nation in the end.

Pragmatics and Conclusion: A Warning to Modern-day “Zoramites”

Just as Nephi foresaw the fall of the “great and spacious building” (1 Nephi 11) — which he equated with the fall of his people (1 Nephi 12) — he also foresaw the fall of the “great and abominable church” which he specifically and repeatedly connected with the Gentiles:

Nevertheless, thou beholdest that the Gentiles who have gone forth out of captivity, and have been lifted up by the power of God above all other nations, upon the face of the land which is choice above all other lands, which is the land that the Lord God hath covenanted with thy father that his seed should have for the land of their inheritance; wherefore, thou seest that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren. (1 Nephi 13:30)

And the blood of that great and abominable church, which is the whore of all the earth, shall turn upon their own heads;

about them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them, that they should not do like them”; Jeremiah 2:5: “Thus saith the Lord, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain?”

67 See also 1 Nephi 15:5.
for they shall war among themselves, and the sword of their own hands shall fall upon their own heads, and they shall be drunken with their own blood. And every nation [Heb. gôy = “gentile”] which shall war against thee, O house of Israel, shall be turned one against another, and they shall fall into the pit which they digged to ensnare the people of the Lord. And all that fight against Zion shall be destroyed, and that great whore, who hath perverted the right ways of the Lord, yea, that great and abominable church, shall tumble to the dust and great shall be the fall of it. (1 Nephi 22:13-14)

And the Gentiles are lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and have stumbled, because of the greatness of their stumbling block, that they have built up many churches; nevertheless, they put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain and grind upon the face of the poor. (2 Nephi 26:20)

Yea, they have all gone out of the way; they have become corrupted. Because of pride, and because of false teachers, and false doctrine, their churches have become corrupted, and their churches are lifted up; because of pride they are puffed up. They rob the poor because of their fine sanctuaries; they rob the poor because of their fine clothing; and they persecute the meek and the poor in heart, because in their pride they are puffed up. They wear stiff necks and high heads; yea, and because of pride, and wickedness, and abominations, and whoredoms, they have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ; nevertheless, they are led, that in many instances they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men. O the wise, and the learned, and the rich, that are puffed up in the pride of their hearts, and all those who preach false doctrines, and all those who commit whoredoms, and pervert the right way of the Lord … But behold, if the inhabitants of the earth shall repent of their wickedness and abominations they shall not be destroyed, saith the Lord of Hosts. But behold, that great and abominable church, the whore of all the earth, must tumble must tumble to the earth, and great must be the fall thereof. … Wo be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts! (2 Nephi 28:11-15, 17-18, 32)
Mormon must have been aware of Nephi’s statements like these regarding the Gentiles in latter-day apostasy when he (Mormon) crafted his later descriptions of the apostate Zoramites in Alma 31–35. The Gentiles’ “pervert[ing] the right way of the Lord,” their persecution and mistreatment of “the meek and the poor in heart” (including the economic poor), their wearing of “fine clothing,” and their building of exclusive “fine sanctuaries” are all things upon which Mormon evaluates the Zoramites and levies a negative judgment. Mormon and Moroni knew that these would also be the sins of the latter-day Gentiles who would become — and remain — “high” and “lifted up” in Zoramite-like pride.

Mormon and Moroni saw with their own eyes, what Nephi had seen in vision: the fall of the Nephite nation. And just as Nephi saw his future posterity and their fall in vision, Moroni himself saw others to whom the vision of the “great and spacious building” and its fall pertains: the latter-day Gentiles. Like his ancestor Nephi, Moroni foresaw the coming forth of the Nephite records during a time of Zoramite-like apostasy: “Yea, it shall come in a day when the power of God shall be denied, and churches become defiled and be lifted up in the pride of their hearts; yea, even in a day when leaders of churches and teachers shall rise in the pride of their hearts, even to the envying of them who belong to their churches” (Mormon 8:28; cf. especially Isaiah 2:6-22). Moroni’s language becomes achingly plaintive on this point:

Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. (Mormon 8:36-37)

Moroni speaks so plaintively because he understands that 1 Nephi 11:34-36 was not simply a prediction about the “fall” of his people, but of the latter-day Gentiles. His description of these latter-day Gentiles is a description of a sick society whose symptoms match those of the Zoramites in Alma 31 and his own society during his father’s
(Mormon’s) lifetime prior to the great Lamanite war that made an end of the Nephites.

Moreover, it is no accident that Moroni almost immediately gives us an account of the rise and fall of a Gentile nation (the Jaredites) who were “raised up” upon the land (Ether 1:43). The Jaredites fled the great tower but end up falling like temporal and spiritual Babylon⁶⁸ — i.e., the “great and spacious building.” The Book of Mormon, in President Ezra Taft Benson’s words, constitutes “a witness and a warning”⁶⁹ to latter-day Gentiles — especially those living in Lehi’s land of promise — of whom the Lord foretold:

At that day when the Gentiles shall sin against my gospel, and shall reject the fulness of my gospel, and shall be lifted up in the pride of their hearts above all nations, and above all the people of the whole earth, and shall be filled with all manner of lyings, and of deceits, and of mischiefs, and all manner of hypocrisy, and murders, and priestcrafts, and whoredoms, and of secret abominations; and if they shall do all those things, and shall reject the fulness of my gospel, behold, saith the Father, I will bring the fulness of my gospel from among them.

(3 Nephi 16:10)

Like Nephi, Jesus foresaw and foretold the extreme pride — the highness — of the latter-day Gentiles, of which the Zoramites were but a mere type or foreshadow. In our day we continue to see the prophecy that the Gentiles would by-and-large reject the fulness of the gospel, and we are watching as the Lord “bring[s] the fulness of [his] gospel from among them.” And yet the Lord, as he did through Alma, Amulek, Zeezrom et al. to the Zoramites offers the latter-day Gentiles an opportunity to repent. If the Gentiles repent, he extends special promises to them:

But if they will repent and hearken unto my words, and harden not their hearts, I will establish my church among them, and they shall come in unto the covenant and be numbered among this the remnant of Jacob, unto whom I have given this land for their inheritance; And they shall assist my people, the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of the house of Israel as shall come, that

⁶⁸ Isaiah 21:9; Jeremiah 51:8, 44-49; Revelation 14:8; 18:2; D&C 1:16; 86:3.
⁶⁹ Ezra Taft Benson, A Witness and a Warning: A Modern-Day Prophet Testifies of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988). It is ignorance of this warning that brought (and keeps) the church under condemnation (see D&C 84:49-59).
they may build a city, which shall be called the New Jerusalem. And then shall they assist my people that they may be gathered in, who are scattered upon all the face of the land, in unto the New Jerusalem. And then shall the power of heaven come down among them; and I also will be in the midst. (3 Nephi 16:21-25)

These promises predicated on faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism as evidence of Christ-like humility, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost and enduring in faith, hope, and charity are worth the blessings that follow. Christ-like humility is necessary for both Jew and Gentile. Ultimately, there is no salvation or exaltation (being “lifted up at the last day”) in the kingdom of heaven for any of us without it.

In conclusion, the pejorative wordplay (and its possible roots in Deuteronomy 8:14; 17:20 and Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13) can be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>Wordplay on –ram-name</th>
<th>Possible direct scriptural allusions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacob 1:13-16;</td>
<td>Zoram, Zoramites: “they … began to be lifted up somewhat in pride”;</td>
<td>Deuteronomy 8:14;</td>
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<td>2:13</td>
<td>“lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because</td>
<td>17:20</td>
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<td>of the costliness of your apparel”</td>
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<td>Alma 4:6-10;</td>
<td>Zoram, Zoramites Schism: some church members “lifted up in the pride of their eyes”</td>
<td>Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13</td>
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<td>5:28; 63</td>
<td>(2 x) “are ye stripped of pride”? “can ye be puffed up in the pride of your hearts;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>yea, will ye still persist in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts</td>
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<td>upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alma 31:12-18;</td>
<td>Rameumptom, Zoram, Zoramites “they had a place built up in the center of their</td>
<td>1 Nephi 8:26</td>
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<td>18, 21</td>
<td>synagogue, a place for standing, which was high above the head”</td>
<td>Exodus 15:1-4, 21</td>
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<td>“thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be</td>
<td>Deuteronomy 8:14;</td>
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<td>cast [cf. Heb. rmy] by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we</td>
<td>17:20</td>
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<td>thank thee”</td>
<td>Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13</td>
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<td>“Now the place was called by them Rameumptom, which, being interpreted, is the holy</td>
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<td>stand”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Alma 31:24-28  Zoram, Zoramites  
“[Alma] also saw that their hearts were lifted up unto great boasting, in their pride. And he lifted up his voice to heaven, and cried …”
Deuteronomy 8:14; 17:20  Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13

Alma 38:3-5, 11-14  Zoramites  
“ye shall be lifted up at the last day”  “See that ye are not lifted up unto pride”  “do not pray as the Zoramites do”
Alma 31:12-18, 21  1 Nephi 13:37

Alma 62:49  Zoramites  
“They [the Nephites] were not lifted up in the pride of their eyes”
Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13  Alma 4:6-10

Helaman 6:15-19  Cezoram, Zoramites  
“[The Nephites] set their hearts upon their riches…that they might be lifted up one above another”
Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13  Alma 31–35

Helaman 7:16  Cezoram, Seezoram, Zoramites  
“that pride which ye have suffered to enter your hearts, which has lifted you up beyond that which is good because of your exceedingly great riches!”
Alma 31–35  Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13

4 Nephi 1:24, 35-38, 40-44  Zoramites  
“those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel”
Church/population schisms: “the people who were called the people of Nephi began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches”
Jacob 1:13-16; 2:13  (Deuteronomy 8:14; 17:20)  Alma 31–35

The Zoramite schism and apostasy had a major effect on Nephite society, not only during the time of Alma and his son Helaman, but also during the times of his later descendants and spiritual successors (e.g., Helaman₃, Nephi₂) and even centuries later at the time of the final fracturing of Nephite society. The Zoramites of Alma’s time and their Rameumptom are a type and a shadow of the latter-day Gentiles. The record of their society offers us poignant lessons on the importance of humility, worship, prayer and embracing the Savior and his atonement (see especially Alma 34:16; cf. Mormon 5:11), rather than our own self-supposed “highness” or “holiness.”
The author would like to thank Suzy Bowen, Daniel C. Peterson, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David Calabro, Stephen O. Smoot, Neal Rappleye, Tim Guymon, Parker Jackson, and Heather Soules.

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Why Did You Choose Me?

Joseph Grenny

Abstract: By seeing the example of a county prosecutor, I learned that we are never more like the Savior than when we willingly and vulnerably enter the self-created pain of another person’s life.

I never feel I truly understand a celestial principle until I can study its mechanism in operation in mortal life. Don’t get me wrong. I “stand all amazed” with others at the love Jesus offers me. I know He lives. I have felt His redeeming power in my life. But I have struggled to understand the connection between a man writhing in agony in a garden two thousand years ago and my being forgiven for angry things I said to my teenage son this morning. I can better appreciate the Atonement if I can see how principles behind it — like vicarious suffering and grace — produce similar effects between mortals.

Two months ago I did. On the first Wednesday in January, I got a glimpse of atonement in operation. I watched how willing and worthy condescension yields power, profound intimacy, and personal transformation.

My wife and I volunteer regularly at a place called The Other Side Academy in downtown Salt Lake City. It is a remarkable place. I’ve come to think of it as a last-chance Zion. A few dozen men and women live there as an alternative to lengthy prison sentences. The “keeper of the gate” there is Dave Durocher. He spent twenty-three years in California prisons and was facing a twenty-nine-year sentence when he was offered a chance to go to a place like The Other Side Academy.

It saved his life. After completing his obligatory two years, he stayed an additional six years because he wanted to save others’ lives as well. When he heard that people in Utah wanted to start The Other Side Academy, he left all he knew and loved — including a new and lucrative career — to come and once again consecrate his life to saving others. Knowing Dave Durocher has helped me better appreciate the mechanism of atonement.
In order to gain admittance to The Other Side Academy, an incarcerated person awaiting trial writes a letter to Dave. If the letter sounds sincere, Dave enters the jail for a face-to-face interview. The interviews are loud and peppered with colorful vocabulary as Dave tests whether candidates are truly willing to acknowledge their worthless and fallen state. If they are, they receive a letter accepting them into the Academy. To enter, they must commit to stay two years and, even more impressive, they must plead guilty to every charge the prosecutor levels against them.

This is quite a gamble for many. One recent arrival explained that if he had stayed in jail and fought his charges he probably could have gotten his sentence down to twelve years in prison. Instead, in order to gain admittance to the Academy, he stood manacled in court and pled guilty to twenty-five years’ worth of charges if he was ejected from The Other Side Academy before completing two years. He took the risk — trusting that Dave would not give up on him — because he wanted a new life. Much of what residents are expected to do for two years is lift and save others.

The first Wednesday of January I attended a nightly seminar where outside guests are invited to share important ideas from their lives. The speaker that night was Christine Scott — the Utah County prosecutor responsible for sending many of her Academy audience to prison over the years. To say she had the audience’s attention would be a profound understatement. They were shackled to her every word.

For thirty minutes this powerful and articulate woman stood in front of her erstwhile quarry recounting the story of her college romance with a fascinating returned missionary who turned out to be an alcoholic and, later, a meth addict. She described her descent into unhealthy entanglement in his addictions and the torturous process of extricating herself. “I learned,” she said, “that I can’t save someone if they don’t want to be saved. I vowed never again to let myself get drawn into trying to solve someone’s problem for them. And I have kept that vow ever since.”

I haven’t fully introduced you to Christine. She did not simply represent justice to the students that night. She represented much, much more. You see, Christine is also the reason they are there.

Two years ago the first student from Utah applied for this kind of alternative to incarceration. The applicant was a man I’ll call Jed — a career criminal whom Christine despised. Christine had been a police officer sixteen years earlier when Jed was arrested for the first time. She always remembered him because he was the first person she ever thought
she might have to kill. He was aggressive and threatening. She reached for her gun but, fortunately for both of them, he surrendered. When Christine later became a prosecutor, she would practically lick her lips when she got a new chance to incarcerate Jed. And over the years, he gave her many. When he was arrested in 2014, his case landed again on Christine’s desk — this time with enhanced felonies. She could put him away for a very, very long time.

As she read the long string of charges, her boss entered her office and asked if she would consider allowing Jed to go to a program like The Other Side Academy. She recoiled inwardly. Her silent response was, “Over my dead body.” And then something remarkable happened. As her boss left her office she said, “An overwhelming feeling came over me that I should let him go.”

She drove to Utah County Jail and summoned Jed from his cell. Jed wept in a way she thought he was incapable of. He told of finding God, of his revulsion at who he was. He told her he knew he had no right to ask for any breaks. And yet he hoped — at age 34 — to do something with the rest of his life. Christine had heard this act from hundreds before this. But something inside her told her this was real. A wiser version of a part of her that had been locked away since her college days began to stir.

She finished her remarks that night with the following warning, “I want you to know that I love my job. What I do is important. I protect the public. You need to know that if any of you walk away from this two-year commitment I will lock you up. I will not hesitate.” Pause. “But I also want you to know that I believe in you. I see good in you. And I wish nothing but the best for you.”

Next, Christine invited questions. Ten hands shot up. She called on a shy-looking man inked from wrist to neck. “Christine,” he began. “You and I have known each other a long time.”

Christine nodded. The man had been arrested thirty-four times.
“You had me on a lot of stuff before I asked to come here.”

His eyes welled with tears.
“I just want to know,” he said, eyes pleading, “Why did you choose me for this place?”

Suddenly it wasn’t him asking, and it wasn’t Christine answering. In my mind, it was me asking and the Savior answering. “Why did you choose me? Why did you do it for me?”

Her voice answered for the Savior, “I can’t tell you for sure. It was a feeling.”

The man smiled. I wept.
The other nine raised hands wondered the same thing. “Why me?” Christine went to a place of profound discomfort the day she visited Jed in Utah County Jail. She offered grace by interrogating her well-informed judgments about him. Based on faith in a feeling, she took a risk by giving Jed an alternative to decades in prison.

I’m sure I hardly understand the smallest part of the Atonement. But I learned something about its principles by watching them in operation that night. I learned that we are never more like the Savior than when we willingly and vulnerably enter the self-created pain of another person’s life. I saw that if we enter their world without succumbing to its evils we can be granted enormous influence to lift and love that person. Godly intimacy is influence.

I “stood all amazed” as I watched a dozen felons embrace the woman who had previously prosecuted them, which led to a deeper appreciation for One who endures the pain of entering my world so He can love, lift, and influence me.

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NICE TRY, BUT NO CIGAR:  
A RESPONSE TO THREE PATHEOS POSTS ON NAHOM (1 NEPHI 16:34)

S. Kent Brown

Abstract: *A series of three Patheos posts on the subject of Nahom rings out-of-tune bells all over the place.*

Let’s give credit where credit is due. The three pieces at the Patheos website written by an author known only as “RT” are well written and show an acquaintance with LDS sources that discuss the trek of Lehi and Sariah as recounted in the book of First Nephi in the Book of Mormon.¹ That said, such an observation does not mean that gaping holes are not lacking in the basic research.

In the effort to place the narrative of First Nephi into the mythological or “imaginative history” sphere by saying that the narrative does not match what is known about ancient Arabian travel, RT does not see what all LDS researchers have come to see: that the well-established incense route that Lehi’s party evidently followed ran on the east side of the Al-Sarāt mountains, not the western or coastal side. At least five passes are known from one side of the mountain range to the other.² Other, lesser-known tracks certainly also existed.


More important is the eastward turn of all southbound traffic in the region of Wadi Jawf. Joseph Smith could not have acquired that fact from any map produced before his era except one in London, in codex form. Only the map of Arabia Felix that accompanies the Codex Ebnerianus of Ptolemy’s Geography, which was copied about AD 1460 and is now owned by the New York Public Library, shows a trail that turns east in south Arabia. This trail probably comes from the influence of Arab cartographers on the maker of the map because Ptolemy does not describe the trail in the written part of his work where he lists towns and their locations. This codex, which is not one of the more important copies of Ptolemy’s work because it does not make Lister’s list, came into the possession of the New York Public Library only in 1892 from a London book dealer named Bernard Quaritch and was not published until 1932.

Clearly, the eastward turn was known only to those who rode or walked the incense route in antiquity. This fact became known to modern researchers only after seeing the tremendous effort made by ancient caravaneers to grade and level the incense road when it passed through mountainous terrain, such as the steep ascent out of Maktesh Ramon in southern Israel.

Further, no modern map of Arabia shows the belt of green vegetation in southern Oman that Nephi describes in his narrative as one possessing “much fruit,” “wild honey” and “timbers” (1 Nephi 17:5; 18:1–2). This area of vegetation is exactly where the Book of Mormon narrative predicts it will be after the party turns eastward in the vicinity of Marib, Yemen.

The discussion about the Nihm/NHM/Nehhm/Nahom name has to be taken seriously. To be sure, the range of meanings of the root letters NHM in pre-exilic Hebrew are very different from those of ancient South Arabian. Why would they not be? But to suppose that the party of Lehi and Sariah would not sense relevance in the name when they heard it is to deny what happens anytime one is in a foreign-speaking environment. A person looks for cognates or similar sounding words and then links them to what he or she knows. It is a simple observation played out countless times when individuals step into an unfamiliar linguistic world.

The discussion of Joseph Smith’s access to a modern map of Arabia that even slightly highlights the name Nihm/Nehhm is particularly questionable. To make up scenarios out of whole cloth is irresponsible.
The ideas were gathered from traveling salespeople? Neighbors? The notion that atlases were widely distributed into the population of New Hampshire or upstate New York is completely without basis.

What one wants most from the early nineteenth century environment of people who worked from first light in the day to last light in the evening is a specific reference, a reminiscence from a citizen of Lebanon or Palmyra, which says the Smith boys used to work on the farm for pay and, during their lunch break, used to look at the maps that were in the house. Specifically, the works of Jean Baptiste d’Anville and Carsten Niebuhr are not the types of items that the fellow who owned the blacksmith shop in Palmyra acquired. To suggest this requires more than supposition. Rather, such items belong in the homes of the well off. And people in those homes are not entertaining the local farm hands who work for hire, as Joseph and his siblings did.

Further, as the accession records at the Dartmouth University Library and Brown University’s John Hay Library show, the libraries of the day did not purchase such items even if they were available and even if they might be important for research and teaching on campus. The libraries acquired them from private donors, the wealthy. And no such people, who collected books, atlases, and the like, are known to have lived in Palmyra except for John H. Pratt, whose Manchester lending library catalogue does not include any hint in the collection about works that would lead a person into the world of Arabia.

The effort by RT to discredit as merely “apologetic” the works that seek to describe the environment through which the party of Lehi and Sariah journeyed fails. Does the very act of labeling all such efforts as “apologetic” mean that RT’s efforts should be classed as genuine historical research conducted without slightest hint of an agenda? Nice try, but no cigar.

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A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU. His most recent book is The Testimony of Luke which deals historically, culturally, and doctrinally with each verse in Luke’s Gospel and is available in hard copy and electronic-book form from BYU Studies, Deseret Book and Amazon. In Church service, he has served as president of the BYU Thirteenth Stake and president of the Jerusalem District. He is married to the former Gayle Oblad; they are the parents of five children and the grandparents of twenty-five grandchildren and one great grandchild.
Abstract: The Arabian Peninsula has provided a significant body of evidence related to the plausibility of Nephi’s account of the ancient journey made by Lehi’s family across Arabia. Relatively few critics have seriously considered the evidence, generally nitpicking at details and insisting that the evidences are insignificant. Recently more meaningful responses have been offered by well educated writers showing familiarity with the Arabian evidences and the Book of Mormon. They argue that Nephi’s account is not historical and any apparent evidence in its favor can be attributed to weak LDS apologetics coupled with Joseph’s use of modern sources such as a detailed map of Arabia that could provide the name Nahom, for example. Further, the entire body of Arabian evidence for the Book of Mormon is said to be irrelevant because Nephi’s subtle and pervasive incorporation of Exodus themes in his account proves the Book of Mormon is fiction. On this point we are to trust modern Bible scholarship (“Higher Criticism”) which allegedly shows that the book of Exodus wasn’t written until long after Nephi’s day and, in fact, tells a story that is mere pious fiction, fabricated during or after the Exile.

There were high-end European maps in Joseph’s day that did show a place name related to Nahom. Efforts to locate these maps anywhere near Joseph Smith have thus far proved unsuccessful. But the greater failure is in the explanatory power of any theory that posits Joseph used such a map. Such theories do not account for the vast majority of impressive evidences for the plausibility of Nephi’s account of the journey through Arabia (e.g., remarkable candidates for Bountiful and the River Laman, the plausibility of the eastward turn after Nahom). They do not explain why one obscure name among hundreds was plagiarized — a name that would have the good fortune of later being verified as a genuine ancient tribal name present in the right region in Lehi’s day. More importantly, theories of fabrication
based on modern maps ignore the fact that Joseph and his peers never took advantage of the impressive Book of Mormon evidence that was waiting to be discovered on such maps. That discovery would not come until 1978, and it has led to many remarkable finds through modern field work since then. Through ever better maps, exploration, archaeological work, and other scholarly work, our knowledge of the Arabian Peninsula has grown dramatically from Joseph’s day. Through all of this, not one detail in the account of Lehi’s Trail has been invalidated, though questions remain and much further work needs to be done. Importantly, aspects that were long ridiculed have become evidences for the Book of Mormon. There is a trend here that demands respect, and no mere map from Joseph’s day or even ours can account for this.

As for the Exodus-based attack, yes, many modern scholars deny that the Exodus ever happened and believe the story was fabricated as pious fiction well after 600 BC. But this conclusion does not represent a true consensus and is not free from bias and blindness. The Exodus-based attack on the Book of Mormon ultimately is a case where a weakness in biblical evidence from Egypt is used to challenge the strength of Book of Mormon evidence from Egypt’s neighbor to the east, the Arabian Peninsula. We will see that there are good reasons for the absence of evidence from Egypt, and yet abundant evidence that the Exodus material interwoven in Nephi’s account could have been found on the brass plates by 600 BC. The absence of archaeological evidence for Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the chaos in the many schools of modern biblical scholarship do not trump hard archaeological, geographical, and other evidence from the Arabian Peninsula regarding Lehi’s exodus.

We will see that some of the most significant strengths of the Book of Mormon have not been turned into weaknesses. Indeed, the evidence from Arabia continues to grow and demands consideration from those willing to maintain an open mind and exercise a particle of faith.

New Attempts to Bury Nahom

The Arabian Peninsula now provides a surprisingly rich body of evidence in support of the plausibility of Nephi’s account of the journey that Lehi’s family took on their way from Jerusalem to a coastal site they called Bountiful. This body of evidence, reviewed briefly later in this paper, has often been ignored or treated superficially by our critics. However, recently a seemingly thorough contrarian view has been offered by an anonymous but well educated writer, “RT,” on the
Faith Promoting Rumor blog at Patheos.com.² RT agrees with and builds on a critical assessment in a recent post from a professor of history, Philip Jenkins, in his blog The Anxious Bench also at Patheos.com.³ These authors raise significant arguments that merit a response. They suggest that Nephi’s account has elements that raise suspicion and point to fabrication by Joseph Smith, with the assured assistance of a detailed map that could have guided him, for example, in placing Nahom in what LDS apologists see as exactly the right place. While there is no evidence that Joseph had such a map or access to one, the critics are certain that he must have seen and studied one to guide him in describing the journey through the Arabian Peninsula.

If RT and Jenkins are right, a map or two, some common knowledge, and a bit of luck coupled with the distortions of weak LDS apologetics might be all it takes to explain the alleged Book of Mormon evidence.

In fact, one could even argue that Nephi’s account of his family’s exodus from Jerusalem via what we now call Lehi’s Trail is not a strength of the Book of Mormon after all, but one of its greatest weaknesses. RT argues that Nephi’s subtle and frequent use of Exodus themes, with many implicit and explicit references to events in the book of Exodus, betrays the Book of Mormon as a modern construction, for modern biblical scholarship (“Higher Criticism”) supposedly shows that the Exodus account was simply not known in 600 BC for Nephi to use. Does this give critics a powerful axe that trumps any Book of Mormon evidence?

In Section 1, we will summarize the numerous arguments that have been recently launched against Lehi’s Trail, with brief responses. Then in Section 2 we’ll review highlights of the Arabian evidence for Lehi’s Trail before dealing later in more detail with the two issues I consider most weighty: the alleged use of a map of Arabia by Joseph Smith, covered in Section 3, and the impact of biblical scholarship regarding the Pentateuch on Nephi’s writings, treated in Section 4.

In Section 3, while examining the possibility of maps having guided Joseph, I will argue that attempts to explain the evidence from Arabia with the aid of a map requires something of a dream map with far more information than Joseph possibly could have gleaned from any known source in his day.

In Section 4, while examining the felling power of the “Higher Criticism Axe” against the Arabian evidence, I will argue that modern scholarship leaves abundant room for Nephi to have known about the Exodus. We will see that biblical criticism based largely on examining the biblical text does not necessarily outweigh hard archaeological evidence.
Indeed, the alleged consensus of scholars does not present anything close to an iron-clad case against Nephi’s brass plates and the record on the gold plates. In fact, what we can learn about the brass plates from the Book of Mormon, when properly viewed, may help us reform flawed assumptions in scholarly work on the Bible.

I. Summary of Recent Arguments Against Lehi’s Trail

Before listing the barrage of criticisms that have recently been levied against the account of Lehi’s Trail, it is important to first note what they do not achieve. Our erudite critics fail to:

- Explain why the case for Lehi’s Trail has grown dramatically stronger, not weaker, in the nearly two centuries of further investigation in Arabia since the Book of Mormon came out. Many glaring weaknesses such as the lack of flowing water, the apparent lack of any place resembling Bountiful, the impossibility of trekking across the vast sand dunes of Arabia, etc., have now become less of a problem or even crown jewels of evidence for the plausibility of the Book of Mormon.

- Account for the multiple details of those crown jewels in the Arabian evidence with anything verging on a plausible explanation other than luck. For example, even if Joseph could have used a map to somehow guess the location of a fertile spot like Bountiful east of Nahom, finding one that would be (and still is today) uninhabited is a highly counterintuitive stroke of luck. As we will see, the unlikelihood of a place like Bountiful being uninhabited in a region where fertility is rare and greatly treasured is still being used as a reason why Nephi’s record must be fictional (“it is simply impossible that Lehi could have found a pristine garden spot on the coast far from human civilization”4 according to RT, possibly unaware of important aspects of Warren Aston’s non-fictional work at the secluded, still uninhabited, and verdant gem of Khor Kharfot, discussed below). What map or other data from the nineteenth century could have made Joseph so surprisingly lucky?

- Explain why, if Joseph used a map to provide “local color” or build in evidence for his book, he and his co-conspirators
never showed the least awareness of such evidence and never exploited it to advance their cause? When other apparent evidences became known, they were enthusiastically highlighted in LDS publications. If there were evidence on high-end maps from Europe known to Joseph and his peers, why not “discover” one and make a fuss over Nahom? Such a find would have to wait for an accidental discovery in the 1970s.

Now let’s wade through the bulk of the criticisms. We begin with Philip Jenkins, who makes these points:

1. Finding a place name similar to Nephi’s “Nahom” in the vast Arabian Peninsula is pure coincidence.

   **Response:** An assertion offered without support. Nahom is a remarkable find, far more than just a random place name, as discussed below. Further, given that ancient Hebrew-related languages were written with roots made from consonants without the vowels, Nahom would have been written as NHM, which is essentially the same name of the relevant place and tribe in modern Yemen. Today that name can be spelled as Nihm, Nahm, or Nehem, but these spellings can all be considered as NHM. This rare name is not found anywhere else in Arabia, as detailed below.

2. The inscriptions on ancient altars in Yemen providing archaeological evidence for the name Nahom in Lehi’s day actually refer to a tribe, not a geographical place.

   **Response:** The general region called Nehem/Nahm, etc. is named for the Nihm tribe that has long been there. Tribes can, in fact, give their names to the lands they occupy.

3. The significance of the NHM inscriptions on altars in Yemen has been blown vastly out of proportion by enthusiastic LDS members. Since there are thousands of place names all over the Middle East, it was essentially a certainty that someone would eventually find overlap between a real name and one from the Book of Mormon, especially when you just consider that Semitic names
are typically just written with three consonants. “A name inscribed as NHM could be Nahom, Nuhem, Nahum, Nihim, Nehem, Nehim, Nihm, Nahm, Nihma, Nahma. … The odds of some accidental correspondence are very high.”

Response: As documented in more detail below, there is only one region in Arabia with the NHM name, and it is in precisely the right place to correspond with the Book of Mormon. This, in combination with numerous other aspects of Lehi’s Trail that now have evidence for plausibility, provides a compelling case that something more than coincidence is at work in 1 Nephi. Adding Jenkins’ creative misspellings to the known ways that the NHM place and tribe have been transliterated does nothing for the case against Nahom. Since none of these other variations exist elsewhere in Arabia, as far as we know, his point is without merit. There’s one NHM-related area in Arabia, and it fits the Book of Mormon well. This could be coincidence, but Jenkins vastly overestimates the odds of “accidental correspondence.”

4. The name Nahom can be readily explained as just a minor variation on the name of the book Nahum in the Bible.

Response: The names are similar, but a prophet’s name in the Bible does not inform anybody as to the location of the ancient tribal region in Yemen that fits the Book of Mormon account so remarkably well.

5. In claiming that the NHM inscriptions from Yemen are significant, LDS apologists have failed to bear their burden of proof by considering the odds of finding the NHM name somewhere in Arabia. If this name occurs, say, every five miles or so in the Middle East, there’s no significance to finding one in the alleged “right place.”

Response: This is addressed below. Jenkins is simply unfamiliar with the detailed work that thoroughly answers his question.
6. “A form of NHM (Nehhm) shows up for instance in the travel narrative and maps of Carsten Niebuhr, of the 1761 Danish Arabia Expedition, marking a location in Yemen. An English translation of his writings appeared in 1792, and copies were available in US libraries in the early nineteenth century.” This map was available in some US libraries in Joseph’s day.

Response: This is addressed in detail below. Among the points to be made, had Joseph used this map, it would have offered precious little help (e.g., no hint of the Valley of Lemuel or Bountiful on the east) and would have guided him the wrong way after Nahom. What would motivate Joseph to ignore all the “help” available on the map and select only one small spot to pluck what would prove to be a very lucky place name?

7. There were other European maps of Arabia that had NHM-related names on them.

Response: Yes, and with many of the same limitations that Niebuhr’s map has. This will be treated in detail below.

8. “For the [LDS] apologist cause, [the map issue] is also utterly damning. The map evidence makes it virtually certain that Smith encountered and appropriated such a reference, and added the name as local color in the Book of Mormon.”

Response: Jenkins’ “virtual certainty” is based on speculation and an absence of evidence. While this is treated below, I’ll raise one important issue now: If Joseph secretly used a map with Nehem/Nahom on it, none of which can be shown to have been anywhere near him, in order to add “local color” and build in plausibility or evidence of authenticity to his tale, why did he and his peers never manage to “discover” such a map after the Book of Mormon came out in order to give it support? Why go to such trouble and not exploit it? Why did we have to wait until 1978 for a BYU professor to notice this potential evidence for the plausibility of Nahom in the Book of Mormon? The most plausible explanation is that Joseph did not know about the existence of Nehem/Nahom on some European maps.
9. Relevant maps were probably abundant: “Following the US involvement against North African states in the early nineteenth century, together with Napoleon’s wars in the Middle East, I would assume that publishers and mapmakers would produce works to respond to public demand and curiosity.”

**Response:** This is addressed below. The relevant maps may not have been abundant, and there is no evidence that one was ever near Joseph Smith.

10. Joseph was a diligent student who would have actively sought for information to help craft his book: “there is one thing we know for certain about the man, which is that he had a lifelong fascination with the ‘Oriental,’ with Hebrew, with Egypt, with hieroglyphics, with his ‘Reformed Egyptian.’ He would have sought out books and maps by any means possible.”

**Response:** Addressed below. Jenkins mistakes the intellectually mature Joseph of later years for the young unlettered man tasked with translating the Book of Mormon.

11. “Is there even the ghost of a case here that needs debating or answering? Obviously not. And this is the best the apologists can do?”

**Response:** Jenkins fails to understand how broad and deep the body of evidence from Arabia is. As we will discuss in our overview below, it is certainly a remarkable issue that weighs in favor of the plausibility of Nephi’s brief record.

**From RT, Part 1:**
RT’s related but more extensive critique comes in three parts, in which he makes many points, often at length and with reasonable documentation. I’ll exclude a few minor points that aren’t specifically related to Lehi’s Trail and 1 Nephi.

I should first point out that a number of RT’s criticisms are informed by modern “historical criticism” or “higher criticism” of the Bible, which tends to view the Pentateuch as fiction (to be discussed in Section 4).
Some extreme factions in these schools see little historical value in much of the Old Testament. RT seems to among these so-called “minimalists” (for minimalizing the historical value of the biblical record) given the criteria he applies in labeling events as fictional and especially given that he does not seem to accept the reality of Jeremiah and Ezekiel as real prophets who existed before the Exile. In response to an argument from biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman citing passages from Jeremiah and Ezekiel to support for an early date for the presumed source used in much of Exodus, RT replied: “This is begging the question. We do not in fact have evidence that Jeremiah and Ezekiel existed before the exile.”

This is surprising, since according to well-known Bible scholar Richard Elliot Friedman, proponents of the “Documentary Hypothesis” (discussed in Section 4) have not argued that Ezekiel and Jeremiah were written much later by someone else or that the Exodus-related material was patched into their books by late redactors, and James K. Hoffmeier notes that “the chronological data interspersed throughout the book of Ezekiel makes it one of the most securely dated books in the Hebrew canon.” I see RT’s view as a rather radical position not shared by a majority of scholars. But given that perspective, it will not be surprising that numerous aspects of the Book of Mormon would be found guilty of being fiction, especially those that lack granular detail consistent with his expectations or those that draw upon biblical themes.

My disagreement with his overall views of scripture does not address the merit of his points, which now need to be considered individually. I’ll provide brief responses to most of these points. Those not given responses here are treated below in Section 2.

1. Regarding the evidence related to Nahom, one can, “from a limited perspective,” say that “archaeological discovery and historical research would appear to bear out the accuracy of the Book of Mormon account.” The Book of Mormon appears to put Nahom in precisely the right spot. But these merits fade when we recognize that a map could have guided Joseph and when we notice the illogical and non-historical nature of the account.

2. The account contains many story elements showing “it originated as imaginative mythological literature modeled along biblical patterns,” while lacking the kind of details we would expect in a real report of a family traveling through Arabia. (See the related response to Objection #12 below.)
3. While the directions for travel are realistic, the details are not. There is very little precise geographical detail. Given the nebulous account, it is no surprise that “researchers of the Book of Mormon have been unable to agree on the precise path followed by Lehi in Arabia or even to identify a single site visited by the group apart from Nahom.”

Response: This is a surprising statement in light of the impressive candidates that have been identified for the sites of the Valley of Lemuel and the River Laman, Shazer, and especially Bountiful. Progress in understanding a likely route has been steady since the first serious efforts to explore this topic and continues with periodic field work and other research. The general path is clear, following the Frankincense Trail for much of the journey, with some debate over the eastward turn after Nahom, though this appears to be resolved in the latest works (e.g., Warren Aston’s 2015 Lehi and Sariah in Arabia).

4. The simple unidirectional travel across Arabia (south-southeast, then eastward) gives a route one could create by looking at a map of Arabia.

Response: This is an outrageous statement based on hindsight. Yes, if you know where Bountiful is, where Nahom is, and where the Frankincense Trail is, you could connect lines on the map. But this explains nothing. RT does not explain how one could use these maps a priori to create Lehi’s Trail. Take any map of Arabia, hand it to a few dozen college students not familiar with the Trail of Lehi, and ask them to draw a route from Jerusalem to the ocean. Result? Probably a beeline to the Mediterranean Sea. Maybe straight to the Red Sea for a few. Then ask them to draw a path one could take from Jerusalem through the Arabian Peninsula to the ocean. Result? Even if you try forcing the “correct answer” by asking them to draw two lines, one south-southeast and another nearly due east, what percentage of people would ever end up at Khor Kharfot, the leading Bountiful candidate? Or, if
you point to where a candidate for Bountiful is and ask them how to get there from Jerusalem, how many would come up with a route as plausible as that in 1 Nephi? Even good modern maps lack the information to reach Nahom and from there to gain access to a strong candidate for Bountiful to the east. Using modern maps, would they ever reach the Valley of Laman, Nahom or Bountiful?

5. Since 1 Nephi 2:5 has Nephi coming near the “borders” of the Red Sea and then traveling south-southeast, they presumably traveled along the coast and not along the Frankincense Trail that is separated from the coast by the Hijaz mountains. But travel along the coast would be impossibly difficult, both due to the rugged terrain and the lack of wells for water.

Response: Virtually every researcher writing about Lehi’s trail puts them on the Frankincense Trail early in the journey, not along the coast itself. The details of the route from the Valley of Lemuel to the main incense trail are not given, but the bulk of their southward travel would naturally follow the broad Frankincense Trail.

6. Lehi’s exodus is completely illogical. If God wanted to get them to an ocean to sail to the New World, why not go straight to the Mediterranean Sea? Why take so long on such a difficult journey through Arabia? “Everything about the migration to the Promised Land seems to reflect real-world naïveté and ignorance.” “The decision to … lead this branch of Israel to the New World via the deserts of Arabia only makes sense at a literary level, created as a period of wilderness wandering and testing before the journey to the Promised Land. …”

Response: If I were to walk into a class of, say, ten-year-old Primary children in a typical LDS ward, I would expect to get a reasonable answer to the question of why God had Lehi travel and struggle for years before getting to the promised land, when he could have just sent them there quickly. It’s essentially the same question as to why He sends us here to mortality instead of just putting us in Heaven in the first place. There are vital things to gain from the journey.
I am deeply puzzled by RT’s stance here. Since he claims to be LDS, I assume he must have known this kind of answer at some point, but it seems to have been erased through much learning. This reveals one of the great problems in the branches of modern biblical criticism that seek to minimize the historical value of scriptural records. When a tale has strong literary functions (such as parallels to the Exodus) and high theological or symbolic meaning, it is immediately assumed to be fiction (if it’s a biblical text, that is—a less biased approach is generally taken with other ancient documents, in my opinion), even though real life stories can frequently be cast into such forms. Hundreds of years from now, future minimalists may have their turn to dismiss the story of the Mormon exodus from Nauvoo to Salt Lake as mere “naiveté and ignorance” that “only makes sense at a literary level.”

7. The Book of Mormon account clearly “was not intended to represent factual history” because Nephi’s account employs language, motifs, and themes from the biblical narrative of the Exodus. This includes the “pillar of fire” Lehi saw (1 Nephi 1:6), themes of mercy and deliverance for God’s chosen people, the three-day journey into the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:6 and Exodus 3:18; 8:27; 15:22), Lehi’s invoking the names of his sons in poetic statements (1 Nephi 2:8-10) as did Moses (Exodus 18:3–4), the journey to the promised land, the significance of genealogy, the parallels between the brass Liahona and Moses’s brass serpent as symbols of Christ requiring faith, and the murmuring from hungry people in the group (1 Nephi 16:19 and Exodus 16:2–3, 8). Thirty-nine such elements are listed.

Response: This is related to my response above for Point #6, but will be treated in more detail below.

8. RT rebuts Terrence Szink’s assessment of the intricate Exodus themes in the Book of Mormon that, while pervasive, are subtle enough that they were only recognized in our day. Rather than being an evidence of ancient Hebraic origins beyond Joseph Smith’s abilities, RT is confident that Joseph
could have fabricated this since he was steeped in Bible lore, and since other authors have done similar things.

**Response:** The Exodus themes in the Book of Mormon have been a fruitful area for exploration by LDS scholars and are far more interesting and pervasive than anyone seemed to realize until recently. One can argue that Joseph made these connections through osmosis or good Bible scholarship, or one can recognize yet another layer of impressive accomplishment in a carefully crafted ancient record. This is left to the reader. Some of the other interesting contributions to consider are papers by Bruce Boehm and S. Kent Brown.

9. The Exodus themes in the Book of Mormon cannot be part of a real text from Nephi’s day: “The broad consensus of contemporary biblical scholarship is that while parts of the Pentateuch may have been written during the late monarchy and been in existence when Nephi supposedly lived, the narrative did not become culturally authoritative for Jews in any significant sense until the Persian and Hellenistic periods.”

**Response:** Treated in Section 3. RT’s consensus is illusory.

10. The Book of Mormon fails to properly interact with the Pentateuch, showing little interest, for example, in defining the Laws and statutes the people should observe.

**Response:** This is a perplexing objection, for the law of Moses was already defined and on the brass plates. Why must it be redefined? I wish to know where RT obtains his criteria for how a scriptural record should interact with the laws of the Pentateuch, particularly when it has been carefully edited to benefit later generations who would no longer be under those laws. Mormon, knowing that we would have access to the records of the Old Testament, would add no value by reciting the details of those rules that do not apply to us. However, the Book of Mormon makes it clear that the Nephites observed the “the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord, according to the law of Moses” before the coming of Christ (2 Nephi
5:10; cf. 2 Nephi 25:24–26; Jacob 4:5, 7:7; Jarom 5, 11; Mosiah 2:3, 3:15; Mosiah 12:27–29, 13:27–28, 16:13-15; Alma 25:15–16; Alma 34:13–14; Helaman 13:1, 15:5; 3 Nephi 1:24, 9:17, 15:2–4, 8; 4 Nephi 12; Ether 12:11). In fact, nearly every book within the Book of Mormon makes references to the Law of Moses. The offering of sacrifice and burnt offerings is explicitly mentioned several times (1 Nephi 2:7, 5:9, 7:22; Mosiah 2:3) and the ritual practice of sacrifice among the Nephites is implicit in teachings about the future sacrifice of the Messiah (Alma 34:10–15). “Sacrifices and burnt offerings” are formally ended by the proclamation of the triumphant Messiah in 3 Nephi 9:9. The commandments in the Pentateuch that do still apply to us are given in detail in Mosiah 13 and aspects of this moral code are discussed in detail several times (Jacob 2, Mosiah 2:13, Alma 16:18, Alma 30:10, 39:3–12).

Given Mormon’s era and objectives, it would be truly surprising if he had incorporated the details RT demands into our record. Joseph, supposedly steeped in Bible lore, could easily have added “local color” with extensive details of the law of Moses, but instead we have a text that very appropriately reflects what the Book of Mormon claims to be. An evaluation of an ancient text needs to begin with understanding what the text claims to be, not what modern scholars demand of it, especially when the demands are motivated by a desire to minimalize and undermine its historicity.

11. “Perhaps most damagingly, the allusions and references to the book of Exodus in the Book of Mormon show that the form of the narrative it presumes corresponds to that found in the Bible, combining both non-priestly (non-P) and priestly (P) material. As is well known, one of the more significant conclusions of two centuries of biblical scholarship is that the story of the Exodus is actually a product of multiple literary sources/strands that were developed and combined over time, including a non-P source (sometimes divided into separate Yahwist and Elohist sources or early non-P and late non-P strands) and a P source that covered
similar material but had distinctive theological emphases and content as well. Although many scholars believe that some of the non-P material may date to the pre-exilic or monarchic period, the P source is at the earliest exilic and more likely from the post-exilic/Persian period.” This rules out the Book of Mormon as a historical text.

Response: We deal with this below in Section 4, where we will see that significant biblical scholars disagree with the dating of P and others find noteworthy evidence for an Exodus from Egypt and for the significance of the Exodus tradition among pre-exilic Jews. The broad, stable consensus RT would have us accept belies the confusion in the unsettled world of modern biblical scholarship, where the textual evidence from LDS scriptures may actually provide valuable data to help resolve some current debates.

12. “The absence of mention of pack animals highlights the fanciful character of the narrative.” While Nibley said that the use of camels was so obvious, that there was no need to explicitly state what was used for the journey, RT is incredulous that Nephi would not mention camels even once. “For the Book of Mormon account of Lehi’s journey is a[n] autobiographical-historiographical narrative … containing substantial itinerary material, including details such as place names, travel directions, and chronographic formula[e], as well as accounts about hunting for food and notable incidents and interactions within the group, in other words, the precise type of context where we would expect to find some mention of the status of the group’s livestock or pack animals.”

Response: After reading RT’s earlier objection that “almost everything in between [the beginning and the end of the journey] is nebulous and blurry,” I am grateful that RT now recognizes that there are significant details in Nephi’s brief account, in spite of comprising a mere handful of verses spanning eight years. I, too, would like more details and more local color, but Nephi’s purpose is not to document the details of daily life and give us a granular history. More
extensive details (the “more history part”) are in his other set of plates with Lehi’s record (2 Nephi 4:4), which I hope to read someday. Nephi’s goal on the small plates is to “write the things of my soul” (2 Nephi 4:5) and to bring us to the Messiah. Doing this requires some details of their journey, especially those that support his theological objectives in showing the workings of the Lord, etc. But it is unreasonable to demand information on camels, tent design, personal hygiene practices, interactions with locals, romance on the trail, etc. — the very sort of details that we would expect not in Nephi’s terse agenda-driven account, but in a fraudulent work designed to interest readers and sell well.

13. Related to the above objection, the use of camels is said to be unlikely. “[F]rom the evidence of archaeology and biblical text, it would seem that camels were not used as a regular beast of burden in the central hill country of Judah and Israel, but were confined to areas in the south and southwest/southeast of Palestine close to desert trade routes.”

Response: There is no problem in assuming, based on the text, that Lehi had experience with camels and may have owned some. While some have proposed that Lehi was a caravanner, Jeffrey Chadwick notes that Nephi’s familiarity with metal working suggests the family had a connection with the mining and metal working industry and may have frequented an important source of ore to the south, the ancient copper mines near the Gulf of Eilat where Lehi would initially approach the Red Sea on his journey. These mines in the Timna Valley are along the major route south to the Red Sea. To bring back ore, such travel would have naturally used camels. These mines were still active in Lehi’s day.

There is significant evidence that domestic camels were used in Arabia by 600 BC. Martin Heide’s recent study on the domestication of camels is a valuable resource on this topic. It provides crucial information to counter some claims by biblical minimalists who see the numerous references to the camel in the Old Testament as anachronisms pointing to late origins of the text. While they may not have been
widely used in Israel before 1000 bc, “domesticated Bactrian camels may have been available in Mesopotamia by the end of the third / beginning of the second millennium.”17 (This is contra RT, who in Footnote 36 states that “Camels were not domesticated until the end of the second millennium and so are anachronistic in the stories about the patriarchs,” evidence that those accounts were created at a late date when camels were widely used.) By Lehi’s day, domesticated camels were in widespread use on trade routes in Arabia, and it is entirely plausible that someone embarking on a trip south of Israel would have used camels.18

Objections to Lehi’s Sacrifice

14. RT objects to Lehi’s building of an altar and offering sacrifices as not only contrary to Jewish centralization of worship at Jerusalem, but as fundamentally ahistorical because ancient Jews wouldn’t just build an altar at some random place for sacrifice. Sacrifice “was integrally connected to … the worship of local deities… in particular spaces set apart for this purpose. … [O]ne did not simply build an altar out in the country when you wanted to make a sacrifice to deity. Altars were in fact inextricably linked to particular cult sites and sanctuaries, where deities were understood to be close at hand. … Because sacrifice was fundamentally about feeding the deity, … one fed the deity where he/she was widely viewed to be present and cultically available.” Related examples in the Old Testament of individuals constructing altars for personal use (Genesis 13:18; 22:9; 35:7; Exodus 17:15; 32:5; 23:14; Joshua 8:30; Judges 6:24 etc.) are dismissed as equally ahistorical, being “literary presentations of times in the distant past rather than historical narrative and as a rule function as etiologies for the establishment of actual cult sites/sanctuaries.”

Response: In dismissing the historicity of numerous episodes relating to altar building, I suggest that RT draws upon his “biblical minimalism,” which we will discuss in the final section of this paper, viewing much of the Old Testament as a literary concoction not grounded in actual
events. However, since at least some of the locations where the patriarchs or others built altars were not specified (e.g., Noah’s altar in Genesis 8:20) or were well outside Judea (e.g., the altar Moses built in Exodus 17:15), we need not believe that all these references to altar building were just to provide justification for existing designated worship sites for Jews in Israel many centuries later. If there is no substance to those accounts, if they were just post-exilic creations to justify later practices, why are there any scenes of divinely approved altar building and sacrifice outside of Jerusalem?

Regarding the requirement for central worship in Jerusalem, yes, this was part of the reforms of Josiah and the Deuteronomists, which Lehi and others clinging to the more ancient traditions may have resisted. In fact, one of the most interesting new bodies of Book of Mormon evidence comes from work exploring the tensions during the late First Temple period between a newly reformed religion and the old ways of worship, akin to Lehi’s style. This includes the work of Margaret Barker and others. But in any case, the late requirement for centralized worship in Jerusalem may not have applied to those far from its environs, as David Seely demonstrates.

Altars, per The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, “consisted of any type of structure (they were usually open structures) where the sacrifices could be made by anyone. Such sites are numerous from the ancient periods and they seem to have been centers of activity for priests and nonpriests.” Further, “the earliest legislation as well as the earliest practice presupposes the use of altars in a worship attended by no special priesthood.” The guidelines for altars in Exodus 20:24–26 are given in the second person singular, as if to everyone, not just priests: “An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in all the place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. And if you make an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones. …” The International
Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains the implication since this regulation “applies in ‘all the place’ (i.e., throughout the territory of Israel) rather than in ‘every place’ (i.e., the special sites of theophanic appearances, or other sanctuaries).”

Thus, contrary to RT’s claim, altar building and sacrifice were not limited to places of special significance such as sites of theophanies, and could be part of family or lay worship. In addition to examples of family or lay worship from Genesis, young David spoke of an annual sacrifice for his family in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 20:6, 29) presumably using an altar.

The Jewish Encyclopedia also explains that while there were strict restrictions for the Levite offerings, “both before and after the time of Moses the ‘olah [burnt offering] was offered by laymen without distinction of persons and without restriction as to mode or measure,” citing Genesis 8: 20, 22:2ff (cf. 15:17); 1 Samuel 6: 14; Amos 22; Isaiah 1: 11; Hosea 6: 6; Job 1: 5 and 42: 8.

RT’s summary of sacrifice in ancient Israel and the feeding of local deities only at special sites, strikes me as a condescending view of secular scholars who project their modern attitudes back onto the Hebrews of Lehi’s day to suggest that the prophets of the Bible were superstitious primitives rather than intelligent men seeking to humbly worship the God of the universe. Yes, the sacred temple is an appropriate place to seek the presence of God (far more than some “local deity”), as Isaiah does in his worshipful encounter with the Lord at the temple altar in Isaiah 6. But anciently, worship and sacrifice were not strictly limited to Jerusalem or other official sites. Even after Josiah’s reforms, there was great variety in worship in ancient Israel. For example, Diana Edelman’s work, mentioned by RT, shows that even after centralization, sacrifice and worship of Yahweh continued in many regions outside of Jerusalem. Her examples include worship complexes built inside of forts, such as the fort at Arad with a presumably Yahwistic worship complex including an altar of unhewn stones and a sanctuary with a holy of holies.

Edelman also mentions the ancient Jews in Elephantine,
Egypt, who had built themselves a temple or “altar house” not at some mystic site, but inside a fort. I would argue that altars in forts are presumably there for convenience and security, and that forts themselves tend to be located at places selected for military advantage rather than mystic places providing access to local deities. The Elephantine Papyri show that faithful Jews far from Jerusalem could build altars, conduct sacrifices, and even build a temple, where worship continued even after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

All this places the Book of Mormon on solid ground, while if it had been fabricated based on Joseph's alleged intimate knowledge of the Bible, it would seem that a temple could not be built and that a Levite priest would be needed if sacrifices were to be offered, as many critics of the Book of Mormon continue to claim.

To further demonstrate the blunder of Lehi building an altar, RT quotes Julius Wellhausen: “the altars, as a rule, are not built by the patriarchs according to their own private judgment wheresoever they please; on the contrary, a theophany calls attention to, or at least afterwards confirms, the holiness of the place…” [emphasis added].

It is hard to see how one might think this doesn’t apply to Lehi. During the prolonged time here, Lehi experienced miracles such as escaping with his life and family in the first place, then receiving the brass plates, being filled with the spirit such that he could prophecy about his descendants (1 Nephi 5:17), having Ishmael's family join him, and receiving the miraculous director called the Liahona (1 Nephi 16:10). Perhaps most dramatically, he had his famous vision of the Tree of Life (1 Nephi 8), which begins with an encounter with a heavenly being in a white robe. Lehi has had multiple divine encounters, spiritual experiences, and miraculous blessings, “and all these things” happened in the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 9:1), before they crossed the River Laman to continue their journey (1 Nephi 16:12). This was a sacred place, a divinely appointed place. Lehi’s “local deity” was clearly accessible...
here and had spoken with him. Perfect spot for an altar.

15. RT objects to sacrifices on Lehi’s Trail since it would have meant bringing animals for sacrifice on the trip, which would require water and fodder.

**Response:** The multiple sacrifices described are all near the beginning of the journey, in their first major camp, where this would be less of a problem. Later when water is more precious and food less abundant, we don’t have mention of sacrifice. But sacrifices could have been offered through vegetable offerings, birds, etc.

16. RT objects to the use of the Book of Mormon’s phrase “sacrifice and burnt offerings” and wonders why sacrifice is always singular, when the Bible has “burnt offerings and sacrifices” (e.g., Exodus 10:25; 18:12; 20:24; 24:5). The exact Book of Mormon expression “is not attested anywhere in the Bible” and to RT it seems that it “functions as if it were a merism or compound expression for the offering of sacrifices, thus further reinforcing the impression that the author had no firsthand knowledge of Israelite sacrificial practice.”

**Response:** I’m not sure why sacrifice is typically singular, but RT may be relieved to find 3 Nephi 9:19 has the double plural “sacrifices and burnt offerings.” But yes, the Book of Mormon may well be using “sacrifice and burnt offerings” as a merism referring to the entire complex of sacrificial rites, just as the related phrase in the Bible may also function as a merism. For example, regarding “burnt offerings and sacrifices” in Exodus 10:25, Baruch Levine and Gary Anderson explain that this verse refers to the burnt offering (olah-zebah) and to the peace offering (olah-shelamim). They state that the frequent reference to these two sacrifices together should be understood as a merism representing the entire sacrificial system.31

17. RT claims that the Book of Mormon botches the distinction between burnt offerings and sacrifices.
Response: We’ve already noted that “sacrifice and burnt offerings” may well be a merism, referring to the body of sacrificial practices, and need not require that at least one instance of sacrifice and two of burnt offerings were made each time that phrase is used, contra RT. But Nephi’s record is subtly consistent with ancient Jewish practices, as Kent Brown observes. When they reach the Red Sea, Lehi builds an altar and “makes an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God” (1 Nephi 2:7) — no mention of burnt offerings. The two times he makes “sacrifice and burnt offerings” (1 Nephi 5:9 and 7:22), he has great cause for gratitude but also cause for concern about sin. “In each case, one can readily detect sin in the prior behavior of family members whether it took the form of complaining, family jousts, or the taking of human life. Here, Lehi sought to free his extended family from the taint of unworthiness so that he and they would be able to carry out the purposes of the Lord.”

Lehi offers sacrifices after they have escaped from Jerusalem, after his sons escape Laban and return with the brass plates, and after his sons return with Ishmael’s family, with Nephi having been delivered from death at the hands of Laman and Lemuel. These were moments showing the Lord’s great favor and it was entirely appropriate for Lehi to praise God and offer sacrifice. In Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel, Gary Andersen writes: “The identification of cultic praise as a joyous act is not made lightly. There is a homologous relationship between the cultic role of this joyous praise and the cultic role of the selamim offering in the lamentation sequence. When lamenters have received an assurance of divine assistance or have experienced divine deliverance they must offer either praise or a selamim sacrifice.” So while “sacrifice and burnt offerings” may be a merism, literally offering both would be appropriate in both cases where that phrase refers to Lehi’s actions.
18. “Lehi’s acts of sacrifice are unique in the context of the Book of Mormon. They are the only reports of a character engaging in actual sacrifice in the whole of the Book of Mormon narrative,” while we would expect sacrifices in other settings also such as when they reached the New World.

Response: I agree that we would expect Lehi and others to have offered sacrifice in the New World. However, the failure to record those specifics in Mormon’s abridged record does not mean those events did not happen nor that they were not recorded. However, Lehi’s acts of sacrifice are not unique in the Book of Mormon. Mosiah 2:3 records that the Nephites offered “sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the law of Moses” when they gathered at the temple to hear King Benjamin’s speech. Sacrifices obviously continued among the Nephites until the coming of Christ (see item #10 above).

Further Objections

19. Lehi’s naming of a river and valley after Laman and Lemuel reflects non-Israelite concepts and naming conventions. RT argues that Israelites did not tend to name places in the way Lehi did, and would not have used people’s names. Rather, these actions can be assumed to be non-historical literary devices because they are patterned after similar actions by Moses during the Exodus, namely, the “similar poetic declarations made by Moses about his two sons (Exodus 18:3–4), and the naming of local topography was also a prominent feature of Israel’s journey from Egypt to the Promised Land (e.g. Exodus 15:23; 17:7, 15).” Further, “biblical scholars have shown that the naming episodes recounted in the Exodus narrative and elsewhere in the Bible, upon which the Book of Mormon naming events are most likely modeled, as a rule had a literary function and origin and were not intended to represent factual history.” Finally, “as far as we know, ancient Israelites did not name local topography with the names of private individuals.”

Response: Lehi’s actions may well have been deliberately modeled on some aspects of the Exodus. His choice to do so
and Nephi’s choice to highlight such acts do not evaporate the reality of his journey. Some influential and vocal scholars deny the historicity of much of the Bible and naturally will argue that naming events or anything else with a “literary function” or etiological function cannot also represent factual history — if it comes from the Bible. We will briefly discuss the merits of their methodology in Section 3 of this paper.

The act of renaming a place was not uncommon among the ancient Hebrews. “New settlers would often change the name of their new home. Presumably this was because the former name was offensive to them or because they wished to commemorate in the new name a feature pertinent to their own experience.” Of course, Lehi was more than just a nomad. He was a prophet of God leading and teaching his people, and the naming of some places may have played a role in his theological objectives.

As for naming places after the names of private individuals, examples might include the land of Israel itself, the tribal regions for the various tribes of Israel such as Zebulon, Dan, and Judea (obviously named after Israel’s sons), or the city of Leshem which members of the tribe of Dan renamed Dan “after the name of Dan their father” (Joshua 19:47). Somewhat less humble was Nobah renaming a village Nobah, “after his own name” (Numbers 32:42).

Incidentally, the naming of the first two eldest sons as Laman and Lemuel is an interesting example of “pendant names,” names that go together, like Eldad and Medad or Hillek and Billek.

20. “[T]he Red Sea is implied to be a ‘fountain’ … [T]his description is at odds with the conventional understanding of ‘fountain’ in ancient Israel and the Near East more broadly.” RT argues that the waters of the deep were viewed as a destructive force, representing chaos, so it would be “completely beyond the pale” for Lehi to encourage Laman to be like the River Laman flowing into the fountain of the Red Sea.

Response: The term “fountain of the Red Sea” may actu-
ally refer to subterranean fountains presumed to feed the Red Sea, and need not mean that the Red Sea is a fountain. This is discussed in Section 2; also see Point #27 below.

As for the waters of the deep being considered the enemy of God, making “the fountain of all righteousness” an inappropriate term in the context of 1 Nephi, the concept of the deep representing an enemy to God may stem from an influential 1955 paper by H.G. May which has received a noteworthy reappraisal from Rebecca S. Watson. May’s thesis was that “many waters” in the Old Testament referred to insurgent waters of chaos that represented God’s enemies and had to be controlled or tamed, but that paper may suffer from serious flaws and does not adequately reflect Jewish thought before the Exile. Instead, the “many waters” or the deep and fountains in ancient Jewish thought can represent waters of life and fertility. The “fountain of Jacob” in Deuteronomy 33:28, for example, is linked to agricultural abundance and may also relate to “the blessing of fresh flowing water.”

Watson demonstrates that the sea of water resting on the backs of (resting) bulls in the temple was not associated with chaos and battle, but with fertility and life. The bull itself was a popular symbol of fecundity in the ancient Near East and “appears in connection with the life-giving water of rivers and the underworld.” The associated plant symbolism around the molten sea may be connected to the theme of “life and regeneration” and “ideas of continued blessing and prosperity,” and the palm tree engravings (1 Kings 7:27–39) may also symbolize the tree of life, “a motif which is closely linked to that of life-giving water” — quite an appropriate combination of symbols in light of Lehi’s dream of the tree of life and the version of it experienced by Nephi, who saw that the iron rod “led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life; which waters are a representation of the love of God” (1 Nephi 11:25).

In light of other examples, “the Temple may be characterized as ‘a sphere of life’: the recurrence of the same features in the Jerusalem Temple and in the garden of Eden, and especially
in the imagery surrounding the bronze sea and lavers, therefore indicates that the presence of the living God, whose blessings flow out to nourish the earth, may be represented here.”43 In spite of possibly making too much of combat themes, May does recognize that the sea of bronze “stood for the cosmic sea, the tehom, as the subterranean ocean from which all fertility was derived.”44 This was a positive symbol. Watson explains that “this harmonious Temple symbolism, in which the fresh water features as a source of life and blessing and as an indication of the presence of the deity, must be rigorously distinguished from any idea of conflict with the salt-water ocean.”45 Further, while “it might appear that the waters here depicted are merely subterranean, the apprehension of an identity between the celestial and terrestrial temples, and the obvious congruence of the heavenly and earthly oceans, militates against such a clear-cut division.”46

In light of Watson’s work, Lehi was on solid (albeit moist) ground when he stood by the River Laman and yearned for his eldest son to be like it, “continually running into the fountain of all righteousness!” (1 Nephi 2:5).

21. “Other place names mentioned in the broader literary context are also implausible.” RT objects to LDS explanations for Shazer and Irreantum.

**Response:** RT may be right, but there may be meaningful possibilities that he is overlooking, as discussed later in Section 3.

22. “The few chronological notices seem unrealistic and dramatically disproportionate.” While LDS writers widely agree that 1 Nephi 2:5–6 describes a three day journey from the beginning of the Red Sea to the Valley of Lemuel, RT interprets the text to say that it took three days from Jerusalem to reach the Red Sea, and then declares that distance to be impossibly large for such a short journey. RT complains about vagueness elsewhere and cannot fathom how the journey would end up taking eight years in total.
Response: The text indicates that they came down to the borders of the Red Sea, and then after three days of travel, reached the Valley of Lemuel. This natural reading makes it possible to reach the dramatic candidate for the Valley of Lemuel and the River of Laman that will be discussed below. RT’s strained reading does render the trip impossible. In evaluating texts, one should beware of selecting possible readings that immediately render the text nonsensical, although nonsense is all some critics wish to see.

As for the eight years in total, this is a puzzle for all of us. There are many details we don’t have yet, but the absence of some details is not a reason to reject a text. Clearly a long time was spent in at least one location, maybe more. Aston proposes that it was in the Valley of Lemuel and that vicinity, which may have been a training camp for their future journey through more difficult terrain.47

23. “The narrative shows no knowledge of any actual people, tribal groups, or oasis communities in Arabia.”

Response: This is a fair complaint. I also wish it gave more detail. But again, the absence of desired detail is not a reason to reject the text. The record appears to be written as a family record with a theological purpose, where outsiders don’t get much attention. Clearly they interacted with locals to know what others called the place Nahom. To obtain water at wells along the way, there also would be regular interaction with others. But those interactions do not appear to rise to the level of being the things of Nephi’s soul, which is what he writes for the benefit of his posterity, and us in a remote day. The book is not meant to be a travelogue or daily journal but a document to bring us to Christ. Many people are not named or discussed, including Nephi’s own wife and children. I wish his small plates were several times the size they were, and that the Lord had given us about ten times as much information as we have. But what we have is a good start, if we can get past the illegitimate reasons people give to overlook the book.

24. “The general practice of not making fire on the trail
implies secrecy and as a practical matter would have posed severe challenges for a group relying on hunted food.”

Response: Here I feel RT works too hard to insist on narrow interpretations of Nephi’s statements in 1 Nephi 17 regarding their eating of raw meat (2, 12) since “the Lord had not hitherto suffered that we should make much fire” (12). These statements are made after the eastward turn on the most difficult part of their journey. The first statement about raw meat is preceded by the declaration that they did “travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 17:1). The statement about “hitherto” not using much fire is made after they arrive at Bountiful and need to make fire to process the ore Nephi found there. Does “hitherto” refer to the entire journey or primarily the most difficult portion after Nahom? I find it plausible that their little use of fire need not be due to divine commandment (a word stronger than “suffered” might have been used in that case), at least not all the time. One excellent reason for not making much fire is not having much wood. Patterns of travel, such as traveling at night to avoid the heat of the day, may also have constrained the suitability of fire. Many foods do not require cooking or, like bread, can be cooked occasionally and used days later.48 There may also have been times when the risks of bandit raids required avoiding fire.

Whatever the reasons, fire was not avoided completely, just not used much, at least for one major portion of their journey. As for raw meat, a reasonable view is that it would have been sun-dried meat, like the jerky that is popular in many parts of the world.49 RT dismisses the explanation of what the text likely means in terms of practical, real life matters as “an attempt to secularize the narrative and make it intelligible in modern historicist terms.” Since the “ahistorical” text is infused with Exodus themes, RT cannot accept the women eating a civilized meal of camel jerky. Rather, it must be a supernatural scene of women savagely chewing bloody carcasses and finding it appetizing. This inflexibility in interpretation of a text, insisting on meanings that render it unlikely or
impossible instead of providing practical solutions for unclear or missing elements, is frequently encountered in the methodology of “higher criticism” of the Bible.

25. “Liahona is superfluous in the context of the narrative.” RT sees it as an unnecessary miracle to provide a parallel to the brass serpent of the Exodus account. Since Lehi was already a prophet and a “visionary man,” he was capable of getting revelation on directions without the tool. Further, the Liahona “has no relation to documented divinatory techniques or technology practiced in ancient Israel.”

Response: First, I would hope that most Book of Mormon students and Bible students would readily recognize the purposes the Lord can achieve through the use of physical objects as symbols and teaching tools and later as tangible reminders of miracles, deliverance, and covenants. Like the relics in the First Temple, the Liahona was a precious reminder to the Nephites of the Lord’s power and a symbol used for teaching important lessons (Alma 37:38–45). Yes, of course it was not necessary. But it was indisputably valuable. Complaints about the Lord’s didactic methods — a sufficiently trained scholar can think of many — should be taken to Him directly.

Second, I am surprised that RT objects to the originality of the Liahona. Apparently it is a problem if it “has no relation to documented divinatory techniques or technology practiced in ancient Israel.” Likewise, I suspect that if it did have a clear relationship to practices in ancient Israel, RT would find that to be evidence of clumsy imitation, fraud, and ahistoricity.

Third, I can agree with RT that the use of a divine physical object on which writing can appear and which can provide direction does have a certain relationship to a seerstone, or more to the point, the ancient Urim and Thummim, which I suggest provides a relevant example of an ancient divinatory tool perhaps with some relation to the Liahona. In *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*, Cornelius van Dam explains why the Urim
and Thummim was not a lot oracle but an object, possibly a gem, that provided information via light. In one example he cites the probable use of the Urim and Thummim in 2 Samuel 5:23–24 to give detailed information to David about when and where to attack the Philistine army, with instructions about a location to move toward. Vam Dam later concludes that the Urim and Thummim was an important tool that Yahweh used to guide his people in time of war and to instruct them on other important matters. The appearance and working of the Liahona and the Urim and Thummim are distinct, but they both could provide detailed revelation, including instructions on where to go.

Though I agree with van Dam that the Urim and Thummim was not merely a crude lot oracle, lot oracles may also offer some slight parallels to the Liahona. Encyclopedia Biblica’s article on the Urim and Thummim mentions an old Arab practice using two arrowshafts, each with words written on them, that were placed in a container. One was selected randomly to convey guidance from God. The Liahona had two spindles that could point the way in a brass shell and had the ability for writing to appear. Nevertheless, much about the Liahona is unique, which should not be a problem. Yet it does have parallels to ancient divinatory practices, which also should not be a problem.

Finally, RT is silent on what may be the most interesting aspect of the Liahona: the beautifully apt Hebrew etymology that has been offered for this coined term that reflects an accurate knowledge of Hebrew from Lehi’s day and literally means “direction of the Lord.”

26. RT complains of the “relative nonsignificance of water to the narrative.” He helpfully reminds us that water is essential for survival, and complains that it is not more frequently mentioned. “Only once during the whole journey through Arabia is a water source associated with the establishment of a campsite (1 Ne 2:6)! And only once do we hear about the group complaining for thirst while traveling … (1 Ne 16:35).”
Response: Much is left out in the abbreviated account on the small plates, including some obvious issues involved in daily life. By traveling along the Frankincense Trail, access to regular watering spots would be possible. Stopping at such places to obtain water would be natural, expected, and not worth special mention, given Nephi’s purpose in the brief account. While regular sources of water are along the trail, obtaining additional food for a family with children, without the luxury of the gold and silver left behind in Jerusalem, could well have been the real challenge at many stages.

Interestingly, the thirst of Lehi’s group is mentioned slightly more often elsewhere in the Book of Mormon (Alma 18:36-37, Alma 37:41–42), where we also learn that there was a period in which the group was “slothful” and forgot to exercise faith and diligence, causing the Liahona to fail and their progress to stop, such that they “did not travel in a direct course and were afflicted with hunger and thirst” (Alma 37: 41–42). This account and many other details were apparently on the large plates, a record we currently do not have.

27. Claims to plausible candidates for the “River Laman” are wishful thinking. “It is well known that there are no actual rivers flowing from Arabia into the Red Sea due to the harsh desert climate, a state of affairs that has changed only marginally since the time of Lehi. Although Book of Mormon researchers have identified some seasonal wadis along the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba as possible candidates for the river Laman, it is only with considerable semantic stretching and a dose of wishful thinking that we can possibly consider calling these small waterbeds rivers.”

Response: This was one of my most surprising moments reading RT. RT should be aware of the candidate for the River Laman found by George Potter and Craig Thorsted at Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, demonstrated to flow year round.55 It is not just a seasonal wadi and in many ways appears to be an impressive candidate, after years of critics denying that such a perennial river/stream could even exist. In addition to impressive documentation from the field work of Potter
and Wellington, there are now additional photos of the river/stream, the valley, and the setting from Adib Al Harbi, apparently the result of his tourism and exploring.\(^56\)

But I must admit that today the “river” is what I would call a stream or a brook, though Potter points to evidence that the flow may have been significantly stronger in the past, at least partly because the local government is pumping away some of its source water.\(^57\) Is it inappropriate to call such a stream a river, or to use the same word for both? In the kjv, the Hebrew word \textit{nachal} (נַחַל, Strong’s H5158) is translated “river” fifty-six times, “brook” forty-six times, “valley” twenty-three times, “stream” eleven times, and “flood” five times. Its definitions show that it can be a river or a stream.\(^58\) Another Hebrew word, \textit{nahar} (נָהָר, Strong’s H5102) is usually translated as “river” in the kjv (98 times), but twice appears as “streams” and can mean river or stream.\(^59\) RT’s objection regarding stream vs. river seems poorly grounded.

Further, just as small hills tend to be called mountains in regions that are rather flat, so small bodies of water can be called lakes and rivers in arid settings when they might barely qualify as ponds and streams in climates with more rainfall. Moving into Arabia, I suspect Lehi’s family was relieved to spend time by a “river” of any size. That it was a small, shallow flow is consistent with the apparent ease with which they crossed it as they packed up their tents and headed into the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:12).

The site at Wadi Tayyib al-Ism as a candidate for the River Laman and Valley of Lemuel is not without weaknesses (further exploration is definitely needed) and has been criticized by one BYU scholar, Jeffrey Chadwick, whom RT cites and whose most important objection, in my opinion, is that the stream/river lacks a mouth flowing into the Red Sea as Nephi’s account seems to require.\(^60\) Instead it sinks into the gravel floor of the valley almost half a mile from the Red Sea. This concern may be easily resolved, as discussed in Section 2. Here I will simply note that if Nephi understood that the River Laman, as it sank into the ground, was
flowing into the subterranean waters that feed the Red Sea (possibly what he meant by “the fountain of the Red Sea” in 1 Nephi 2:9), then the place where that stream disappeared to enter the larger subterranean water would appropriately be called a mouth, and the geography at Wadi Tayyib al-Ism would seem to relate well to the text without the need to assume differences in elevation of the canyon in Lehi’s day or significant differences in the behavior of the stream.

28. RT objects to the Book of Mormon’s “lack of differentiation in Arabian geography,” failing to note the details of the various terrains they would encounter.

**Response:** I have this problem, too, in my own journal, even when I am providing lots more detail and local color than Nephi. I’m willing to give Nephi a break for not feeling compelled to use a major portion of his small gold plates to tell us about details that did not advance his purposes.

29. “If the party went east as alleged in the Book of Mormon, they would have been forced to cross the Ramlat Al-Sab ’atayn desert” and this would be virtually impossible.

**Response:** RT is right about the difficulty of crossing the Ramlat Al-Sab ’atayn desert. He is wrong about the geography. Incredibly, following Nephi’s directions by going nearly due east from Nahom will let you avoid the dread sands of the Ramlat Al-Sab ’atayn desert just to the south and the vast Empty Quarter just to the north, as Aston shows in *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia.* This path will allow you to have a shot at survival (Liahona or equivalent highly recommended!) by traveling along highlands that will bring you through the plateau just north of the Wadi Hadramaut and then directly into the lengthy Wadi Sayq, to emerge at Khor Kharfot, the leading candidate for Bountiful.

30. “Even more strangely, in the two cases where the presence of a mountain is recorded they are each appended with a definite article with no additional information about their location (“the mountain”), suggesting that
they are somehow known or particular mountains.”

Response: There is a prominent mountain at Bountiful’s leading candidate that could logically be called “the mountain” — a point definitely in favor of Khor Kharfot and the Book of Mormon. The first instance of “the mountain” (1 Nephi 16:30) informs us that Nephi went up to “the top of the mountain, according to the directions which were given upon the ball.” Rather than it being a case of Nephi assuming that we would know which mountain, it could be an artifact of translation if the trailing clause was initially a relative clause modifying “mountain,” as in “the top of the mountain for which directions were given upon the ball.”

31. Nephi’s record implies that his group was alone at Bountiful, which “highlights its inauthentic and imaginary character, since we know from archaeology that the Dhofar was inhabited and its natural geography exploited from very early times, including the time of Lehi.” Indeed, “virtually all of the proposed Bountiful sites would have seen significant human activity, and it is simply impossible that Lehi could have found a pristine garden spot on the coast far from human civilization.”

Response: Here is an issue from RT that we should take seriously. It is natural that a plush, green site on a coast will attract human population, and would seem very unlikely that such an unpopulated place could exist, even once we recognize that there are green places east of Nahom (contrary to the prevailing wisdom just a few years ago when the very idea of a place like Bountiful was mocked by anti-Mormons). I believe RT is correct on most of these points: Bountiful should be uninhabited, but much of Dhofar was inhabited, and it is very unlikely, virtually impossible that there could have been a pristine garden spot without a significant population — unless, I would add, that spot were hidden by its terrain from ocean travelers, as is the valley of Wadi Sayq whose oblique angle to the coast hides much of its greenery when viewed from the sea, and unless that site were enclosed by rugged mountains making it difficult
or impossible to access from inland except for someone coming from a distant inland path through the long Wadi Sayq, such as traveling nearly due eastward from Nahom without the benefit of an established trail. This is actually the very situation we have for Bountiful at Khor Kharfot, where “a unique and impressive set of circumstances has kept [it] isolated and unpopulated”63 — a pristine miracle staring us in the face, a place that appears to have been largely uninhabited over the millennia, in spite of very small ruins from some past occupation and some cave paintings.64 It is, in fact, uninhabited today. The evidence points to this as precisely the kind of sheltered, hidden, pristine garden spot the Book of Mormon requires. The fact that other spots along the coast of Oman were obviously settled and still are populated does not erase the reality of our unpopulated, pristine, majestic site that may very well have been the place a weary group of ancient Hebrews gladly called Bountiful. Far from highlighting the imaginary character of the Book of Mormon, this site brilliantly underscores the case for the reality of 1 Nephi as an authentic ancient record, no matter how many issues one can manage to quibble with.

32. RT objects to various details regarding the ship Nephi built.

Response: Most of his concerns are adequately addressed in Aston’s most recent work, Lehi and Sariah in Arabia, but it is true we have few details in the account. Aston’s proposal of a raft-like structure with a sail and other features seems plausible. As for wood, Aston explains that that imported lumber was not needed and reports that Khor Kharfot offers acacia, sycamore fig, and tamarind trees that could be suitable for shipbuilding, and have been used for shipbuilding in the past.65 Aston’s point is supported by finds of ancient Egyptian working boats (as opposed to purely ceremonial boats) made of acacia and sycamore fig66 and by reports on the excellent properties of tamarind wood, making it suitable not only for furniture and tools, but also for canoes and the “side planks of boats.”67 Other species might have been available in Lehi’s day such as particularly useful coconut palms, though they are not currently there.68
One further important point: sailing from the coast of Oman to reach Mesoamerica is possible if done during a time of the ENSO effect (El Niño — Southern Oscillation), which changes winds and currents in a way that could be exploited for travel from Arabia to the New World.

33. RT claims that the Book of Mormon shows no awareness of the complex geography the group would encounter, such as the lack of direct access from the large Wadi Hadramaut to the Dhofar region, requiring the group to cross mountains before a wadi leading to Bountiful.

Response: Access from the interior to many parts of Dhofar is a challenge, as RT notes, and is another important point to consider. Indeed, direct access to Khor Kharfot is rather difficult, being isolated and largely enclosed by mountains (a primary reason it remains uninhabited), unless one begins far inland as the Lehites did. Precise navigation via the Liahona would probably be required to enter the correct wadi, but for a group coming eastward from Nahom (not on any alleged trade route), there would be no major barriers to reaching Bountiful. Going nearly due east, the group would stay north of Wadi Hadramaut and be able to directly enter Wadi Sayq with no lava fields to cross or mountains to scale, making it possible for a group with children and camels to reach Khor Kharfot from Nahom. (See also the Yemen rainfall map in Section 2 below.) RT’s objections are more based on a misunderstanding of the required route than a lack of plausible routes.

34. RT complains of Nephi’s repeated use of the word “wilderness” to describe where they were traveling, again showing the Book of Mormon’s lack of awareness of geography.

Response: “Wilderness” is an appropriate term, though lacking in the geographic details RT would like to see. As the group came to the southern end of the Dead Sea, they would encounter “the wide rift valley of Arabah, a name that actually means wilderness, just as Nephi had recorded.” Strong’s H6160, ‘arabah, is translated in the KJV as “wilderness.”
ness” five times, as “desert” 9 times, and as “plain” 42 times, in addition to being used twice as a place name, Arabah.73 This word is closely related to ‘ārab (עֲרָב, Strong’s H6152), which in the KJV is always translated as Arabia.74 To me, ‘ārabaḥ would seem like a meaningful word to use not only because it literally is the name of a region they were going through several times early in their journey, but also because it relates to the general area they were traveling through. Lehi’s Trail was a trek through ‘ārabaḥ/Arabah and ‘ārab/Arabia, and nearly always through real wilderness/desert.

Nephi may also have used other words such as Strong’s H4057, midbar, which can mean wilderness, desert, uninhabited land, large tracts of land around cities, and pasture suitable for flocks. In the KJV it is translated as “wilderness” two hundred fifty-five times and “desert” thirteen times.75 It appears that midbar and ‘ārabaḥ can refer to a variety of terrains and still be translated as “wilderness.” Nephi’s frequent reference to the “wilderness” also helps highlight parallels between their journey and the Exodus, which is more in line with Nephi’s aims than providing lessons in geology and geography. Still other words could be used at times that again are suitable for the desert.76 Nephi’s use of “wilderness” is also appropriate considering Isaiah’s use of that concept, where it is frequently linked to Exodus themes and deserts, but tied to future deliverance and blessings in a gardenlike state where the faithful will rejoice. The trek through the wilderness to Bountiful and the promised land resonates with Nephi’s favorite writer, Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 32:15–16; 35:1, 6; 40:3; 41:18–19; 42:11; 43:19–20; 51:3; 63:13). That Nephi applied the scriptures to his own journey and painted it in related language, emphasizing related themes, is no reason to treat it as fictional, but in fact points to the skillful, thoughtful application of scripture that a devout ancient Hebrew might make when on a divinely guided journey through the wilderness and across a sea to the promised land. In fact, he explicitly states that “I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). That he accomplished this so successfully and so deeply (e.g., consider the intricate
parallels to David and Goliath discussed by Ben McGuire and the papers cited above at Point #8) is hardly a reason to reject his work as Joseph’s crude borrowing of Bible lore.

Further, RT misses many important though sometimes subtle clues about geographical awareness, such as Nephi’s consistent and geographically accurate use of “up” and “down” referring to their travels to and from Jerusalem. Finally, noting such features as the Valley of Lemuel, the River Laman, the presence of fertile regions after the Valley of Lemuel, the difficulties of the eastward trek, and especially Bountiful, with its prominent mount, flint, iron ore, access from the inland, and great fertility certainly should count toward some hint of geographical awareness. Nephi’s foreword to 1 Nephi states that his account includes “the course of their travels” and he provides exactly that. Clear, basic directions and sometimes other details are given for every location mentioned. It was only when modern researchers took the text seriously that we learned just how plausible Nephi’s account is. While much more work is needed, dismissing it as fiction and grasping for reasons to ignore the evidence is not the scientific thing to do at this stage.

Highlights of RT’s Part 2:

Several of the complaints in Part 2 will be addressed in the review of evidences in Section 2 below. I’ll just mention a few issues here:

35. The South Arabian NHM name with its softer H would not be recognized as NHM in Hebrew with its harder H. “[T]he tribal name Nihm is spelled with a voiceless laryngeal middle H rather than a pharyngeal Ḥ and stems from the root NHM, which in ancient South Arabian refers to ‘pecked masonry’ or ‘stone dressing.’ This spelling means that *Nihm would have sounded utterly different to a native Hebrew speaker from Hebrew NHM* and it is unlikely that the first would have evoked the other. The weakening and coalescence of the gutturals did not occur in Hebrew until much later.”

**Response:** Yes, there are several H sounds in ancient Semitic languages. In Hebrew, the letter ḫē (פ) is a voiceless
glottal fricative written as [h], a sound that can be heard at Wikipedia. It is related to the South Arabian ‘r’ that is the H of the NHM inscriptions from altars near Marib, Yemen, showing the significance of the NHM tribe near Lehi’s day. On the other hand, heth (ה) “originally represented a voiceless fricative, either pharyngeal /ħ/, or velar /x/.” These two H sounds can also be heard at Wikipedia. To my ear, these sounds all have an “H-ness” to them. I don’t think it would be impossible for Nephi to have also heard a relationship.

In fact, Hebrew has two NHM roots, one with the relatively hard heth and one with the softer hē. Since English has only one H to transliterate these letters, it is unclear which root Nephi used, though most writers assume it is the first. The first root is nacham (Strong’s H5162, נחאם) which is typically translated as “comfort” but can also mean “to be sorry” or to “suffer grief.” Gesenius indicates that it is “like the Arabic” cognate nahima. This root for Nahom would make an apparent word play with the verse immediately following Nahom, where the daughters of Ishmael “mourn exceedingly” (1 Nephi 16:35) and are obviously in need of comfort. In proposing a word play here, Stephen D. Ricks (and others) have discussed the issue of differing H sounds and noted that while the local Nehem may have had an etymology different than the Arabic nahama, “to sigh or moan,” nevertheless, a mourning-related Hebrew Nahom with its hard H still could have been understood by Nephi to be related. This is not an essential point, but still noteworthy. Ricks concludes that “Nahom is thus a striking fit as a Book of Mormon proper name based on archaeological, geographical, historical, and, to a lesser extent, on linguistic or etymological considerations.”

The second root to consider is naham, (Strong’s H5098, נחאם), with the soft H, which can be translated as “roar” or “mourn,” and can be applied to the “voices of people groaning.” There is overlapping meaning between these two words, both of which may be onomatopoeic in origin. To assume that hearing one NHM root could not evoke the other, when it has related meaning and a related sound, seems unreasonable.
RT objects to this root, for a Hebrew word meaning “groan” would “hardly be intelligible” as a place name. He might have a point if Nephi were coining a Hebrew name based on NHM with a soft H, but Nephi is merely reporting the local name, which may have been from an early Arabic language. If Nahom were heard with a soft H, understanding it to be related to “groan” is entirely appropriate. If Nephi heard it with a more guttural H and made a connection to Hebrew NHM with a hard H, the associated meanings related to “mourning” and “comfort” would be appropriate. The two roots are related and a word play with either might be possible.

Regarding the second root, Aston in a peer-reviewed paper observes that its Hebrew meanings of “roar,” “complain” and “be hungry” relate to the Arabic meanings “to growl, groan, roar, suffer from hunger, to complain” and states that “this association with hunger may be connected to the fasting that was often part of mourning for the dead in ancient Yemen and still in many cultures today.” This enhances the potential scope of the word play in 1 Nephi 16.

The word play issue has most recently been addressed by Neal Rappleye and Stephen Smoot, who also discuss an example a bilingual wordplay in the book of Genesis on the name Ham involving two different H phonemes. This strengthens the case that Hebrew speakers would have recognized a relationship and been able to make a word play with words differing in the H sound. There’s no problem here.

36. RT complains that nacham, a Hebrew word for “comfort” is inappropriate in the alleged wordplay, since the daughters are still grieving and have not yet come to terms with Ishmael’s death. While no response should be necessary, I will briefly mention this in Section 2.

37. RT complains that the meaning of Nehem is linked to stonework, not mourning, making it a poor fit for a word play. **Response:** One of Warren Aston’s important contributions related to Nahom, apart from identifying the NHM
inscription on the second and third such altars near Marib, is found in his peer-reviewed paper on the etymology of the Nihm tribal name. In discussing the tribal lands, centered about 40 kilometers northeast of Sana‘a, he explores possible meanings of the name and its origins.” The root NHM (with the soft H) “appears in every known occurrence of the name in epigraphic South Arabian text, whether Sabaean, Hadramitic or Minean in origin. Here, it usually refers to ‘dressed masonry’ or the ‘dressing of stone by chipping.’” Aston proposes that ancient stoneworkers gave the tribe its NHM name, and that their stonework and masonry skills were probably employed in creating the numerous stone burial sites in the region, including their own tribal lands but possibly also the large necropolis outside of their current lands.

38. RT also complains that there is no indication that a word play is intended since the name is simply introduced in a matter-of-fact manner.

Response: Hebraic wordplays are rarely preceded with any special flags or markers. Puns, allusions, and other tools are simply dropped into the text for the reader to discover. This is in contrast with conventional US practice where amateur punsters seem bound to insert the formulaic lie “no pun intended” after every pun to make sure we know that it was intended. But the numerous word plays in the Book of Mormon show evidence of being neither from an amateur nor an American.

39. RT finds that the weeping of the women at Nahom is not relevant to the proposed meaning of the name Nahom. He finds the allegedly ancient text to be inadequate, lacking details from ancient funerary practices. “[The description of only women mourning in v. 35 seems to stem from the more simple narrative intention to portray females as emotional in nature and especially sensitive to the physical challenges of wilderness travel (cf. 1 Nephi 17:1–2). The gender stereotype of women as tender and weak … is also found in the contemporary
pseudo-biblical prose work *The Late War*, by Gilbert Hunt.”

**Response:** RT’s approach nicely illustrates some of the flawed methodology of minimalists in the field of “Higher Criticism” who prefer to look for parallels in late sources to establish late dates for scriptural texts rather than give the ancient texts a fair treatment, while also zealously minimalizing evidences for plausibility. The women are doing the mourning, mourning exceedingly, in fact, but instead of being able to admit that is appropriate in context, he instead paints it as evidence of modern plagiarism informed by modern stereotypes, noting that the mourning of women in Gilbert Hunt’s *The Late War* is similar to that of the Book of Mormon. Of course, *The Late War* has recently been touted (without success) by some Book of Mormon critics as a key source of Book of Mormon plagiarism.

RT’s footnote is to Hunt at p. 72 of an 1819 edition, where in chapter 19, vs. 62, we encounter the phrase “as weak women,” but ironically it is the *men* of Zebulon’s army who are described as weak. On that page, we also have widows weeping for slain husbands and children (19:58), but that follows old men weeping for their children in the previous verse. This seems more like equal opportunity weakness and crying to me, though there is that outdated idea that male soldiers are supposed to be stronger than women. The possibility of more significant gender stereotypes permeating the *Late War* can be tested by searching the text for terms such as “women,” “woman,” “cried,” “lament,” “plead,” “beg,” “weep,” “howl” or “mourn,” where it seems that men cry about as often as women. The problem may be my lack of sensitivity, but perhaps RT’s point reflects not so much a careful reading of *The Late War* as it does his own stereotypical view of Book of Mormon origins.

40. The burial of Ishmael outside of Jewish territory “reflects ignorance about ancient Israelite attitudes toward death and burial” since being buried away from one’s homeland would be a “calamity of the highest order,” but there is “no indication that the Book of Mormon author or
members of Lehi’s party had any knowledge of such cultural norms.” RT complains of missing details such as “how native members of the Nihm tribe responded to foreigners seeking a burial place on their land.”

**Response:** In almost any historical record, there are missing details that later readers might wish to have, but “mourning exceedingly” seems to reflect that there was some sense of a calamity here. The gaps, though, can be managed with a “generous reading” of the text. Nephi, for example, may have assumed that attentive readers would notice that yes, they were in a foreign land for this death and burial not requiring further explanation. The details of the burial, the rites performed, any negotiations for a burial place, etc., are left out presumably because they do not fulfill Nephi’s theological agenda, though I share RT’s desire for more. Interestingly, one of Aston’s suggestions on this issue is that a Jewish colony in the area may have assisted in providing a proper Hebrew burial. Jewish burials in Yemen are attested no later than 300 BC, and since we know of later Jewish presence in the Nihm area, it is possible that Jews could have been there earlier and could have been able to assist in proper burials.97

41. RT claims that Nephi’s description of Nahom as a “place” would be unintelligible “since the Hebrew common noun *mqwm* ‘place’ is always used to refer to a particular or closely defined locale, such as a house, town, or sanctuary, never a tribal region.”

**Response:** RT is projecting his views back into the text. While today we know of Nihm as a tribe with tribal lands, Nephi does not say that Nahom was a broad geographical region, town, tribe, or any of the above, although the context requires it at least be a “place” where someone could be buried. He met people there, probably in some kind of dwelling, where they learned the name. The “place” could have included a “closely defined locale” like a town or an ancient burial site. But I am not convinced by RT’s limitations on the scope of *mqwm* or *maqowm* (Strong’s H4725).98 The first use of that word is in the Creation
account of all the waters being gathered into one “place” (Genesis 1:9). That would seem like a fairly broad place, not “closely defined.” Isaiah 33:21 speaks of “a place of broad rivers and streams,” indisputably a broad area. Ecclesiastes 1:7 speaks of the sea as a “the place from whence the rivers come.” So a broad region for “the place” Nahom does not seem beyond the pale, though Nephi may have encountered something much more closely defined.

42. RT claims that Aston has embellished the facts by stating that Nahom is associated with a large burial region.

**Response:** Aston has not embellished the facts of the burial regions in the area at all. In all of his writings that I have encountered, he has been careful to explain that Arabia’s largest necropolis, rich in graves made of stone, does not lie within current Nihm tribal boundaries. But for RT to say that they are “nowhere close” is not particularly objective, for they are certainly close enough to have been within the scope of Nihm tribal activities, though not necessarily Nihm tribal lands. The significance of the burial regions, including those within current Nihm lands, will be discussed in Section 2.

I find RT’s accusation of embellishment by Aston to be inappropriate. Aston has been meticulous and careful in his statements and research. Unlike nearly all the rest of us interested in Arabia, he has spent years traveling there, inspecting sites, studying intricate details, mastering new skills, building relationships with officials and scholars in the area, funding exploration out of his own pocket, and carefully bringing to light some of the most significant and carefully documented finds relevant to the Book of Mormon. Along the way he has given presentations to academic conferences, published a peer-reviewed paper on some aspects of his work, and written two of the most valuable books available for students of the Book of Mormon. It is not all just for the sake of apologetics. He has uncovered a unique biological treasure at Bountiful and has gained the respect and support of many scholars in pushing for work to preserve the now-threatened region
whose water resources are being diverted. He has joined with others, including non-LDS experts, in establishing the Khor Kharfot Foundation (khor-kharfot-foundation.com) in order to encourage further study and protection of the region. His work is worthy of respect, whether one accepts the Book of Mormon or not, and responsible scholars will recognize his contributions and careful work rather than making unwarranted accusations of “embellishment.”

II. The Strength of Book of Mormon Evidence from Arabia

Of Weaknesses and Strengths in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon has numerous apparent weaknesses and idiosyncrasies that critics can ridicule. The surprising thing, though, is how often these weaknesses eventually become strengths. Some merely become neutralized with reasonable arguments and tentative scenarios, but many glaring defects have, over time, transformed completely into noteworthy evidences of authenticity. Examples include Joseph’s long-ridiculed blunder in Alma 7:10 about Christ being born in the land of Jerusalem, when everyone knows it was the town of Bethlehem. This attack could be neutralized with logic, but now ancient documents such as the Amarna Letters and the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that the “land of Jerusalem” — a phrase not found in the Bible — was an authentic term among ancient people describing the region around Jerusalem, including nearby Bethlehem.

Similar episodes of weakness becoming strength include the general idea of ancient Semites writing scripture on metal; the mass of the gold plates (along with other physical aspects of the highly physical plates); cement in the Americas; the basic evidence of grand civilizations in the ancient Americas which was felt as a matter requiring faith by early Latter-day Saints, until they felt great vindication with the publication of John Lloyd Stephens’ Incidents of Travel in Central America in 1841; the blunder of the man Alma being given a common female name; the fatal “mists of darkness” in 3 Nephi 9 being recognized as volcanic ash complete with hard evidence of corresponding volcanic activity in the right time and place (Mesoamerica); the concept of Jews even thinking of building a temple outside of Jerusalem; and so forth.

Naturally, some issues remain as weaknesses requiring patience, further work and frequent review of casual assumptions, although many major weaknesses are being eroded to some degree with significant
surprises and new evidences in works such as John Sorenson’s *Mormon’s Codex*[^108] and Brant Gardner’s *Traditions of the Fathers*,[^109] along with the ongoing work at places like the Interpreter Foundation and Book of Mormon Central.[^110] There is still room for debate and, mercifully, nobody need feel compelled to believe the Book of Mormon in the absence of any faith. Faith is still required and probably always will be, but for those interested in exploring the rocky path of faith, there are occasional dazzling lights along the way to help us see our way around or over the obstacles we face.

Some of the brightest lights giving intellectual support to the Book of Mormon come from the Old World, particularly the Arabian Peninsula, where dramatic finds have added new levels of credibility to the account in 1 Nephi. Glaring weaknesses such as the impossibility of finding a “continually running” river (1 Nephi 2:9) in Arabia and a place like Bountiful in a land rich in oil and sand but nothing like the verdant treasure of Nephi’s account, have suddenly become strengths.[^111]

Almost as interesting as the evidence itself is the response of critics and skeptics in their efforts to minimalize the significance of what is emerging there. The critics who once mocked the account of Lehi’s trail and its ridiculous details today insist that those very details, now that they appear to be strengths in light of modern investigation, are easily accounted for based on information that must have been at Joseph’s fingertips.

Many contend that everything Joseph needed to craft the Book of Mormon was in his environment. This has become a mantra for critics. Nahom? A similar name is on several European maps from before Joseph’s day. Bountiful? Just a twist on Arabia Felix, the happy green corner of southwestern Arabia that some ancient writers discussed. The Valley of Lemuel and the River Laman? Any decent map of Arabia shows mountains near the Red Sea, so obviously there would be valleys, and mountain valleys would suggest water to Joseph — or maybe Joseph mistook the Gulf of Aqaba for a river. Piece of cake. As one prolific critic, an anonymous university professor, explained on my *Mormanity* blog:

> No vast library would have been needed [to create the Book of Mormon]. The amount of material Joseph would have had to see and hear is not at all extraordinary. … Joseph would merely have had to listen to a bunch of sermons, pay attention to the discussions going on all around him, and, yes, see a map or two. Nothing far-fetched at all.[^112]
I don’t buy this “argument from impossibility” because I don’t see anything in the book that couldn’t have been written in the 1820s by Smith or someone like him.

Chiasmus? Anyone familiar with the Bible is familiar with chiasmus (regardless of whether they know the term for it). EModE [Early Modern English]? Most likely an artifact of Stanford Carmack’s poor “Texas sharpshooter” methodology. Nahom? Nehem was right there on widely available maps of Arabia. Etc. It’s all there.¹¹³ [emphasis mine]

Some outstanding efforts at fleshing out the “it’s all there” theory for the Arabian evidences include those of Jenkins and RT.¹¹⁴ Their work is a notable improvement over the silent treatment or casual dismissal often seen in other quarters, so the authors are to be thanked for at least engaging the evidence to some degree. But have they actually considered and accounted for the strengths of the evidence, rather than just focusing on apparent gaps and the endless potential of dumb luck?

**Joseph’s Well Hidden Expertise and a Foolishly Missed Opportunity?**

If Joseph knew much about the Arabian Peninsula, he failed to show off this knowledge in the only comment we have from him about Lehi’s journey: “Lehi went down by the Red Sea to the great Southern Ocean, and crossed over to this land,” meaning America.¹¹⁵ Down by the Red Sea, then to the ocean. That’s rather vague — the kind of overview one might pick up from the Book of Mormon, but it doesn’t reveal a rich source from which the Book of Mormon picked up its information. It doesn’t seem that Joseph was very interested in or knowledgeable about the details of the Arabian Peninsula. As far as I know, nothing in his comments, behavior, and belongings, or in the observations of others around him, reveal any fascination with the Arabian Peninsula and its cartography or geography.

If the details in 1 Nephi were part of a scheme to create apparent Book of Mormon evidence, he certainly missed every opportunity to exploit that evidence. Neither he nor his peers seem to have recognized there was evidence supporting Book of Mormon plausibility there. It would be several generations later before Hugh Nibley dug into the evidences related to Lehi in the desert, and he would fail to find our specific candidates for the River Laman, Nahom, and Bountiful. In 1978, a few decades after Nibley’s initial work, Dr. Ross T. Christensen, a
professor of archaeology at BYU, was the first person to notice a Nahom-like name on a map of Arabia and announce a possible connection to Nahom in Nephi’s account.\textsuperscript{116} If Joseph and purported co-conspirators went to the trouble of learning details about the Arabian Peninsula to enhance the Book of Mormon, why completely fail to capitalize on that work? Why leave the evidence for plausibility to future generations over a century later? What possible advantage did he obtain by plucking obscure Nahom off the map? It’s like a murder mystery where the alleged killer lacked any motivation for the crime, lacked means to commit the crime, probably never got near the murder weapon, and for the rest of his life apparently never even knew of the crime. As we shall see, the claim that Joseph drew upon his environment to write the Book of Mormon raises bigger questions than it answers.

\textbf{Some Highlights of the Arabian Evidence}

Contrary to all previous reports, a perennial stream was found by George Potter and Craig Thorsted that flows through a magnificent canyon into “the fountain of the Red Sea,” in a place that nicely fits

A view of Khor Kharfot, the mouth of Wadi Sayq, a leading candidate for Bountiful, with Arabia’s largest freshwater lagoon and abundant fruit, nearly due east of Nahom. Image courtesy of Warren Aston.
details in Nephi’s account. The valley is Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, roughly midway along the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba.

In contrast to Joseph’s vague summary of Lehi’s journey mentioned above, the Book of Mormon text provides a number of specific details: three days through the wilderness past the borders “nearer” the Red Sea to the Valley of Lemuel, which has a continuously flowing river, and
even apparently had seeds, grain and fruits that the family could gather (1 Nephi 8:1). These details and other aspects of Nephi’s account of the valley and river have found remarkable confirmation with a specific and plausible candidate for the Valley of Lemuel and River Laman, Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, identified by George Potter and Richard Wellington in their *Lehi in the Wilderness*.117 (It is not the only candidate that has been proposed,118 but I feel it stands as the best.) You can view several parts of the valley and some of its stream within Google Maps at 28.563416 degrees north and 34.808121 degrees east119 (access it via this shortcut: http://tinyurl.com/valleylemuel).

The valley is a dramatic rift in the earth that is far different than the surrounding terrain. Potter and Wellington found that the valley could have been readily accessed coming south from Aqaba by simply continuing straight when the main trail turns east at Haql, which is about twenty-five miles south of the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba. By departing from the caravan route, Nephi would encounter the shoreline mountains after about fifteen more miles. The only way to continue was to turn into a wadi on the left that led into the mountains, the only valley leading into the mountains that they encountered after Haql. This then opened into another wadi leading south, and later at about seventy miles from their start, the wadi turned west toward the tallest shoreline mountains. So far, all was arid and barren. Three miles later, they were inside a great granite canyon with a small stream, a perennial river that flows into the Red Sea, an entirely plausible candidate for the long-ridiculed Valley of Lemuel and River Laman, within a plausible three-day journey (with camels) from the northern end of the Red Sea.120

While plausible, the region has not been systematically explored, and it is possible that other valleys could one day prove to be superior candidates, but for the moment we can safely say that at least one reasonable candidate has been found. It is also possible to question assumptions made for this site, such as whether Lehi used camels.

Nephi later says that they next traveled four days to a place called Shazer that featured good hunting, travel generally being south-southeast, a highly specific direction that well fits the ancient incense trails running roughly parallel to the Red Sea. Continuing in that direction (1 Nephi 16:13, 14), after extensive travel and afflictions, Ishmael dies and is buried at a place others called Nahom (1 Nephi 16:33–34).

Nahom appears to correspond with the ancient and modern tribal lands of the Nihm tribe (which can be pronounced *Nehem* or *Nehhum*) located northeast of Sana’a at about 15.6 degree north latitude.121
The name Nahum/Nahom in Hebrew has a root meaning related to mourning and appears to be part of a Hebraic word play in 1 Nephi 16: 34–35. The NHM Hebrew root nacham (Strong’s H5162) has a basic meaning related to sorrow, grieving, lamenting, and consoling. Non-LDS scholar David Damrosch explains:

It [naham] appears twenty-five times in the narrative books of the Bible, and in every case it is associated with death. In family settings, it is applied in instances involving the death of an immediate family member (parent, sibling, or child); in national settings, it has to do with the survival or impending extermination of an entire people. At heart, naham means “to mourn,” to come to terms with a death; these usages are usually translated (e.g., in the rsv) by the verb “to comfort,” as when Jacob’s children try to comfort their father after the reported death of Joseph.123

Alan Goff observes that immediately after we read of Ishmael’s burial at Nahom, his daughters mourn exceedingly (1 Nephi 16:35).124 RT claims that this connection in Hebrew fails because the daughters have not yet “come to terms” with Ishmael’s death and have not found comfort. I am frustrated by this dense, literal reading of the text, not rare among those who look for reasons to reject the historicity of scripture in general (we’ll discuss biblical “minimalists” later). Can we not readily recognize that “comfort” need not be attained in this setting to be an appropriate term? Is it not clear without being explicitly written that the faithful members of Lehi’s family would be trying to provide comfort in this scene, just as Jacob’s children try (but fail) to comfort their father after reporting Joseph’s death? Nacham is appropriate in both settings. Its use is subtle evidence of Hebraic influence behind the text, particularly in light of the further observations Goff offers about the pattern of murmuring in the wilderness in the Old Testament, also applicable here.125

Wonderfully, we now have archaeological finds — three stone altars from a temple at Marib, to the east of current Nihm boundaries — confirming that a NHM-related tribal name was in the area somewhat before Nephi’s day. These altars were donated to the temple by a wealthy member of Nihm tribe, with his tribe name carved as NHM on the altars.126

We also know that the region was associated with burial places. Aston shows a 1976 map from Nigel Groom (sorry, too late for Joseph) of the Nahom/Nehem area near Wadi Jawf in Yemen which has a marker in the Nehem area for “burial region.”127 Aston learned from a French
archaeological team that this burial site is ancient, with circular rock tombs that may date to 3,000 BC. About 25 miles east of those tombs at Ruwaik, outside the present Nihm tribal boundaries but possibly within its ancient boundaries, is an extensive ancient burial place, apparently the largest in Arabia, with some tombs dating well before Lehi’s day, adding plausibility to Ishmael’s burial (not death) at a place already known as Nahom.

If Nihm stonework was at Marib, it could have been at the necropolis. In fact, as Aston proposed in a paper in the *Journal of Arabian Studies*, the masonry or stonework-related meaning of NHM in South Arabian may well reflect the Nihm tribe’s ancient occupation as craftsmen who made the stone graves in the region, including those on their tribal lands, and other stone items. If so, the relationships between both mourning and stonework associated with NHM roots in the Near East would be nicely joined in the Nihm tribe’s origins (and be remarkably applicable to Nephi’s account).

Though Marib is outside the current boundaries of Nihm tribal lands, the Nihm tribe obviously had some kind of presence there anciently to have been associated with three altars at the Marib temple. In recent years the tribe has continued making news in Marib, though not always fortunate. There is no reason to assume that the Nihm tribe could not have been associated with Arabia’s largest necropolis outside its current borders, roughly as far from current Nihm lands as Marib.
After Nahom, they make an eastward turn and reach Bountiful, a verdant place nearly due east of Nahom (1 Nephi 17:1–5). See the photos above and also explore the leading candidate on Google Maps, coordinates: 16.7322336 degrees north, 53.3325437 degrees east, accessible via http://tinyurl.com/wadisayq. This is less than 1 degree north of the heart of Nihm territory and the candidate for the place Nahom, making it nearly due east of Nahom, as Nephi said. As Aston notes, the entire course that a traveler would take to access Kharfot from Nahom, a trek of about 970 km in length, “lies in a substantially easterly direction, with no significant detours required by the terrain.”

None of these details has been contradicted by subsequent exploration and discovery in the Arabian Peninsula, and many have surprising validation for their plausibility. The south-southeast direction makes perfect sense for travel generally along the broad Frankincense Trail. The Valley of Lemuel and the River Laman have an outstanding candidate complete with wild grain and fruit, including berries and three kinds of dates. There is evidence related to the place Shazer (discussed below). Extensive evidence related to Nahom and especially Bountiful has been provided in Warren and Michaela Aston’s *In the Footsteps of Lehi* and more recently Warren Aston’s *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, perhaps my favorite books related to the Book of Mormon. This includes evidence for Nahom’s ancient association with burial places.

Perhaps most importantly, now we know that the Nahom region offers the ability to turn east and not only survive, but to reach a remarkable and previously unrecognized place that Aston has proposed as the leading candidate for Bountiful. While Nephi shows the ability to discern direction with accuracy, reflected in the south-southeast direction that he gives for major portions of their journey, the “nearly eastward” direction that they take for the remainder of the trip after Nahom has been said by some to necessarily require a large detour from “nearly eastward” in order to avoid the desert by following trade routes. Aston shows that those proposed routes would not be feasible for reaching a fertile spot toward the east and would hardly qualify as traveling eastward. In fact, Aston insists that Nephi’s directions are plausible and accurate. By traveling directly eastward from Nahom, Nephi’s group would avoid the dreaded Empty Quarter to the north and the difficult Ramlat Saba’tayn desert to the south. Even a slight departure from eastward, such as east-northeast or east-southeast, would have led to trouble. But “traveling almost true east from Nahom placed them on a narrow band of stony plateaus and
valleys leading between the two deserts to the coast.” Aston explains that this eastward route is not only the most direct and efficient path to reach Bountiful, but one that makes Bountiful accessible without significant physical barriers such as lava fields, sand dunes, mountains, or steep ravines. Consistent with Nephi’s account (1 Nephi 17:1–2), this would be the most difficult part of the journey due to the scarcity of water, but pools of water on the stony surface of this region following rain storms could have helped.

Adding to the plausibility of Aston’s, or rather Nephi’s, “nearly eastward” route from Nahom, is the map of rainfall distribution reported for Yemen, which I believe has not been previously considered in discussions of Lehi’s Trail. In the image below, I have superimposed a CIA map of annual rainfall in Yemen over Aston’s map of southern Arabia. A path from Nahom through the upper green branch of higher rainfall corresponds well with Aston’s proposed path, avoiding the extremely low-rainfall desert regions. That green branch leads them directly toward Dhofar and Wadi Sayq, a long wadi in Oman west of Salalah that extends westward from Khor Kharfot slightly over the border into Yemen. Aston’s proposed route, in my opinion, is the most direct and reasonable route to the secluded, hard-to-reach Khor Kharfot.

A remarkable correlation between Nephi’s Bountiful and Khor Kharfot is not just that it is a rare fertile location on the coast nearly due east of Nahom, but that it was and largely still is an uninhabited fertile spot. Fertile spots with fresh water (such as the freshwater lagoon fed with freshwater springs at Khor Kharfot, documented in the video Lehi in Arabia) tend to attract settlement, especially in Arabia, but Nephi’s Bountiful clearly lacked population because Nephi had to rely on his brothers for labor to build the ship and had to make his own tools from iron ore that he had to find himself. He was not in a major port town, but an uninhabited but highly livable spot the family apparently had to themselves. What are the odds of such a place being found anywhere in Arabia, much less exactly where the Book of Mormon said it should be? It’s one thing to guess that an area on the coast might be unusually fertile and suitable for people to live. It’s another thing to guess that nobody lives there. No map would have helped Joseph do that.
Observations on the River Laman, Where “There Never Was a River,” and the Problematic “Fountain”

Solid evidence supporting Book of Mormon plausibility can be found across the entire span of Lehi’s Old World journey. The evidence comes from field work, archaeological finds, and other scientific studies. For example, Potter and Wellington’s field work found that by following a reasonable interpretation of Nephi’s directions, it would be possible to wander into a magnificent and highly plausible candidate for the Valley of Lemuel with a continually (year-round) flowing river (brooklet) of water, in a setting that corresponds wonderfully with Nephi’s record and Lehi’s sermon to his sons based on the terrain. It is a three days’ journey

Map of average rainfall in Yemen superimposed on Aston’s topographical map of southern Arabia. The upper green branch (5–10 inches/year) extending from Nahom east toward Oman corresponds well with the route proposed by Aston that provides inland access to Wadi Sayq and Khor Kharfot, Bountiful.
from the initial approach to the Red Sea along the ancient trails that would have taken Lehi’s family south, based on travel with camels.

The River Laman was long an easy target for critics, an obvious weakness. In the 1858 *Millennial Star*, an anti-Mormon critique called “The Doctrines of Mormonism” from the Religious Tract Society is rebutted. One of the arguments against the Book of Mormon is this:

Then, in the wilderness, three days’ journey [after going by the Red Sea], we are told of a river, where there *never was a river*. Then this river is said first to empty itself into the Red Sea, and then into the fountain of the Red Sea! Evidently the ignorant man who wrote all this nonsense, or spoke it, knew nothing of the geography of the wilderness, and knew little about seas, and rivers, and fountains.

The LDS writer noted that the critic has not proven there is no river, and if there is none there, the river Nephi described may have been a small brook that has long since dried up. As for the argument about fountains, the defense is offered that calling any sea a fountain is hardly objectionable, and that the sea provides the source of “waters under the earth” that bubble up as springs, making the sea ultimately the “universal fountain” of the earth’s water resources.

The argument may have been reasonable for its day, but the Book of Mormon’s claim remained a trouble spot, for, based on modern knowledge, one could reasonably assume there was no river there and perhaps “there never was a river.” Even 20th-century surveys of the region would continue to declare that it was free of rivers. Given that, should the world not be somewhat intrigued by the finding of Potter and Wellington that there was in fact a remarkably plausible candidate for such a river and such a valley within a three days’ journey south of Aqaba, the northernmost tip of the Red Sea that is likely to have been near Nephi’s initial approach to the Red Sea? The declaration that “there never was a river” there stands vacated. Many more modern repetitions of that same complaint stand refuted. Exploration of the Arabian Peninsula has made the Book of Mormon more credible, more plausible, not less so. A weakness has become a strength.

Critics still nitpick at the evidence, of course. It is argued by some that the three-day counter could have begun anywhere along the Red Sea, for Nephi doesn’t say precisely where he was when he came “near” and then “nearer” the Red Sea. But since major trails south would bring him to Aqaba as the primary way of approaching the Red Sea, and then away from the Red Sea after that, it is a rather reasonable assumption that
Nephi’s contact with the Red Sea began at Aqaba. Further confirmation that the River Laman is along the short Gulf of Aqaba and not anywhere along the Red Sea may be found in Nephi’s language.

But fountain? Critics in the 1850s guffawed at describing the flow of the river as going into the “fountain of the Red Sea” and some continue to object to Nephi’s term. One can argue that fountain can have a broader meaning than a spring or subterranean flow of some kind, but the other uses of “fountain” in the Book of Mormon point to similar concepts: a physical or figurative source of a flow such as a spring. The Hebrew word typically translated as “fountain” (Strong’s H4599, mayan) has the meaning of a spring, and is also sometimes translated as spring or well, giving it a subterranean flavor. Interestingly, that more specific meaning may actually fit the physical reality Nephi experienced.

Potter and Wellington, in Lehi in the Wilderness, observe that “the river flows under a gravel bed for the last three-eights of a mile as it approaches the Gulf of Aqaba.” They observe that the river may have previously had much greater water flow, and that the canyon floor is believed to have risen since Lehi’s day, so perhaps it flowed directly into the Red Sea when Nephi saw it. On the other hand, I wish to suggest that even through the river flow may have been greater and the elevation of the canyon somewhat lower, what if the river still disappeared beneath the rocks as it approached the Red Sea in Nephi’s day? By disappearing into the rocks adjacent the Red Sea, the water is obviously not disappearing completely, but is flowing into the Red Sea through subterranean channels, joining the underground springs that feed the Red Sea. In other words, the River Laman is now, and possibly was in Nephi’s day, literally flowing into the fountains that feed the Red Sea.

If the river disappeared near the coast in Nephi’s day as it does now, arguably flowing into the “fountain of the Red Sea,” then perhaps this would also explain Nephi’s repeated use of the verb “empty” rather than “flow.” The river “emptied into the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 2:8), and again Lehi “saw that the waters of the river emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 2:9). Waters disappearing, descending into the earth, could well be described this way. Perhaps Potter’s candidate for the River Laman fits the details of Nephi’s description even better than he realized, although it is difficult to know if the behavior of the river around 600 BC would be similar to its behavior today.

Another objection to the leading candidate for the River Laman is that it lacks a mouth flowing into the Red Sea, apparently contrary to 1 Nephi 2:8, which states that the river “emptied into the Red Sea; and the
valley was in the borders near the mouth thereof.” Chadwick emphasizes this repeatedly in his critique, claiming that without a mouth, we can rule this candidate out and be certain that Potter has been looking in the wrong place.\(^{151}\) One definition of “mouth” is:

something that resembles a mouth especially in affording entrance or exit: as

\(a\): the place where a stream enters a larger body of water,

\(b\): the surface opening of an underground cavity. \(\ldots^{152}\)

Another dictionary gives one definition for mouth as “the outfall at the lower end of a river or stream, where flowing water is discharged, as into a larger body of water.”\(^{153}\) If Nephi understood that the River Laman, as it sank into the ground, was flowing into the subterranean waters that feed the Red Sea, or the fountain of the Red Sea, then the place where that stream disappeared and entered a larger body of water (the subterranean fountain) would appropriately be called a mouth. The Book of Mormon does not say that the mouth directly contacted the Red Sea. It had a mouth and flowed into a fountain, the fountain of (meaning “belonging to” or “associated with,” I would argue) the Red Sea, and thus “emptied into the Red Sea,” via the fountain. This understanding resolves the primary argument Chadwick offers against this candidate, for the river does indeed have a mouth where it flows into a larger body of water. And, as noted above, it resolves the objection to calling the Red Sea a fountain, which is not necessarily what Nephi is saying. It is also consistent with the ancient concept of interconnected subterranean waters that feed rivers and oceans.\(^{154}\)

**Don’t Overlook Shazer**

Nahom and Bountiful are relatively well known in LDS circles, and the candidate for the River Laman has also received significant publicity. Here I’ll go into a little detail about one of the lesser known treasures of plausibility along the way, Shazer, to illustrate how minor points in the text play significant roles in connecting the text to real terrain.

Shazer is introduced as Nephi’s group leaves the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 16:11–14):

11 And it came to pass that we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness.
12 And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman. 13 And it came to pass that we traveled for the space of four days, nearly a south-southeast direction, and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer. 14 And it came to pass that we did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families in the wilderness, to the place of Shazer. And we did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction, keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea.

Nephi’s use of borders, as had been pointed out by Kent Brown, may refer to mountains in the area. This word was also used to describe Nephi’s initial approach to the Red Sea, where there were borders “near” and borders “nearer” the Red Sea. George Potter said that he learned from local Arabs that the name of the mountains in northwest Arabia, the Hijaz, means “borders.” He also notes that the Hebrew word for borders, gebul, is cognate with Arabic jabal (jebel, djebel) meaning mountain. So references to the borders near the Red Sea could logically refer to mountains. The entry in Strong’s Concordance for gebul also notes that one meaning can be a concrete object marking a limit.

Starting with the proposed location of the Valley of Lemuel, the place Shazer needs to be within a four-day journey (presumably with camels) along a south-southeast direction.

Regarding the place name Shazer, Nigel Groom’s Dictionary of Arabic Topography and Placenames provides an entry for a similar word, shajir: “A valley or area abounding with trees and shrubs.” Other dictionaries also connect shajir and shajra to an abundance of trees. Hugh Nibley felt there may be a significant connection:

The first important stop after Lehi’s party had left their base camp was at a place they called Shazer. The name is intriguing. The combination shajer is quite common in Palestinian place names; it is a collective meaning “trees,” and many Arabs (especially in Egypt) pronounce it shazher. It appears in Thoghret-as-Sajur (the Pass of Trees), which is the ancient Shaghur, written Segor in the sixth century. It may be confused with Shaghur “seepage,” which is held to be identical with Shihor, the “black water” of Josh. 19:36. This last takes in western Palestine the form Sozura, suggesting the
name of a famous water hole in South Arabia, called Shisur by Thomas and Shisar by Philby. ... So we have Shihor, Shaghur, Sajur, Saghir, Segor (even Zoar), Shajar, Sozura, Shisur, and Shisar, all connected somehow or other and denoting either seepage — a weak but reliable water supply — or a clump of trees. Whichever one prefers, Lehi’s people could hardly have picked a better name for their first suitable stopping place than Shazer.\textsuperscript{160}

RT criticizes Nibley’s approach, noting that Shazer is not a Hebrew word, and if Nephi for some reason wanted to adopt a word related to Arabic’s shajir, given the nature of Hebrew consonants in that era it is more likely that it would have been pronounced something like “sager” with “s” and “g” instead of the sibilants “sh” and “z.”\textsuperscript{161} RT’s criticism draws upon Thomas Finley in The New Mormon Challenge, who rejects the plausibility of an Arabic or Hebrew origin to the name and instead speculates that Joseph Smith concocted it from Jazer in the Bible, particularly Isaiah 16:8 which mentions Jazer and wilderness.\textsuperscript{162} In response to Finley’s essay, Roper and Tvedtnes acknowledge that Finley may be right about the problem with Nibley’s proposal, and they offer an even stronger argument by also noting that words with two consecutive sibilants are rare in Semitic languages.\textsuperscript{163} They also explain that Finley’s proposal for Jazer would seem to suggest that Joseph spent inordinate amounts of time searching the Bible for relevant place names to modify in order to come up with a word that would be used only once with little apparent significance. This objection applies to some of RT’s speculations as well for the origins of Nahom and other names, an objection we’ll come back to later.

As for Shazer, there are several other interesting possibilities that have been raised by LDS scholars regarding origins and meaning of the name Shazer, as listed in the extensive Book of Mormon Onomasticon,\textsuperscript{164} but objections can be raised for all of them. A candidate favored by the Onomasticon is a Hebrew word meaning “twisted,” perhaps due to twisted acacia trees in the area or, as Aston speculates, the twisted terrain,\textsuperscript{165} but why it would be chosen by Lehi’s group is unclear and RT appropriately questions its plausibility.

An intriguing possibility noted in the Onomasticon is an ancient watering hole in South Arabia written as Shisur or Shisar, possibly from a word meaning “cleft” or “sinkhole.”\textsuperscript{166} In recent English publications, this site is often written as Shisr or Shisur (Shisur Wubar).\textsuperscript{167} It is part of the “Land of Frankincense” on the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites.\textsuperscript{168}
This significant ancient watering hole and settlement is in the Dhofar region about ninety-five miles northwest of Salalah, near candidates for Bountiful. It is discussed in some detail, along with Khor Rori, one of the Bountiful candidates, in a UNESCO report that points to the ancient significance of the place, though not necessarily the name. It is nowhere near Nephi’s Shazer, of course, but that name for a watering hole from a region of incense production could have been known to travelers on the Frankincense Trail, and its suitability as a name for a watering hole could have contributed to whatever reasons Lehi may have had for applying a related name to the watering hole they encountered. Perhaps both shajer and Shisr influenced the choice.

At the moment, we don’t have a compelling explanation for the meaning of Shazer or the reasons why it was selected as a name. Perhaps variations in local dialects might account for the difficulties regarding Nibley’s proposal of relationship to the Arabic word shajer, said to be pronounced shazher by some Arabs, especially in Egypt. Could “Shazer” be Nephi’s transliteration of a local pronunciation of a term related to Arabic’s shajir, making it not a Hebrew word after all? Is Shazer a transliteration of a name that we now would write as Shisr? Other speculations can also be considered, but for now, no easy answer presents itself. This uncertainty, however, is not uncommon in dealing with ancient texts where there are many puzzles about names and their origin.

A more important question is whether the existence of a place like Shazer is plausible, given that the Book of Mormon indicates that it was a place where Lehi’s group could stop and go hunting — obviously a place with water and wildlife where one could stay for a while on a long journey.

It turns out that there is a reasonable fit for Shazer, a large, extensive oasis region with what is said to be the best hunting in all of Arabia, and it is in the right location to have been a four-days’ journey south of the proposed location for the Valley of Lemuel, near a branch of the ancient Frankincense Trail and in the region of Arabia near the Red Sea called the Hijaz. This oasis is in the wadi Agharr and was proposed by Potter and Wellington in Lehi in the Wilderness as a result of field work to investigate that portion of Lehi’s trail. They explain that they initially thought it would be easy to find Shazer, knowing that Nephi’s group traveled seventy-five miles (almost certainly with camels) from the Gulf of Aqaba to the proposed site of the Valley of Lemuel in three days. They concluded that the four-day journey from the Valley of Lemuel
to Shazer required simply finding an oasis within 100 miles south-southeast of the Valley of Lemuel. The following passage from Potter and Wellington describes how they located a candidate for Shazer. After initial candidates they explored proved to be too inhospitable to fit Nephi’s description, they continued searching along the Gaza branch of the Frankincense Trail, which passes within about ten miles of the leading candidate for the Valley of Lemuel. The critical clue came when Richard Wellington read an account from a German explorer, Alois Musil, who spoke of an oasis of date palms extending over twenty-five kilometers in the region of Agharr. In nearby Midian they had also been told by the Police General that the best hunting in the entire area was in the mountains of Agharr. Evidence from old Arab geographers also pointed to Agharr as the first rest-stop after Midian, making it a plausible candidate for Shazer, the halting place of Nephi’s group four days after leaving the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 16:13). Potter and Wellington describe their visit:

Now we had evidence from independent sources that the first rest stop after Midian [modern al Bada’a] on the ancient Gaza branch of the Frankincense Trail was in a fertile valley with trees, wadi Agharr, and the surrounding mountains presented the best hunting opportunities along the trail. The next step was to visit Al-Agharr....

From al Bada’a we headed the sixty miles south-southeast to wadi Agharr and our potential location for Shazer. ... As we reached wadi Agharr ... [t]here was a gap in the mountains where the trail led. Through the gap we could see some palm trees in the wadi. Entering the wadi we were amazed to find an oasis that ran as far as the eye could see both to our left and to our right.

Wadi Agharr was exactly as Musil had described — fields of vegetables and plantations of palms stretching for miles. It is a narrow valley, perhaps one hundred yards across, bounded on each side by high walls stretching up a few hundred feet. “Shazer” was certainly an apt description for this location — a valley with trees, set amid the barren landscape of Midian. Here, after three years of fruitless searching, systematically visiting all the wells in a seventy-five mile radius of wadi Tayyab al Ism, we had finally found Shazer.
[The authors then discuss the presence of “Midianite” archaeological sites in the region, dating to the late second to mid-first millennium BC, suggesting that the valley was fertile anciently.]

On a later expedition we returned to Shazer and drove up into the mountains in the area we thought the men of Lehi’s party would have gone to hunt. We spoke with Bedouins who lived in the upper end of wadi Agharr who told us that Ibex lived in the mountains and they still hunted them there. We were reminded of the words of the Greek Agatharkides of Cnidos who called this area anciently the territory of Bythemani. According to Agatharkides, “The country is full of wild camels, as well as of flocks of deer, gazelles, sheep, mules, and oxen ... and by it dwell the Batmizomaneis who hunt land animals.” It may have been these very animals that Lehi and his sons went out to hunt.

Here at wadi Agharr is a site that perfectly matches Nephi’s Shazer. It probably has the best hunting along the entire Frankincense Trail. It is the first place travelers would have been allowed to stop and pitch tents south of Midian, and as the Book of Mormon states, it is a four days’ journey from the Valley of Lemuel (1 Ne. 16:13).

Their candidate for Shazer is a plausible four days’ journey away from their stunning candidate for the Valley of Lemuel and River Laman. If this is Shazer, it would seem that Nephi’s group quickly returned to the Frankincense Trail, perhaps backtracking out of the Valley of Lemuel for several miles to reach the main trail again before continuing their “nearly south-southeast direction” toward Shazer, about sixty miles south-southeast from Al Bada’a or ancient Midian.

In addition to the large oasis at Wadi Agharr (also known as Wadi Sharmah), another large oasis at al-Muwaylih has been proposed as a candidate for Shazer.

Potter and Wellington offer much more as they retrace Nephi’s journey. For example, after Shazer, Nephi writes that they traveled through the “most fertile parts” (1 Nephi 16:14) and then subsequently through “more fertile parts” that can be understood to be less fertile than the “most fertile” parts. These fertile regions were encountered before they turned due east, which began the most difficult part of their journey. Along the ancient incense trail, continuing just after Shazer until
Medina, one encounters a region of the Hijaz called Qura Arabiyyah or “the Arab Villages” which are described by Arabs as the “fertile parts” of the land. It is the part of the trail with the highest concentration of farms and rest stops for caravans, and fits the Book of Mormon description. After Medina, there are fewer farms, but still enough fertile places to be called “the more fertile parts.” Knowledge of these many fertile regions in the midst of the barren Arabian Peninsula was largely hidden from the west until recently. These are rare and unusual places in the Arabian Peninsula. Could Joseph have learned of them on his own?

**Evidence that Gets No Respect**

For many students of the Book of Mormon, the evidence for Nahom has been particularly interesting because it has been buttressed with recent archaeological finds. Three altars from Lehi’s day have been unearthed in Marib bearing identical inscriptions mentioning the ancient Nihm tribe whose name has the NHM consonants of the Semitic name Nahom. The NHM names in the region of Nahom are linked to the tribe which has been in the area for at least 2,800 years. Marib is seventy miles east of Sana’a and outside the current region of the Nihm tribe but could have been included within its tribal boundaries anciently or could have been the nearest sacred site for a major donation from a wealthy Nihm tribesman.

The Nahom region is located exactly where one can turn eastward to reach excellent candidates for Bountiful. The evidence from geography and an Arabian NHM-name putting Nahom in precisely the right area to correspond with the Book of Mormon demands respect.

Naturally, there are many issues where further work is needed to resolve questions or debate. For example, while LDS researchers generally agree that Khor Kharfot is a highly plausible candidate for Bountiful, Potter and Wellington advocate a different site, Khor Rori, still in the same general area. There is debate about which route was used shortly before reaching Nahom, and debate about whether the route after Nahom went directly eastward or southeast for a while before getting back on the eastward tack. But these are minor issues compared to the big picture.

For many Latter-day Saints, the Arabian Peninsula evidence has been some of the most remarkable evidence supporting Book of Mormon authenticity. At least with respect to the Arabian journey given in 1 Nephi, the case for Joseph fabricating the text seems strongly challenged, but the evidence gets no respect. It raises the question of just
what would it take for evidence anywhere to rise to the level of counting as actual evidence in favor of plausibility. For some critics, the Arabian evidence, as we shall see, counts for nothing.

The Critics Respond, Round One

After presentation of the basic evidence from the Arabian Peninsula, the old arguments like “there never was such a river” and “Bountiful cannot possibly exist” required a facelift. The initial response of critics was to nitpick by noting lack of consensus on details of the trail or suggesting that Nihm or Nehem only share three letters of five in Nahom. Some efforts sought to minimalize the whole body of evidence into a single point and then dismiss it. Thus, one critic, Chris Johnson, gave a video presentation at an ex-Mormon conference in which he compressed the Arabian evidence into the finding of Nahom seemingly “at the right place” in Arabia. Recognizing that Nahom in Hebrew was just NHM, he raised the question as to how significant it is to find a name with those three consonants, or rather, how significant it was for Joseph Smith to guess the existence of a place name using NHM. He then provided a list of many other names from around the world he had found through computer-aided searching showing that NHM-names were so common that the NHM finding in Arabia was without significance. In fact, he even claimed that NHM-based names were “some of the most common” of any three-letter grouping of consonants.

Apart from the terrible logic of reducing the Arabian evidence to just three letters, and thinking that finding those letters in, say, Europe, Africa, or North America was somehow relevant to the significance of finding Nahom in the right place in the Arabian Peninsula, what made this attack particularly amusing was what I discovered when I pried into his prize list of NHM names. If NHM names are common all over the world, as Johnson argued, then we should expect to find them without great difficulty. The scattered examples he offers, however, reflect strenuous searching among minutiae with a powerful lens. For example, Nhema, Zimbabwe appears to be no more than a modern street, Nhema Close, only about 150 meters long, in the eastern suburbs of Harare. If this level of granularity is needed to come up with a handful of NHM names, it’s hard to seriously maintain that they are abundant and common. Several of the names don’t appear to exist or have any substance to them. Among ones that do seem to exist, Nhime, Angola appears to be merely an obscure beach, possibly with a village nearby. Nahum in Israel, was a kibbitz founded in the twentieth century. Tiny Nahma, Michigan with
a population under five hundred was founded in 1881. Noham, Iran has a population of one hundred eighty-six. The majority of his examples are not only insignificant in our day, but were generally nonexistent in Joseph Smith’s day or at least not able to have served as inspiration for Nahom, though Johnson is not arguing plagiarism but rather that finding an NHM name somewhere is not significant because there are so many of them.

The real issue, however, is whether NHM names are common in the Arabian Peninsula. They are not. NHM names are rare in Arabia, past or present, and finding one in a plausible location in Yemen counts for far more than Johnson is willing to admit.\(^\text{180}\)

The generally weak and casual response by critics has been ramped up considerably now, as we see in the arguments of Jenkins and RT, particularly with the theory that Lehi’s Trail can be explained with a map or two, which is the topic of our next section in Part 2 of this article.

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Endnotes


4 RT, “Part 1.”

Jenkins, “The Nahom Follies.”


Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance” in Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 113–17; http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1081&index=3. Chadwick also observes that if Lehi and his sons had already made this trip several times for mining purposes, the boys would be able to find their way back and
forth without the need for a Liahona or other special assistance, consistent with the text.


17 Ibid., 363.

18 Heide also sets a noteworthy example in taking ancient texts seriously as sources to be considered, not dismissed, when he says: “If we suppose that all references to camels in Genesis are the outcome of a later elaboration of the text [as some scholars do] we will not gain any new insight into the question of the camel’s domestication from Genesis.” See Ibid., 363.


review-temple-mysticism-an-introduction-by-margaret-barker/ and Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom.”


24 Ibid., 101.


28 Ibid., 96.

29 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1998), 32–33; https://books.google.com/books?id=bfsuicMmrE0C&pg=PA32. Scheindlin writes that “Judean authorities attempted to regulate the religious practices of Elephantine, but they do not seem to have attempted to shut down


33 Ibid., 6.


40 Ibid., 65. See also 66.

41 Ibid., 52.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.


45 Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 53.

46 Ibid., 53.


51 Ibid., 208.
52 Ibid., 217.
57 Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 38–39.
Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Kindle edition, Part 4, section “‘Nearly Eastward’ Toward the Coast.” Also see the topographical map in Part 4, section “Nephi’s Directional Accuracy.”

Ibid., Part 5, section “Nephi’s Paradigm Applied to the Candidates for Bountiful,” subsection “Khor Kharfot, Oman.”

Ibid.

See *Lehi in Arabia*, DVD, directed by Chad Aston.


Ibid., Part 4, section “‘Nearly Eastward’ Toward the Coast.”

Ibid., Part 2, section “‘Up to’ and ‘down from’ Jerusalem.”


Ibid.

Ibid.

E.g., *yeshiymown*, ibid., translated as “wilderness” in Deuteronomy 32:10 and Psalm 68:7.


87 See the Gesenius’ *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon* entries for both roots, Strong’s H5162 and Strong’s H5098, Blue Letter Bible.


90 Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen.” Also see Aston, “The History of NaHoM.”

91 Aston, “The Origins of the Nihm Tribe of Yemen.”

92 Ibid.

93 Further examples of word plays are given in Jeff Lindsay, “Book of Mormon Evidences, Part Two,” JeffLindsay.com, http://www.jefflindsay.com/BMEvidences2.shtml.

94 Gilbert J. Hunt, *The late war, between the United States and Great Britain, from June 1812, to February 1815: written in the ancient historical style* (New York: Daniel D. Smith, 1819); https://archive.org/details/latewarbetweenun00inhunt. (Note that there is an 1816 printing also at Archive.org with different pagination.)

96 The need for men to protect “tender women” from abuse is found in Hunt, *The Late War*, at 81 (21:38), which is balanced by another reference on that page to weak men (21:42). Some women and children also cry when their homes are burned at 78 (21:12–13), but the women generally cry no more often than the men do (see Hunt at 24, 26, 107, 219).

97 Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Kindle edition, Part 3, sections “Ishmael’s Death,” “Nahom Today,” and “Where the Jews Once Part of the Tribe,” where Aston notes the importance of Jewish burial traditions and the possibility of assistance from local Jews and the fact that Jewish burials in Yemen are attested no later than 300 bc See also Part 1, section “Religion in Arabia,” where Aston notes Yemeni Jewish traditions of seven ancient Jewish migrations into Yemen. Further, there is evidence that Jewish traders and merchants were interacting with Yemen before Lehi’s era and a Yemeni Jewish tradition of families migrating from Jerusalem about 629 bc Related information about the many accounts of ancient Jewish immigrants in Yemen is also provided in “Yemenite Jews,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemenite_Jews#Early_history, accessed March 5, 2016.


110 Book of Mormon Central is at http://www.bookofmormoncentral.org/.


117 Potter and Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness*.

118 For a discussion of several candidates, see S. Kent Brown, “The Hunt for the Valley of Lemuel,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*


121 Strong’s H5162, Blue Letter Bible.


124 Ibid., 19–21.


134 Aston, Lehi and Sariah in Arabia, Part 5, section “Nephi’s Paradigm Applied to the Candidates for Bountiful,” subsection “Khor Kharfot, Oman.”

135 Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 34–36.


137 Aston, Lehi and Sariah in Arabia.

shortcut: http://tinyurl.com/arabianevidence3. A primary problem with other candidates, in contrast to the unique and impressive fertility at Khor Kharfot, is their dryness and particularly the lack of trees and native fruit (the presence of modern fruit sustained by irrigation is not evidence of ancient fertility). See also Warren Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 2015, Part 6.


140 Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Kindle edition, Part 4, “Travel Nearly Eastward From That Time Forth,” especially the sections “The Irrelevance of the Trade Route after Nahom” and “’Nearly Eastward’ Toward the Coast.”

141 For example, see the map of Nigel Groom, “Sketch of Southwest Arabia,” *Royal Geographic Society*, London, 1976, a portion of which is reproduced in Aston and Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi*, 1994, 24.


143 Ibid.

144 Aston provides a photo of a water pool on the Mahra plateau east of Nahom left after a rain storm from “months previously” as a clue to how Lehi’s group survived. *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Kindle edition, Part 4, section “Mixed Blessings in the Wilderness.”


146 From Hadden, “The Geology of Yemen.”

147 *Lehi in Arabia*, DVD, directed by Chad Aston (Brisbane, Australia: Aston Productions, 2015) at 57:35–40 and especially 1:07:01–52.


Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 39.

Chadwick, “The Wrong Place for Lehi’s Trail and the Valley of Lemuel,” 209, 212–214.


Potter and Wellington, Lehi in the Wilderness, 3.


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google.com/books?id=E0ZhAAAAcAAJ&pg=PA882. On this page also note shajra and ashjar are related to the concept of an abundance of trees.


166 “Shazer,” *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*.


For example, if \textit{shajir} were connected to \textit{segor} (per Nibley, \textit{Lehi in the Desert}, 90) or \textit{sager} (per RT, “Part 1”) while being pronounced \textit{shazher} in some dialects (per Nibley), perhaps there could be a further connection to the Hebrew word transliterated as \textit{segôr} or \textit{cĕgowr} (Strong’s H5458, רֹגְס, see Strong’s H5458, Blue Letter Bible, \url{https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/Lexicon/Lexicon.cfm?strongs=H5458&t=KJV}), which is related to Egyptian \textit{sg3r}, both with the meaning of “enclosure” (see James K. Hoffmeier, \textit{Israel in Egypt: The Evidences for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition} (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 179; \url{https://books.google.com/books?id=CT_lHTEcL6gC&pg=PA179}). In that case, Nephi’s knowledge of Egyptian language or scribal techniques coupled with his transliteration of a local word related to \textit{shajir} may have caused his selection or coinage of “Shazer” to suggest an enclosure (\textit{segor}) formed by trees (\textit{shajer}). This is simply amateur speculation, however, and the issues with the two sibilants may deserve vigorous objections. The problem of the name Shazer remains unsettled.

\begin{itemize}
\item[171] Potter and Wellington, \textit{Lehi in the Wilderness}, 73.
\item[172] Alois Musil, \textit{Northern Hijaz — A Topographical Itinerary}, published under the patronage of the Czech Academy of Arts and Sciences and of Charles R. Crane, 1926, 303, as cited by Potter and Wellington, \textit{Lehi in the Wilderness}, 76–78.
\item[173] Potter and Wellington, \textit{Lehi in the Wilderness}, 74, 76–78.
\item[175] See Potter and Wellington, \textit{Lehi in the Wilderness}, 82–92, which includes excellent photos and a satellite map.
\item[176] Chris Johnson, “How the Book of Mormon Destroyed Mormonism,” 2013 presentation in Salt Lake City, YouTube; \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAGasQ7j_ZI}, see especially 6:50 to 7:50. The video contains highly derogatory treatment of Church leaders. For a response to the bulk of Johnson’s presentation claiming to have found a key source for the Book of Mormon fabrication, see Benjamin L. McGuire, “The Late War Against the Book of Mormon,” \textit{Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon}


MORMONISM AT OXFORD AND WHAT IT SIGNIFIES

Stephen O. Smoot


Abstract: The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism is a welcomed addition to the current scholarly discussion surrounding the history, theology, and culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It should be read and studied by all interested students in Mormonism and signals that the scriptures, theology, and history of the Latter-day Saints are all increasingly being taken seriously in mainstream academia.

Should one take Mormonism seriously as a theological, philosophical, or metaphysical system? As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sets itself on a twenty-first century trajectory, this question is increasingly being asked by scholarly and lay observers of things Mormon. The “Mormon Moment” that attended Mitt Romney’s unsuccessful bid for the presidency of the United States in 2012 has come and gone, but informed writers are still talking and publishing about Mormon history and theology in both popular and academic venues. Taylor Petrey, writing some four years ago during the height of the Mormon Moment, insightfully blogged on what he perceived as a fundamental problem facing public discourse on Mormonism. He writes,

The trotting out of apparently ridiculous Mormon ideas is evidence of just how little Americans really understand religion. Religious people of all stripes should be concerned with the way Mormonism is portrayed because it reveals the
inability of people to ask the right kind of questions about religion and to discern how religious people construct their worlds. Discussion of Mormonism in the media tends to reveal the fundamentally unethical way that Americans think about religion, engaging in reductionism, decontextualization, and stereotyping.¹

Petrey’s point is easily illustrated. It is easy enough to pick apart any given religion when you portray that religion in a prejudicial or stereotypical manner. One must look no further than the satirical (as well as sacrilegious and racist) musical *The Book of Mormon* or Bill Maher’s (allegedly funny) documentary *Religulous* to see just how easy (and profitable) it is to do such in the largely secular West. But for those mature enough to “put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11), there are much better ways to discuss Mormon history and metaphysics than by turning to trashy cartoon producers and two-bit comedians.

One such way is to crack open a new book edited by Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow, two eminent authorities on religious studies in general and Mormonism in particular. Published late last year, *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* offers a rich compendium of engaging treatments of Mormon history, scripture, theology, sociology, and culture written by some of the finest contemporary scholars of Mormonism.² The book is divided into eight parts: History of Mormonism, Revelation and Scripture, Ecclesiastical Structure and Praxis, Mormon Thought, Mormon Society, Mormon Culture, The International Church, and Mormonism in the World Community. Each section includes several articles pertaining to that category. The part on Revelation and Scripture, for example, contains essays on “Joseph Smith and His Visions” (Richard Bushman, pp. 109–120), “Mormons and the Bible” (Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, pp. 121–133), “The Book of Mormon” (Grant Hardy, pp. 134–148), and “Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism” (David F. Holland, pp. 149–163). Each article contains a helpful bibliography for students to pursue the given subject further.³


3 For instance, Grant Hardy’s bibliography on the Book of Mormon (pp. 147–148) recommends, among others, such titles published by the Foundation
At least two articles in the book are worth highlighting as examples of the strength of the available offerings: the contributions of James E. Faulconer (“The Mormon Temple and Mormon Ritual,” pp. 196–208) and Kathryn M. Daynes (“Celestial Marriage (Eternal and Plural),” pp. 334–348). Both articles are fair in their respective presentations of these two aspects of Mormon theology. Writing for a primarily non-Mormon audience most likely unfamiliar with Mormon theology, Faulconer and Daynes were wise to avoid a purely devotional representation of their topics, while also maintaining a level of even-handedness given the controversy that surrounds them. This they both succeeded in doing. Writing on the Mormon reluctance to discuss the details of temple ordinances, which can be alienating for non-Mormons, for example, Faulconer explains,

If asked about the temple ritual, Mormons are likely to say that it is “sacred not secret.” Though that way of talking about temple worship is understandable, it is unintentionally inaccurate. LDS scripture says, “That which cometh from above is sacred, and must be spoken of with care, and by constraint of the Spirit” (D&C 63:64). Mormons understand the temple rite from that perspective, as something that comes from above. So the temple is secret because it is sacred: it is sacred in that it is a knowledge set apart from other kinds of knowledge and treated differently; it is secret in that the temple and other kinds of knowledge differ at least in that the former is not to be revealed to the uninitiated. (p. 199, emphasis in original)

For her part, Daynes admirably steps away from the sensationalism and luridness found in more polemical treatments of Mormon plural marriage. She confines her treatment to essentially a straightforward recounting of the history of plural marriage, its implementation and eventual decline and abandonment by the main body of Latter-day Saints, and the theological underpinnings and social outcomes of the practice. As must be with any worthwhile discussion of Mormon polygamy, Daynes is nuanced in her treatment, as evidenced in her concluding paragraph:

Polygamous societies differ from each other, just as polygamous marriages do. Polygamy is not a marriage system; it is a category encompassing many different marriage systems. Rules, traditions, and practices vary between groups and change over time. Living in plural marriage among the Apostolic United Brethren is a considerably different experience from living among the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints, and both differ from the Mormon experience in the nineteenth century. Each is shaped not only by ideas and practices within the group but also by the groups’ relationship to the surrounding society. Generalizations and assumptions of similarity between various groups practicing polygamy are thus often misleading. Moreover, mainstream Mormons have retained the original revelation on celestial marriage but tied it to its strictly monogamous marriage system. (pp. 345–346)

Besides being informative in its own right, what Daynes offers in her article is a welcome corrective to much of the misleading and often wildly irresponsible material on the history of Mormon polygamy that is uncritically passed around these days online and in print.

There is much to be commended in the sort of approach advocated by Petrey and manifest in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. “There is no doubt that public discussions of Mormonism will remain interested in difficult issues from its past, including polygamy and its history of excluding people of African descent from priesthood leadership; and its present, including excluding women from priesthood ordination and its teachings about homosexuality,” he acknowledges. However, “Rather than focus solely on these more problematic and controversial aspects, we might practice an attentiveness toward Mormonism as a paradigm for thinking about religion more broadly, to articulate Mormonism as offering a persuasive evaluation (for some) of human situations.” Petrey therefore recommends,

The questions that we should be asking, and Mormons should be answering: How does Mormonism handle the big questions? What is the meaning of life, of death, of the terrible and the good in the world? How do Mormon notions about the cosmos affect ethical decisions toward others? What do Mormon narratives about the past and the present offer their adherents? These are not simple questions, and the answers
are not simple either. To discuss them at all is a serious endeavor."

It is a serious endeavor, and one that should be taken seriously. To that end, I strongly endorse *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*. On balance it is a serious (and successful) attempt to talk about Mormonism in a productive and meaningful manner. As a fair warning to those who may be hesitant to purchase such an expensive book, much of the content in this volume will not be new to informed students of Mormonism. There’s very little in the book that I, at least, perceived as new or groundbreaking, with most of the material deriving from each author’s published oeuvre. (Or so the case is with those contributors whose work I’m familiar with.) This isn’t to criticize the book but merely to make clear what any potential reader will be getting into by picking up the volume.

Returning to the question asked at the beginning of this review, what is significant about *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* perhaps isn’t so much what it says as what it signifies. It signifies that Mormonism as a theological, historical, and philosophical phenomenon should and is indeed being taken seriously in academia. Perhaps it is not being taken as seriously as other religious movements with longer, more venerable historical or theological pedigrees, but it is being taken seriously nonetheless.

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4 Petrey, “Is Mormonism Ridiculous?”

5 This is essentially acknowledged by Givens and Barlow at the outset of the book, who write, “In the present collection, no attempt is made to provide comprehensive coverage of this field coming to be called Mormon Studies. The *Handbook* is not an encyclopedia. … What the editors have attempt to do is provide a number of chapters by leading scholars in their fields, to convey the range of disciplines and subjects where Mormonism might enrich and recontextualize any number of academic conversations” (p. 3).
Abstract: The Arabian Peninsula has provided a significant body of evidence related to the plausibility of Nephi’s account of the ancient journey made by Lehi’s family across Arabia. Relatively few critics have seriously considered the evidence, generally nitpicking at details and insisting that the evidences are insignificant. Recently more meaningful responses have been offered by well educated writers showing familiarity with the Arabian evidences and the Book of Mormon. They argue that Nephi’s account is not historical and any apparent evidence in its favor can be attributed to weak LDS apologetics coupled with Joseph’s use of modern sources such as a detailed map of Arabia that could provide the name Nahom, for example. Further, the entire body of Arabian evidence for the Book of Mormon is said to be irrelevant because Nephi’s subtle and pervasive incorporation of Exodus themes in his account proves the Book of Mormon is fiction. On this point we are to trust modern Bible scholarship (“Higher Criticism”) which allegedly shows that the book of Exodus wasn’t written until long after Nephi’s day and, in fact, tells a story that is mere pious fiction, fabricated during or after the Exile.

There were high-end European maps in Joseph’s day that did show a place name related to Nahom. Efforts to locate these maps anywhere near Joseph Smith have thus far proved unsuccessful. But the greater failure is in the explanatory power of any theory that posits Joseph used such a map. Such theories do not account for the vast majority of impressive evidences for the plausibility of Nephi’s account of the journey through Arabia (e.g., remarkable candidates for Bountiful and the River Laman, the plausibility of the eastward turn after Nahom). They do not explain why one obscure name among hundreds was plagiarized — a name that would have the good fortune of later being verified as a genuine ancient tribal name present in the right region in Lehi’s day. More importantly, theories of fabrication
based on modern maps ignore the fact that Joseph and his peers never took advantage of the impressive Book of Mormon evidence that was waiting to be discovered on such maps. That discovery would not come until 1978, and it has led to many remarkable finds through modern field work since then. Through ever better maps, exploration, archaeological work, and other scholarly work, our knowledge of the Arabian Peninsula has grown dramatically from Joseph’s day. Through all of this, not one detail in the account of Lehi’s Trail has been invalidated, though questions remain and much further work needs to be done. Importantly, aspects that were long ridiculed have become evidences for the Book of Mormon. There is a trend here that demands respect, and no mere map from Joseph’s day or even ours can account for this.

As for the Exodus-based attack, yes, many modern scholars deny that the Exodus ever happened and believe the story was fabricated as pious fiction well after 600 BC. But this conclusion does not represent a true consensus and is not free from bias and blindness. The Exodus-based attack on the Book of Mormon ultimately is a case where a weakness in biblical evidence from Egypt is used to challenge the strength of Book of Mormon evidence from Egypt’s neighbor to the east, the Arabian Peninsula. We will see that there are good reasons for the absence of evidence from Egypt, and yet abundant evidence that the Exodus material interwoven in Nephi’s account could have been found on the brass plates by 600 BC. The absence of archaeological evidence for Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the chaos in the many schools of modern biblical scholarship do not trump hard archaeological, geographical, and other evidence from the Arabian Peninsula regarding Lehi’s exodus.

We will see that some of the most significant strengths of the Book of Mormon have not been turned into weaknesses. Indeed, the evidence from Arabia continues to grow and demands consideration from those willing to maintain an open mind and exercise a particle of faith.

III. The Quest for the Dream Map

The Dream Map Theory

In Part 3 of RT’s series at Faith Promoting Rumor, RT concludes that the most interesting evidences from Arabia must be explainable by natural means and proposes that Joseph must have had access to a map to guide his description of Nephi’s journey. Dr. Phillip Jenkins takes a similar stance on his blog. This leads to two questions for consideration here: (1) Can any map in Joseph’s day provide the information he would have
needed to fabricate the description of Lehi’s journey, with the apparent evidences for authenticity that have excited so many Latter-day Saints? If so, then (2) is it plausible that Joseph had access to such a map and used it in crafting the Book of Mormon?

With “direct hits” from the Arabian Peninsula being impressive enough, at least to some of us Mormons, to make blind luck seem like a rather miraculous foundation for theories of non-miraculous origins, some critics are naturally seeking materials from Joseph’s day that could have been gleaned for guidance in writing the description of Lehi’s journey. Since forms of Nehem were on some European maps predating the Book of Mormon, perhaps Nahom can be explained by Joseph having studied or at least glanced at a map. Perhaps the entire story could have been inspired by a map.

Jenkins instructively shows how simple it can be to lose sight of Nahom and the entire corpus of Arabian-related evidence. It is as simple as showing that Carsten Niebuhr published a 1792 book with a map showing “Nehhm” on it (this is presented as an important discovery that threatens the Mormon position, when it has been a vital part of what Mormons like Warren Aston have presented for many years). And sure enough, maps or works from Carsten Niebuhr, according to a link provided by Jenkins, are listed right in Joseph’s vicinity, over at Allegheny College, Pennsylvania,183 or in the Medical Library of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia.184 Here I define “vicinity” somewhat broadly, for Allegheny College is over two hundred miles away from Palmyra, New York, where the Book of Mormon project started, or over three hundred miles from Harmony Township, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania (not modern Harmony, Pennsylvania, which is much closer — Joseph’s Harmony is near the border with New York),185 where Joseph went to escape persecution and do the actual translation before returning to Palmyra to publish it. Philadelphia is closer to Harmony but still one hundred seventy miles away — arguably not close enough for a quick Saturday afternoon visit to the library to help plagiarize a place name.

At Allegheny Library, one of the largest and most celebrated libraries in the United States at that time, Joseph could have viewed Niebuhr’s Travels Through Arabia and Other Countries in the East186 which features a map of Yemen, to be discussed and shown below, containing the name “Nehhm.” At the Medical Library of Pennsylvania Hospital, now the library of the Philadelphia College of Physicians,187 Joseph could have accessed a French translation of one of Niebuhr’s works, Voyage en
Arabie,188 which features a version of his map of Yemen that, yes, shows “Nehhm.” In fact, this map appears to display a smaller section of Yemen that puts Nehhm more prominently at the top of the map. Whether this map could account for anything else on Lehi’s trail will be discussed below as we consider several candidate maps.

The presence of “Nehhm” or its variants on some early maps printed in Europe is “damning” evidence, according to Jenkins, and forces us to the conclusion that Joseph almost certainly got Nahom from a map:

The map evidence makes it virtually certain that Smith encountered and appropriated such a reference, and added the name as local color in the Book of Mormon.

Some European maps certainly circulated in the US, and the ones we know about are presumably the tip of a substantial iceberg. I have not tried to survey of all the derivative British, French and US maps of Arabia and the Middle East that would have been available in the north-eastern US at this time, to check whether they included a NHM name in these parts of Arabia. Following the US involvement against North African states in the early nineteenth century, together with Napoleon’s wars in the Middle East, I would assume that publishers and mapmakers would produce works to respond to public demand and curiosity.

So might Joseph Smith have looked at a map in a bookstore, been given one by a friend, seen one in a neighbor’s house, discussed one with a traveler, or even bought one? After all, there is one thing we know for certain about the man, which is that he had a lifelong fascination with the “Oriental,” with Hebrew, with Egypt, with hieroglyphics, with his “Reformed Egyptian.” He would have sought out books and maps by any means possible. … No, no, I’m sorry to suggest anything so far-fetched. It’s far more likely, is it not, that he was visited by an angel, and discovered gold plates filled with total bogus misinformation in everything they say about the Americas, but with one vaguely plausible site in Arabia. Ockham’s Razor would demand that.

And yes, I’m joking. [emphasis mine]

The mature Joseph, after translating the Book of Mormon and having many revelations and other experiences, indeed shows a fascination with the antiquities, as we also should. But that’s not the young boy his mother knew, the unschooled farm boy whom she described as “much less inclined
to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children.” In his earliest history written in 1832, Joseph wrote:

It required the exertions of all that were able to render any assistance for the support of the Family therefore we were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was mearly instructid in reading writing and the ground rules of Arithmatic which const[it]uted my whole literary acquirements.

Joseph was not a bookworm and had little time for books, maps, and research before dictating the Book of Mormon at a remarkable rate. He didn’t even have a manuscript with him as he verbally dictated the text to his scribes. If he sought out books and maps, where were they? How did he use them?

If Joseph had a map, how did he use it and why? To be credible, the Dream Map Theory needs to somehow be part of a plausible theory of Book of Mormon fabrication. Adding local color? To this day, almost nobody except a few Mormon apologists and their readers have heard of Nahom in Arabia, so this obscure place certainly doesn’t count for adding local color. Most maps of Arabia in Joseph’s day, like those of our day, did not show Nehem, so it would not be recognized by the general population.

In terms of the overall theory of how Joseph fabricated the book, why would a plagiarist ignore all the abundant details on the map that could have been helpful, and, with the exception of the direction of the Frankincense Trail and the name Nahom/Nehem, instead tell us stories in places that aren’t shown — the River Laman, the Valley of Lemuel, the place Shazer, the camp of the broken bow, and Bountiful? Each of those was a shot in the dark without evidence of being extractable from a map. The Dream Map Theory does not lead to Bountiful nor to the River Laman and the place Bountiful, places that were mocked by educated anti-Mormons for decades, right up until field work established surprising confirmation of their plausibility — and now we are supposed to wipe that smile off our faces and admit that yes, it’s all there, easily derived from a passing glance at some magical “dream map” that the voracious student Joseph absolutely must have studied?

By the way, how long would it have taken to “translate” a fraudulent Book of Mormon if Joseph had to pore over books and maps to come up with a made-up concept every verse or two? This question needs to be considered for those who find plagiarism from multiple sources every
few sentences or so in the text, which was generated by oral dictation at a prodigious rate.

Let’s return to the issue of the maps that Joseph might have seen or must have used (depending on your biases) and see how they could have helped Joseph.

A Treasure Trove of European Maps

When James Gee, an LDS businessman, independent researcher and antiquarian map collector, first read about Ross Christensen’s discovery of Nehhm/Nahom on an old map of Yemen from 1771, he began a quest to find an original copperplate print of that map. He reports that it took him many years to find it. Ultimately he also found many more maps that mention a place similar to Nahom. There were also a great many less detailed maps that lacked this minor element.

Gee’s list of Nahom-infused maps, all of which can be viewed in his online publication include:

Map 1. “Asia,” Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville (Paris, 1751). 30″ x 40″

Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville “would become the greatest cartographer of his time.” This was his first map of Asia, published in 1751. It is now viewable online in the David Rumsey collection. Gee observes:

On this large-scale map of Asia, d’Anville prominently locates Nehem in the Arabian Peninsula, just above and to the east of Sana. Although spelled differently than the Nahom in the Book of Mormon, it is pronounced the same. D’Anville’s location of Nehem seems to match Nephi’s description. The fact that d’Anville had Nahom engraved on his map shows that it was important information to those traveling in that area of Arabia because d’Anville had a reputation for providing only important details on his maps.

D’Anville created his map of Arabia based on the records and writings of classical geographers, Arabs, and European travelers. This map excited the European community to learn more about Arabia, and it marks d’Anville “as the last and most important landmark in the old era of Arabian cartography.” D’Anville’s map of Arabia inspired the Danish
to lead an expedition to the area in 1761 to learn more about it and to fill in the details that d’Anville left out.\footnote{197}

**Map 2. “Yemen,” Carsten Niebuhr (Denmark, 1771). 15” x 23”**

Carsten Niebuhr, a Danish explorer, was the sole survivor of a group that went to Sana’a in Yemen. His map of Yemen shows part of the Red Sea and western Yemen, not the entire Arabian Peninsula, making it a poor candidate for use in creating the route for Lehi’s trail. But it does include a version of Nahom. Niebuhr spells d’Anville’s Nehem as *Nehhm*, and, according to Gee, elsewhere noted the difficulty of spelling names due to multiple dialects and indistinct pronunciation in the country. He describes Nehhm as a district (with an area of over 2,000 square miles) that included a mountain and many villages. This shows Nahom was more than just a burial place or tribal name. A much smaller single color version of this map was printed in Niebuhr’s 1792 book that was, for example, at the library of Allegheny College.\footnote{198}

**Map 3. “Asia,” d’Anville, Revised and Improved by Mr. Bolton (London, 1755). 31” x 30”**

Gee observes that this map is used in place of d’Anville’s rare 1751 map in a number of books. It also uses the spelling, *Nehem*.\footnote{199}

**Map 4. “Asia,” d’Anville, F. A. Schraembl (Austria, 1786). 30” x 40”**

**Map 5. “Arabia,” Rigobert Bonne (Paris, 1787). 14” x 10”**

Nahom is spelled *Nehem* here. This map is available online in the David Rumsey collection.\footnote{200}


**Map 7. “New Modern Map of Arabia,” D’Anville, with Improvements by Niebuhr, Published by Laurie & Whittle (London, 1794). 24.5” x 19.5”**

In 1794 Robert Laurie and James Whittle published a guide for travelers in the Middle East called “The Oriental Navigator.” In that publication they printed a beautiful map of Arabia, the “New Modern Map of Arabia.” They used d’Anville’s spelling for Nahom. Available in the David Rumsey collection\footnote{201} and also at the World Digital Library (wdl.org).\footnote{202}

A very detailed map that features Nehem, though the lengthy mountain range to its west makes it appear difficult for Frankincense Trail travelers to reach. Available at DavidRumsey.com.203


A map showing Nehem and trails near the coast of the Red Sea and the Frankincense Trail.204


All of these maps are visible in the large PDF document from James Gee,205 and most of these are available individually at the David Rumsey Collection (DavidRumsey.com); some are also available at the World Digital Library (wdl.org), Archive.org, and various sites for map collectors and antique documents.206

What Do the Maps Tell Us? What Could They Tell Joseph?
The issue of what Joseph might have actually known about Arabian geography is a difficult one because of the complete lack of evidence that he saw or even was anywhere near any of the most useful maps. Before we stretch too far, let’s start with the simple foundation that other critics have long given us. Joseph might have known something about Arabia from books and, yes, maps that were known in his region. This was explained to me long ago by a critic who challenged my Book of Mormon evidences page regarding the Arabian evidence.

That critic felt that Jedidiah Morse was the key to Joseph’s knowledge:

You write like an intelligent person. How is it you are still mired in LDS quicksand? Your comments on how Joseph Smith knew so much about the Arabian peninsula is [sic] without merit.

There existed in his time a school book entitled Geography Made Easy, Jedidiah Morse, 1813. Smith lived just 2 miles from Palmyra, New York. Where there were several bookstores and a library. No record of his visit though. He also received regularly the Palmyra Register, and later the Wayne Sentinel. The offices of which served double duty as a library. He had ample access to this information.

Not a very big leap of prophecy. More than a small step.
How do you respond to this fact?!207

When I looked at *Geography Made Easy*,208 I was disappointed. There was a map there, but the only detail is the shape of the peninsula and the name “Arabia,” plus the names of the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. The few lines about Arabia in the text offered scant relief to a young con man struggling to make up details for Lehi’s journey:

[Arabia] is divided into three parts, Arabia Petraea, Arabia Deserta, and Arabia Felix. Arabia Petraea is the smallest of the three, and toward the north is full of mountains, with few inhabitants, on account of its barrenness. … It differs little from Arabia Deserta, so called from the nature of the soil, which is generally a barren land; but there are great flocks of sheep and herds of cattle near the Euphrates, where the land is good. In the desert are great numbers of ostriches, and there is a fine breed of camels in several places. … Arabia Felix is so called on account of its fertility with regard to the rest. … Arabia Felix produces frankincense, myrrh, balm of Gilead, gum Arabic, and coffee, of which latter they export prodigious quantities.209

There is a mention of Mecca and Medina, and that’s it.

Morse gave us more detail elsewhere. He published a map in 1828 showing the Arabian Peninsula (available from the David Rumsey collection of historic maps).210 Though to me it seems to lack any meaningful guidance that could possibly account for the most noteworthy evidences from Arabia, this may be due to my pro-LDS biases. To a more educated, more objective critic, Joseph’s plagiarism might be more evident.
While I am not sure if this map actually arrived anywhere near Joseph, a book with a related map and more detail than *Geography Made Easy* was listed in the Manchester Library, where Joseph theoretically could have gone (though he was not a subscriber to this subscription-based library). Morse’s *The American Universal Geography* has an entire chapter on Arabia and has a black-and-white map of the Eastern Hemisphere at the beginning that appears to have roughly as much detail as the color map of 1828. The small section on geography still offers little that could help Joseph in concocting a journey that would later be found to be vastly more plausible than it seemed. There are more names: Medina, Mecca, Mocha, Suez, Oman, Aden, Yemen, Gehhra, Katif, Merab, Kasim, Maskat, Rostak, Labsa, Seger, Dafar, Hodeida, Faitach, and the leading city of Saana [sic], said to be at the bottom of a mountain called Nikkum (a hint of Nahom?) There is also a description of the terrain:

*Face of the Country.* The general aspect of Arabia presents a central desert of great extent, with a few fertile oases or isles, as in Africa; while the flourishing provinces are those situated on the shores of the sea, which supplies rain sufficient to maintain the vegetation. In Yemen there are mountains of considerable height, but chiefly barren and unwooded; while the temperature and plants form a striking contrast with those of the plains: yet the want of rivers, lakes, and perennial
streams must diffuse ideas of sterility through the Arabian landscape. …

Rivers. In the defect of rivers strictly belonging to Arabia, the Euphrates and Tigris … have been claimed by some geographers. … But in Arabia Proper what are called rivers are mere torrents, which descend from the mountains during the rains, and for a short period afterwards.²¹⁴ Morse also observes that there is little in the way of botany to discuss except “on the western side of the Arabian desert” due to the rivulets that the flow from the mountains that supply plants with moisture.²¹⁵ So if you feel that temporary rivulets from rain in the Western mountains and some vegetation from rain on the seashore is all it took to describe the details of Lehi’s trail, at least you’re in good company with a number of critics. And the “Morse is the Source” theory does have an important advantage over its competitors: given the widespread availability of Morse, we don’t have to speculate about rare and costly European maps or exotic atlases floating down the Erie Canal into Joseph’s hands. At least some of Morse’s works treating Arabia were nearby. He could have held it in his hands, seen it with his own eyes, and stolen from it at leisure, if he were so motivated.

But to me, there doesn’t seem to be much guidance given as to how one goes from Jerusalem to Bountiful, or where Bountiful is. And why not use the many details Morse provides, like place names and, naturally, the hordes of ostriches one encounters when traveling through Arabia?

Morse’s map, sadly, fails to give guidance regarding Nahom, though I have to wonder if the presence of the Nihm tribe not far north of Sana’a could be related to the Nikkum mountain said to be next to it. Morse and other nineteenth-century sources quote Niebuhr about a mountain named Nikkum being to the east of Sana’a,²¹⁶ and which could have a connection to the territory of Nehem/Nehhm and the Nihm tribe. Perhaps there is a connection, though not one that would clearly guide Joseph. However, it may point to the possibility that Nihm/Nehem was once pronounced, or may still be pronounced in some dialects, with a more guttural H similar to the hard H in the name of the Hebrew prophet Nahum. Had Joseph seen a source with Nikkum, however, he would not likely have recognized a connection between “kk” and the hard H of the Hebrew letter heth for he had not yet had the opportunity to study Hebrew.²¹⁷

Jenkins argues that a map from Carsten Niebuhr’s 1792 book might be a candidate, since there were two libraries that Joseph could have
visited that had a book by Niebuhr on Arabia.\textsuperscript{218} The more distant library at Allegheny College (three hundred twenty miles from Harmony Township, Susquehanna County, or over two hundred miles away from Palmyra) had the book in English, while the closer Philadelphia library, one hundred seventy miles from Harmony Township, had it in French. Yes, in theory, Joseph could have traveled to remote libraries to track down Niebuhr’s work, or perhaps a stranger or friend came through town with a book for the insatiable bookworm to relish. But does Neibuhr’s map help? Here is the printed fold-out map bound inside his 1792 book.

![View of Niebuhr's Map of Yemen, as printed in his 1792 Travels Through Arabia, provided at Archive.org.\textsuperscript{219}](image-url)
Here is a detail showing the region “Nehhm” just below “Bellad” on the right-hand side.

This map would do little for the overall journey and might not readily suggest “Nahom” as a valid place name either, if Joseph were looking for help. Recognizing that travel eastward from Nehhm/Nahom could lead to anything fertile would seem to be difficult with this map, which shows nothing of the eastward coast and doesn’t even have the courtesy to identify the Red Sea on the west (shown instead as the Arabic Gulf). Using Niebuhr’s map, one would be motivated to only head directly south from Nehhm to reach what appears to be a place with a river at Aden. S. Kent Brown made a related observation about the misleading guidance Niebuhr’s map would have provided, for it would instruct a traveler to go south from Nehhm to reach the Hadramaut area, when in fact it is eastward.220

A further problem with Niebuhr’s map was noted by Eugene England, who observed that while Niebuhr’s map shows a littoral zone on the northwest shore of the Red Sea, it gives no clue to the existence of a system of wadis that could provide inspiration for the Valley of Lemuel.221

Clearly Niebuhr’s map of a corner of Arabia just doesn’t qualify as the elusive Dream Map that the critics believe Joseph must have had, though it is the only map that critics have found so far that was physically in
Joseph’s area, though still implausibly far away, as discussed above. Let’s see what other maps might be more plausible candidates.

RT considers the maps that were available and the details that Joseph must have adapted. He identifies two as prime candidates for Joseph’s use:

I have examined a large quantity of maps of Arabia that were circulating in the English world during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and have found only two that would account for multiple features in the Book of Mormon: the 1794 “A New Map of Arabia” by Robert Laurie and James Whittle, which was an English translation of d’Anville’s map with improvements based on the research of Niebuhr, and the 1817 atlas map by Robert Kirkwood, which for the most part seems to follow Laurie and Whittle.222

RT favors two maps: Map #7 in Gee’s list above, the Laurie and Whittle map, and a map not reported by Gee from Robert Kirkwood, also available in the Rumsey collection.223 Both are very similar. For the Kirkwood map, however, the publisher’s note at DavidRumsey.com tells us of its rarity:

Pub Note:
Rare atlas, also pub. by Wm. Faden & John Smith. Kirkwood engraved some of the maps for Thomson’s General Atlas (Edinburgh, 1817), but we can find no record of this atlas in Phillips, Tooley, Jolly (1983–92) or anywhere else — except for a record of a sale in the Map Collector #42. Kirkwood used A. Arrowsmith’s maps from Pinkerton’s Geography as a base, and enlarged and filled in detail where he could. The result is striking: these maps are more than twice the size of Arrowsmith’s and often carry considerably more detail. Outline color.224

This is a rare map, for which records are exceedingly difficult to find, in contrast to many of the other maps of Arabia. I presume it was also relatively rare in Joseph’s day, but this is uncertain. At a minimum, there is no clear evidence I have seen that this map was accessible to Joseph.

An advantage of the Kirkwood map is that it provides more details about trails, which could have been helpful in describing a path to Aqaba
and then further south, but, as with all other maps considered here, provides no guidance on reaching Nehem, no guidance about turning eastward at Nahom, no hint of the specific place Bountiful, and nothing related to the River Laman and the Valley of Lemuel except for the fact that yes, there are mountains near the Gulf of Aqaba.

Here are relevant portions of the Laurie and Whittle map published in London in 1794 by Laurie and Whittle, based on the work of D’Anville with added material from Niebuhr. It can be viewed in detail at DavidRumsey.com. Here is a portion showing Nehem:

![Nehem detail on the 1794 D'Anville map of Arabia by Laurie and Whittle.](image)

If Joseph saw this, would it not be natural to assume that the mountain range to the west of Nehem would make it difficult for travelers to reach coming from trails closer to the Red Sea?

Zooming out slightly, we can see the small name Dofar on the coast nearly due east of Nahom. Dofar, of course, is Dhofar, the whole southern portion of Oman where both candidates for Bountiful have been found, one at Khor Kharfot (connected to Wadi Sayq), which I find highly plausible, and another slightly further east at Khor Rori, proposed by Potter and Wellington.
Dofar region detail on the 1794 D’Anville map of Arabia by Laurie and Whittle.

Zooming out further, here is more of the map also showing the Red Sea.

Red Sea detail on the 1794 D’Anville map of Arabia.

And the full view:
Zooming in around the Gulf of Aqaba, notice the many details that Joseph could have used to enhance the story:
To make a story that would sell, who could resist adding a touch about Gold Haven, or having a dramatic experience at Mount Horeb? Or revisiting Midian of Biblical fame, or having an episode in Jethro’s Cave? For more fanciful names, why not throw in a touch of Kalaat el Moilah, Eyun-el Karib, or Gebel Iddahab?

Hold on, Gebel Iddahab, at the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba? Could that word Gebel be related to the Hebrew word, gebul, meaning border (as discussed in Part 1 of this paper)? Yes, whether written as jabal, gebel, or gebal, it is the Arabic word for mountains, cognate with the Hebrew for borders, and this map helpfully puts mountains/borders right at the tip of Aqaba, in the region where Nephi would first approach the Red Sea, possibly consistent with Nephi’s account. So this could have been helpful to Joseph, especially if he had already been studying Hebrew and maybe a little Arabic. Of course, his study of Hebrew wouldn’t begin until after the Book of Mormon — but perhaps one can imagine that his technical advisory team included a Near Eastern scholar or two to help with Hebraisms, names, and even maps.

The 1817 Kirkwood map, like the Laurie and Whittle map, features the name Nehem, not as a well or a town, but apparently as a region. As shown below, the Kirkwood map offers the advantage of showing specific trails that could have led Nephi from the Dead Sea to Aqaba (though probably not the trails Lehi took, according to Potter’s analysis). But as shown further below, these trails do not show a path to Nehem, and in fact, reaching it from Aqaba appears to be impeded by a wall of mountains around Nehem. Further, the name Nehem is in small print, about as small as any other minor feature on Kirkwood’s map, and thus hardly would stand out to attract Joseph’s attention. In light of these defects and the rarity of the Kirkwood map, RT’s other leading candidate, the Laurie and Whittle map would seem to be the map of choice in RT’s framework. So far I have not found evidence for it anywhere near Joseph, but that doesn’t mean someone didn’t bring one through town.
Nehem region detail on the Kirkwood map.

Grasping for More than Nahom from the Map?
Recognizing that acquiring just one obscure name like Nahom seems like a fairly sparse harvest of the detailed information present on a high-end
map, RT looks for more evidence of borrowing. Shazer is proposed as an adaptation of the name of the small town Hazire or Hazir listed on some maps. The location could be a four days’ journey from the Valley of Lemuel — if Lehi were driving a Hummer. It’s far too far south to reach with camels in four days. He also argues that Irreantum, the name applied by Nephi’s group and said to mean “many waters” by Nephi as he beheld the grandeur of the ocean, obviously derives from the Erythraen Sea, which on some old maps is shown with its Latin name, Erythraeum.

RT explains:

The conclusion therefore seems inescapable that either Smith had seen the name Erythraeum/Erythrean on a map and recalled it to the best of his ability (or modified it slightly to escape obvious notice) or he had heard it secondhand as the proper name of the Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean in antiquity. Either way, the name demonstrates an interest on the part of Smith in adapting real world place names for the purpose of adding ancient color to the narrative of the Book of Mormon.227

Irre - an - tum has similar letters to Ery - threa - um, though hardly the kind that compels an “inescapable” conclusion of borrowing from a map. The link to Erythrean is even less compelling.

Interestingly, neither of the two maps RT puts forward as his best candidates shows the Erythreaen Sea, much less Erythraeum. Sounds like Joseph needed multiple maps for the job. Or perhaps RT is falling into a bit of parallelomania.

While several potential but speculative origins for Irreantum from Egyptian are proposed in the Book of Mormon Onomasticon,228 RT discounts any Egyptian etymology because most people in Nephi’s group would not have known Egyptian, yet Nephi writes: “And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum” (1 Nephi 17:5). This reading may be overly restrictive and literal. In my reading, the verse does not require that every member of the group simultaneously selected and understood the name. It can simply mean that Lehi gave the name and the group accepted it, perhaps after he explained its significance.

Of the Egyptian etymologies listed at the Book of Mormon Onomasticon, one has recently received new attention in light of its connection to the Egyptian name for the River Orontes in Syria, site of the famous Battle of Kadesh, a battle whose account by the Egyptians appears to have provided significant motifs adapted by the Hebrews in their own Exodus account.229 Of the proposed Egyptian etymologies, Robert F. Smith writes:
The closest to Irreantum is the Egyptian name … for the “Orontes,” the largest river in Syria, site of the great battle of Ramses II against the Hittites, at Qadesh. It is precisely this battle, as described afterward in papyri and monumental inscriptions in Egypt, which provides detailed motifs/tropes used throughout the biblical Exodus account. [The] Israelite Exodus is deliberately reenacted by Clan Lehi as they move through the desert, and their journey ends at Irreantum — just as the Qadesh battle account ends with the Hittites drowning in the Orontes river. As scribes trained in ancient Egyptian, Lehi and Nephi likely read that account of the Battle of Qadesh …, they had the Egyptian Brass Plates, and Nephi certainly knew how to spell “Orontes” in Egyptian.

Nephi or Lehi teaching that story to their group, if they did not already know it, could justify the “we” in “which we called Irreantum.” Of course, RT finds Exodus themes as proof of the fictional nature of the Book of Mormon, a topic we address below. Another problem, as noted in the Onomasticon, is that the proposed etymology “does not account for the doubled r and would we expect another vowel before the r.”

On the other hand, Irreantum may have a plausible meaning of “watering of (super) abundance” if viewed as South Semitic, as discussed by Paul Hoskisson et al. and provided in the Book of Mormon Onomasticon, though RT critiques this on multiple counts with arguments that seem reasonable. If a South Semitic etymology has merit, we await further research to resolve the objections RT raises.

Meanwhile, returning to RT’s confidence that the Erythrean Sea accounts for Irreantum, perhaps we can ask if the choice of that name might have been influenced by what the Greeks called the Red Sea and the Arabian Ocean, Erythra Thalassa? Greek influence was present in the Mediterranean long before Nephi’s day, and perhaps Lehi’s group had heard that name before or during their journey, and found that it resonated with a seemingly suitable South Semitic or Egyptian name they coined or adapted. Perhaps adapting the coined word to fit a related Greek term accounts for some of the problems that can be found in the proposed etymologies. This is mere speculation, but if one insists on seeing “inescapable” evidence of a connection to the Erythrean Sea, the existence of the Greek name before 600 BC might provide an escape for Nephi.
Still seeking for more evidence of Joseph’s intimate knowledge of Arabia from a detailed, high-end European map, RT concludes his post on the maps with an ironic and revealing passage:

Finally, one last piece of evidence that Smith used a map is suggested by the single statement that we have from him outside of the Book of Mormon describing the route taken by Lehi. As editor of the *Times and Seasons*, Smith commented on the discovery of archaeological remains in central America that support the existence of Book of Mormon peoples and in passing summarized the account of their origin: “Lehi went down by the Red Sea to the great Southern Ocean, and crossed over to this land, and landed a little south of the Isthmus of Darien.” Although to some this laconic statement has been taken as proof that Smith could not have composed the complex narrative of the Book of Mormon, to me it suggests that he had a fairly clear mental image of the route through Arabia taken by the group. He speaks of Lehi coming “down by the Red Sea” and then all the way to the “great Southern Ocean,” which can only refer to the Indian Ocean. Launching into the Indian Ocean implies the group had taken a route through Arabia, even though the Book of Mormon narrative is not explicit on this point. In addition, the emphasis on the “great Southern Ocean” matches the accent put on “Irreantum” or “many waters” in the Book of Mormon. Overall, Smith seems to betray a remarkably accurate knowledge of the route taken by Lehi, which he is likely to have gathered in the process of engaging firsthand with a map of Arabia in the construction of the Book of Mormon narrative years before.235

I find this amazing. The Book of Mormon clearly indicates that Nephi turned east, away from the Red Sea, and reaches a great ocean far south of Jerusalem. Joseph gives almost the crudest possible summary of Lehi’s journey from the Red Sea to Bountiful with no mention of the specific places that he allegedly plagiarized to add local color or evidence, or that provide notable evidence today. Simply crossing over from the Red Sea to the ocean — that’s all he had to say about all the details he and his technical advisory team crafted based on his careful consultation with an expensive, high-end European map? And just one statement, when he and his cohorts should have been buying up maps and pointing to the
plausibility of Nephi’s journey long ago — if they had had any clue that verifiable details were present in the account?

As simple, vague, and unspecific as Joseph’s single statement is, RT claims that it “betrays” a “remarkably accurate knowledge of the route” which he likely gathered from firsthand examination of a map of Arabia. This, from the same author who repeatedly dismisses Nephi’s account as vague and general, when in fact it is rich with details in terms of directions (“south-southeast” and “nearly due east”), distances (a three-day journey and a four-day journey), and geographical details (borders “near” and “nearer” the Red Sea, the River Laman, the Valley of Lemuel, the hunting at Shazer, followed by the “most fertile” and “more fertile parts,” then near starvation, a burial at Nahom, and then Bountiful east of Nahom)? Nephi’s account spanning multiple chapters is vastly more detailed and specific than Joseph’s statement, yet to RT it betrays evidence of fraud for being hopelessly vague and lacking in detail, while Joseph’s blunt one-sentence summary of what he had dictated and read somehow betrays “a remarkably accurate knowledge” that must have been in his head before the book was produced and must have come from a map. This reveals something about RT’s methodology.

Questionable methodology is also shown in his claim that Joseph relied on a map to send Lehi and his family on “a route along the shoreline of the Red Sea” as they traveled south from the Valley of Lemuel. His reading of Nephi’s route would then fit a shoreline trail shown on his two preferred maps. He claims that the Book of Mormon account requires them to have never encountered the ancient Frankincense Trail until they crossed over it on the way to Nahom, and bases this claim on the statement in 1 Nephi 2 that they came in the “borders” near the Red Sea. But this does not require traveling along the coast after their entry into the Valley of Lemuel. Going out of the Valley and reconnecting with the major trail and the fertile regions east of the impassible shoreline mountains, but still in the “borders”/mountains and then going in a south-southeast direction makes sense. Nephi’s account does not require shoreline travel, and every other writer I am aware of investigating Lehi’s trail has found following the Frankincense Trail to be consistent with the text. Reading an impossible result into the text is not reasonable at this point. However, RT’s statement is helpful in that it illustrates that using the maps he advocates as Joseph’s source, a course along the Frankincense Trail must not be obvious from the map. Yet it is undoubtedly the path that a real Nephi would have traveled and a path that works in many ways.
One of RT’s more puzzling speculations is that Joseph got the idea for a river near the Red Sea by looking at a map and mistaking the northern tongues of the Gulf of Aqaba for rivers. Rather than be impressed with the actual river of water that has been found three days south of the northern end of the Red Sea, RT now appeals to ignorant Joseph’s failure to understand the map as an accidental source for one of the most remarkable evidences from Arabia. This speculation is far from satisfying. Look at the maps for yourself: on the large originals, would a student of the maps mistake the northernmost tip of the Gulf of Aqaba for a river? And if so, how could he place the “river” at a distance of three days south of their initial approach to the Red Sea, when they wouldn’t get near the Red Sea until they were already at the end of the “river” where it flows into the Red Sea?

The Nineteenth Century Information Superhighway/Supercanal, Frontier Style — Or, Where Could Joseph Find the Dream Map?

RT in Part 3 of his work addresses an issue that some Latter-day Saints have already raised: there is no evidence that Joseph had access to any of these maps. Libraries close to where he lived, like the Manchester Library, the Palmyra Library, and even Dartmouth College Library in Vermont, don’t seem to offer access to information about Nahom, as S. Kent Brown has shown. Brown found that the English translation of Niebuhr’s book, with its accompanying map, was not at the Dartmouth library until 1937 and was not in John Pratt’s library in Manchester. Only after Joseph’s family moved away from the vicinity of Dartmouth did its library acquire English translations of a work from Jean-Baptiste d’Anville that mentions the Nehem tribe and its location. After reviewing the details of relevant books and maps at these two libraries, Brown states:

In this light it is safe to conclude that Joseph Smith did not enjoy access to works on Arabia in either of the libraries that lay near his home at one point or another in his youth. In a similar vein, any hypothesis that Joseph Smith had access to a private library that contained works on ancient Arabia is impossible to sustain.

RT properly points out that the absence of Arabian maps in a couple of libraries does not mean that Joseph didn’t see these maps. That’s a fair point. On the other hand, for Latter-day Saint apologists who are often accused of hiding behind the argument that “an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,” it’s refreshing to see that shoe on someone else’s foot.
RT takes the argument a few steps further as he describes what one might call the Information Superhighway, or rather, the Information Supercanal of that golden age of data, the early nineteenth century:

Rick Grunder has emphasized the “widespread, informal sharing of both broad and particular knowledge” that occurred at every level of Smith’s local environment, so that there were numerous possible means of discovering knowledge about the geography of South Arabia. After examining the print resources available at Palmyra, Robert Paul concluded, “Clearly Joseph Smith had access to a wide range of books in that he lived in proximity to libraries and bookstores,” so there was no need to travel the greater distance to the Manchester area. More recently, Noel Carmack has described how living near the Erie Canal put the Smith family in reach of a wide variety of books, maps, and pamphlets, thanks to traveling bookstores and museums and the connection to larger urban centers to the east.239

Recall that information sharing before the electronic age required contact with individuals and with printed documents. When those documents were expensive European imports in the hands of wealthy individuals or remote libraries, information sharing among impoverished farmers might not be as widespread as RT wishes to suggest, even with the help of the Erie Information Supercanal, a theme that is nicely and rather creatively developed in Noel Carmack’s article.240

Carmack, whose lengthy article is filled with imaginative speculations about diverse sources and maps Joseph might have used to come up with names like Moroni and Cumorah (from the Comoros Islands, of course), informs us that “there is no reason to believe that Joseph Smith was so destitute that he could not afford a handful of books and pamphlets to read and carry with him” and makes the not especially surprising announcement that when “news was not transmitted by word of mouth, members of rural New England and New York communities obtained information from newspapers and chapbooks purchased in local bookstores.”241 He then extends the scope of Joseph’s information access by highlighting the role of the Supercanal:

Before the coming of a comprehensive railway system, canal transportation improved book distribution in New York’s pre-industrial economy. By 1825, when the newly completed Erie Canal passed through the villages of Palmyra and
Macedon, the water-way was already proving an economic boon to Rochester and other cities near its course. ... At least three bookstores were supported by shipments of books from printers in New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, Cooperstown, and Albany.

It could not have been more fortuitous that the Smith home in Palmyra was less than three miles from the canal, which put young Joseph Smith well within reach of a wide selection of books, maps, and pamphlets. ...

The long-held perception that Smith was “unlearned” or “un-bookish” cannot be supported by the notion that printed material was unavailable to him.242

“At least three bookstores” were supported by shipments of books (and maybe maps?) along the Erie Canal, a claim that is backed by two citations. The first is to Paul E. Johnson’s *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*,243 a book exploring the growth of Rochester from 1815 to 1837, where on page 19 we find the key statement supporting Carmack’s claim:

> These last testify to a growing prosperity and urbanity in the countryside. By the late 1820s merchants’ stocks of imported silks and fine wines had grown, and the Rochester market supported three bookstores.244

Just when these three bookstores came along is unclear — the use of the comma in the sentence could mean that the “late 1820s” reference does not apply to the bookstores. The only other mention of bookstores in that book occurs on page 45, where we read of someone opening a printing press and bookstore “by 1830.”245 Perhaps we can find more in Carmack’s second reference, citation to Frederick Follett, *History of the Press of Western New-York*, in the section “Monroe County,” which discusses the rise of newspapers in Monroe County and the city of Rochester from the 1820s up to about 1846.246 Foster’s book, though, seems to say nothing directly about the canal and shipments of books to Rochester. A search for “canal” in this book yields nine references, almost all of which are references to commissioners or toll collectors of the canal, and not a single reference to the shipping of books, maps, or other materials along the canal. Of course, Rochester’s growth was supported by the canal, as was Palmyra’s, and printers such as E.B. Grandin in Palmyra benefited from the canal.

So yes, the Erie Canal helped Rochester’s prosperity, and there was at least one bookstore there by 1830, maybe even three then, and
perhaps the books they got came by the canal or by wagon (ditto for other bookstores in town along the canal, including Palmyra). Rochester was big enough to support three bookstores around 1830, when it had a population of over 9,000 people, making it the twenty-fifth largest city in the United States at the time and dwarfing Palmyra. It was just fifteen or so miles away from Palmyra, and Joseph at least knew where it was because he first attempted to publish the Book of Mormon with a printer in Rochester before settling on Palmyra’s own E.B. Grandin. But three Rochester bookstores do not point to an abundance of materials on Arabia nor do they provide any hint of Arabian maps floating down the EIS (Erie Information Supercanal) — at least not by 1827, when Joseph moved to Harmony Township in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, soon after receiving the gold plates, and the translation of the Book of Mormon began.

If the rise of bookstores and print shops along the Erie Canal in the late 1820s was creating a data-rich environment to feed the ravishing intellectual hunger of young literati along the frontier, why, then, would Joseph make a “reverse Exodus” and depart from Palmyra and his information Bountiful on the vibrant shores of the Information Supercanal to conduct the real work of translation in a virtual Arabian Empty Quarter of information in remote Harmony Township, Susquehanna County? That tiny town is slightly over a hundred miles away from the canal and was in a region with precious little to help Joseph. In that data desert, he would be far from Palmyra, far from the canal, far from major literary circles and universities, and still very far from the two “nearby” libraries critics have identified that actually had the name “Nehhm” on some maps of very limited usefulness.

In RT’s description of all the access to “broad and particular information” that Joseph theoretically could have had via local resources and especially the great Information Supercanal with all its floating libraries and traveling bookstores (had Joseph actually stayed in the region, I should add), RT seems to be overlooking an important point made by Robert Paul, whom he quotes. In fact, immediately after the quoted sentence about the wide range of “access” Joseph had through libraries and bookstores, Paul notes that the real question is whether Joseph took advantage of the access such resources might have provided. He reminds us of Joseph’s meager education, of his mother’s assessment of him as being “much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children,” and states that “it is likely that during the 1820s he simply was not a part of the literary culture, that portion of the
population for which books provides a substantial part of its intellectual experiences.”

Theories based on Joseph accessing advanced information sources via the Erie Canal don’t seem to fit his behavior and other facts. For the task of creating the Book of Mormon, Joseph, not known to be a bookworm at that time, retreated to a remote village where he was still a poor farmer, now probably poorer and away from whatever intellectual resources his impoverished parents might have had, such as a family Bible. Tellingly, on October 8, 1829, shortly after Joseph Smith had completed the translation the Book of Mormon and before he began working on his inspired “translation” of the Bible, Joseph took an important step that would help in that later scriptural project: he had Oliver Cowdery purchase a Bible for him. It suggests that while in Harmony, Joseph’s personal library was rather small if he didn’t even own the most basic book for anyone taking on projects related to scripture. Joseph’s collection must have offered little to work with. Local libraries in Palmyra, Manchester, and at Dartmouth University, all reasonably close to places he had previously lived, didn’t offer useful materials for crafting the Lehi Trail adventure. Where did Joseph get the map or maps he would need to give us 1 Nephi?

The astute reader might wonder why I have failed to mention the library at Harmony. A passage from John Welch explains my silence:

Harmony was a small town on the border between the states of New York and Pennsylvania. The region was very remote and rural. Recently we asked Erich Paul [Erich Robert Paul apparently is the full name of the author of the “Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library” cited herein as Robert Paul] if he had ever explored the possibility that any libraries existed around Harmony in the 1820s which Joseph Smith might have used. He responded: “In fact, I checked into this possibility only to discover that not only does Harmony and its environs hardly exist anymore, but there is no evidence of a library even existing at the time of Joseph’s work.” Accordingly, those who have considered western New York as the information environment for the Book of Mormon may be a hundred twenty miles or more off target. One should think of Joseph translating in the Harmony area and, as far as that goes, in a resource vacuum.

With no library nearby, no circle of literati surfing the Information Supercanal in his backyard, where would Joseph find information to
support the actual translation (drafting, if you wish) of the Book of Mormon that began in Harmony after his December 1827 move? It took years for James Gee to track down actual copies of the various high-end European maps that show Nehhm or Nehem. More recently, digital collections of maps make it much easier to search through antique works. While Jenkins and RT feel that it would have been easy for Joseph to run into these maps, there ought to be some data to lend plausibility to the assertion. If those European maps were so abundant in the United States, we should expect to see evidence of their presence in the kind of places that share and preserve knowledge — namely libraries. Jenkins links to an ex-Mormon forum where two libraries were identified having writings and maps of Carsten Niebuhr that allegedly could have helped Joseph place Nahom in the description of Lehi’s trail. There it was stated that two library catalogs in Pennsylvania at Allegheny College and the Medical School of Philadelphia both had travel logs and maps of Carsten Niebuhr. Beginning with that lead, here’s what I am able to find at these libraries and a few others for comparison.

**Allegheny College Library**

After a large donation in 1820 and several others, Allegheny College Library boasted a collection of over 7,000 books in the early 1820s that made Thomas Jefferson envious and was said to be the largest collection west of the Appalachian Mountains for many years. In the 1823 Catalogue of the library, a search for Niebuhr yields one work, his 1792 *Travels Through Arabia*, which, as noted above, has a fold-out map of Yemen that might have given Joseph “Nehhm” but little else.

A search for d’Anville, the maker of the leading candidate map, results in three finds:

- *Orbis veteribus notus* [atlas], 1763
- *Ancient Geography*, London 1791

The first listing is a map of the Old World that includes Arabia, but not in much detail and without any reference to Nehem/Nahom. However, in a publisher’s note at DavidRumsey.com for a printing of “Orbis Veteribus Notus,” we learn an important thing about the works of d’Anville: “Most of d’Anville’s atlases were made up for the individual customer, so it appears that no two are alike.” This helped me to understand some of the differences that I would encounter between digitized versions of some maps. The making of atlases for individual
customers also suggests that d’Anville’s premium maps were low-volume, high-cost productions, which may account for their scarcity even in fine modern collections, as we will observe below.

The second and third apparently refer to editions of *Compendium of Ancient Geography*, which has only a few pages on Arabia and, based on my examination, does not appear to contain d’Anville’s Nahom-related map of Arabia.259

The *Compendium* is a translation of a French work, *Géographie Ancienne Abrégée*,260 which included nine maps, but no map showing Nehem. The only full view of Arabia is on “Orbis Veteribus Notus,” a map of much of the Western Hemisphere which shows the full outline of Arabia and some cities and mountains, but makes no mention of Nehem. A portion showing Arabia is depicted in the detail below taken from a version of the map on a vendor website.261 His map of the Roman world and Byzantine empire (“Orbis Romani”) shows much of Arabia also with little detail. A small portion of Arabia next to the Red Sea is shown in the map of the 12 tribes (“Les Tribus”), again with little detail. There is no hint of Nehem or related names on the maps or in the text.
else. A search of “map” brings sixteen finds, but nothing that appears to be a map of Arabia. But a search for “Bonne” reveals that the library had both volumes of Rigobert Bonne and Nicolas Desmarest’s *Atlas Encyclopedique*, which James Gee indicates is a source for his Map # 5. Volume 1 of the two-volume *Atlas* contains several maps showing Arabia or parts thereof, lacking Nehem, but a diligent student continuing into volume 2 can find a small, less colorful version of James Gee’s Map #5 showing Nehem, or at least part of, as shown below.

Here is a detail showing Nehem, or what’s left of it:
Just under “UL” along the upper centerfold, above and right of Sana’a, is the “em” from Nehem, I believe. Given the unfortunate effect of the binding, it’s unlikely that this book could have guided a young plagiarizer to pluck Nahom from the depths of this map. And let’s be honest here — what fabricator of tales looking at this map would focus on and select that half-hidden Nehem, such a dull sounding name, when just an inch to the right lies the lure of “Shibam!”?

Any theory of fabrication from such maps needs to explain the astounding absence of useful “local color” names like Shibam from Nephī’s tale.

So the great library at Allegheny College does offer some Nahom-related gems: Niebuhr’s not-especially-helpful view of Yemen (and little else) and an atlas with a better view of Arabia from Bonne, but apparently with Nehem obscured by the binding (made even harder to notice with the fabulous Shibam at its side).

**Medical Library of Pennsylvania Hospital (Philadelphia)**


The French *Voyage en Arabie* allegedly has a map with Nehhm on it, but this does not show up in either of the two volumes available in Google Books. Niebuhr’s map of Arabia inside the book, apparently a fold-out map, is visible in the version available at Archive.org266 but that map and the discussion of Yemen is limited to volume 1, not the lone volume 2 that is shown in the listing of the Medical Library. Volume 2 has other maps for other parts of the world, but I found nothing helpful to Joseph’s cause. While Nehhm is visible on the map in volume 1, it does not appear to be discussed in the text. In both volumes, searches for words like Nehhm, Nehem, Nehm, Nihm, Nahm, and Nahom return nothing. Again, Niebuhr’s map is not a map of Arabia, but a map of its southwest corner, providing the name Nehhm but little else that could help inform or inspire Joseph.

*Description de l’Arabie*267 is actually a 1779 book (1774 appears to be a typo) also available at Archive.org for detailed review. Volume 1 of this French publication lacks maps, but there are several maps at the end of volume 2, including Niebuhr’s map of Yemen on page 377, a map showing the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba on page 371, and a map of Oman showing Muscat on page 367 — none of which would appear to be of any help unless Joseph was looking for a name like Nehhm to
transform into Nahom for some reason. Nehhm is mentioned four times in volume 2, apart from its presence on the map.

No meaningful results were found in other searches using search terms such as Anville, d’Anville, map, and Arabia.

If Joseph were diligent enough to travel one hundred seventy miles from Harmony to the library, the French language and the limited scope of Niebuhr’s map would not be the only barriers he would face. The strict rules governing the library listed on page 1 of the catalog strike me as intimidating. Joseph apparently wouldn’t be able to borrow books and might not have been able to just stroll in and read whatever he wanted. It looks like only a limited list of books was available for anyone to walk in and read. This was, after all, a medical library at a hospital, not a reading room for the general public.

**Harvard Library**

Though not especially close, this library could be a good gauge of what an advanced and highly funded knowledge center could have. Conveniently, there is an 1830 catalog of the great Harvard Library that we can search for its books, maps, and other documents. There we find d’Anville’s *Ancient Geography*, which we have discussed above but appears to lack d’Anville’s Nahom-related maps of Arabia. We also can find Niebuhr’s *Travels Through Arabia* listed on p. 162 of the Catalog’s First Supplement from 1834, but not in the original 1830 catalog. While Niebuhr can give us Nehhm in Yemen, that’s about all he has to offer for Joseph as a fabricator. Rigobert Bonne doesn’t show up. A search for “map” returns a variety of hits, but nothing that looks specific to Arabia.

**Thomas Jefferson’s Collection and the Library of Congress**

The US Library of Congress, after being burned in the War of 1812, was rebuilt using Thomas Jefferson’s collection of 6,873 books. Vast as his library was, it’s section on geography was rather sparse in terms of Arabia and in general appears to have lacked much in the way of maps. The library would grow from that august beginning to be one of the world’s premier libraries today. It has an entire section devotes to maps. They do have one copy of d’Anville’s 1794 map that has the name Nehem on it. That appears to be the extent of their Nahom-related items. According to their help desk, old maps of Arabia like the 1794 d’Anville map were probably acquired in the early 20th century.

The US Library of Congress offers an easy-to-search online tool at www.loc.gov that can target a search to their map collection. But they
I don’t have the rare Kirkwood map of Arabia that is one of RT’s two lead candidates (I searched for “Kirkwood”). A search for “Niebuhr” in the maps section returned the 1794 d’Anville map (its description mentions “improvements by Niebuhr”), an 1835 map by Berghaus, and a 1977 work of Dennis Niebuhr. Niebuhr and d’Anville were the authors of the majority of the old maps identified by James Gee. I also searched for the remaining maps, without success. Specifically, I searched for Gee’s Map #5 by Rigobert Bonne (searched for “Bonne” in the maps collection), Map #8 by John Cary (searched for “Cary”), Map #9 by W. Darton (searched for Darton), and Map #10 by John Thomson & Co. (searched for “Thomson”).

In other words, of the ten maps listed by Gee and the additional Kirkwood map found by RT, only one of these, the 1794 d’Anville map, is currently available in the maps collection in one of the premier libraries of the world, the Library of Congress, and that map of Arabia apparently was a late acquisition, not something Joseph’s friends could have spied had they searched there. Maps that were found in these searches were overwhelmingly from North America, which appears to have been the focus of map collecting in the Library of Congress. I’m not sure why maps of Arabia would be any more popular in Joseph’s day.

Perhaps relevant maps might be found in books outside of the maps collection, though Niebuhr’s books do not appear to be archived here, either, and a 1920 listing of geographical atlases in the Library of Congress offers a section on Arabia showing none of the names of any of the authors of the 11 relevant maps discussed above.275 It does list several maps from d’Anville,276 but not his map of Arabia, which would be consistent with d’Anville’s map of Arabia in their collection having only been acquired in the twentieth century, as I was told by their help desk. Could one surmise that there was not an intense interest in Arabian maps in the nineteenth century? Or that expensive European maps of Arabia were not commonplace acquisitions available to literati and farmers alike?

Thomas Jefferson’s collection of books, not all of which went into the Library of Congress, has been documented and is available in a work known as the Sowerby Catalog, which can be searched online.277 The digitized version includes a heading for “Geography” of various regions of the world, but exploring the many works there shows relatively little about Arabia. A search for “Arabia” returns one entry in the catalog:

_Hakluyt’s voiages_. fol. 1st. edition.
1815 Catalogue, page 123, no. 269, as above.
HAKLUYT, Richard.
The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English nation, made by Sea or ouer Land, to the most remote and farthest distant Quarters of the earth at any time within the compasse of these 1500 yeeres: Devided into three severall parts, according to the positions of the Regions wherunto they were directed. The first, containing the personall travels of the English vnto Iudæa, Syria, Arabia, the riuier Euphrates, Babylon, Balsara, the Persian Gulfe, Ormuz, Chaul, Goa, India, and many Islands adjoyning to the South parts of Asia: together with the like vnto Egypt, the chieuest ports and places of Africa within and without the Streight of Gibraltar, and about the famous Promontori of Buona Esperanza. The second, comprehending the worthy discoueries of the English towards the North and Northeast by Sea, as of Lapland, Scriksinia, Corelia, the Baie of S. Nicholas, …

Hakluyt’s book apparently was printed with a map of some kind, but according to the entry in the catalog, “the copy examined in the Library of Congress was without the map.” A search for “Arabie” returns one work, a Latin text on the basics of the Arabian language. A search for “map” returns forty-six results, but nothing that focuses on Arabia and nothing from key sources like Niebuhr and d’Anville. There is a work from Rigobert Bonne, Atlas portatif de Grenet et Bonne, which has many maps, but not Bonne’s map of Arabia that shows Nehem. It has no map focused on Arabia, though parts of Arabia are shown on several maps and some global or broad regional maps show Arabia, though with little detail. One of the works is an 1804 atlas by Arrowsmith and Lewis with numerous maps that, like many related works, features Arabia in a broad map of Asia, but with little detail and no hint of Nahom.

While Jefferson’s collection is said to have included maps that are not readily apparent from listings of his works, there is no sign that he nor the Library of Congress had a Nahom-related map in Joseph’s day, and even today there seems to only be one at the Library of Congress.

If maps with Nahom were actually accessible to Joseph, we should see evidence that they were known and used within his vicinity. But examining collections of his day in major, distant libraries suggests that the Nahom-containing maps were not abundant and maybe not much easier to find in Joseph’s day than in ours — if he even knew what to look for and why. Further, if the major information centers in Joseph’s day and vicinity did not contain Nahom-related materials, then it would
seem unlikely that such materials were actually widely available in any meaningful sense. But readily available of not, if Joseph managed to find a Nahom-related map such as one of RT’s prime candidates, an important question remains: then what?

**Can the Maps Do the Trick?**

Consider the maps we’ve reviewed above with the task of, say, finding plausible candidates for the River Laman and Shazer, or coming up with the many other evidences of plausibility for Lehi’s Trail that we now have. Is it just luck that the “most fertile parts” come right after Shazer, followed by the “more fertile parts,” after which things become much more difficult and presumably a lot less fertile? “Fertile parts” in Arabia is not part of basic common knowledge. If Joseph understood what “Arabia Felix” meant on the map and knew of reports of that fertile region, he would have placed the most fertile parts way south on the journey, but those fertile parts were not along Nephi’s route. Instead of increasing fertility along the main south-southeast path, the fertility in the Book of Mormon appears to decline (plausibly) until they reach Bountiful.

Neither of the maps proposed by RT and none of the maps reviewed by Gee can reasonably explain the bulk of the evidences for the plausibility of Lehi’s account. Yes, we all agree, a Nahom-like name is there, in the right place, as Latter-day Saints learned from study of such maps beginning in the late twentieth century. The question, though, is whether that is evidence of fraud or evidence of plausibility?

If Nahom were the only evidence we had for the entire journey, it would still be difficult to explain Joseph’s amazing luck. We have evidence of an ancient burial place in the Nehem area that long predates Lehi, making the story of Ishmael’s burial in Nahom more plausible. The modern find of ancient altars bearing the NHM tribal name from slightly before Lehi’s day makes it plausible that Nephi could have encountered the NHM name in the general region associated with the Nihm tribe. If Joseph just plucked a random name off the map, he could easily have picked a name that lacked ancient roots, while the Book of Mormon requires that it existed anciently. To pick a name that would bring archaeological evidence of its ancient existence in that region seems rather lucky. To pick one associated with an ancient burial place seems luckier still. To pick one that “accidentally” leads to a clever Hebrew wordplay on the name, before you’ve begun studying Hebrew, seems like another surprising stroke of luck. To pick one where an eastward turn is possible, and where that eastward turn can bring you to a place like
Bountiful nearly due east of Nahom, seems almost eerie — if Joseph were just making up the Book of Mormon, that is. To get that lucky that with just a glance or two at a map was surely beyond Joseph’s wildest dreams. It would make his map a truly amazing Dream Map.

On the other hand, for those willing to exercise a little faith, the evidence related to Nahom alone should be greeted as helpful information. It is information that can guide us to better appreciate Nephi’s journey and the physical reality of the Book of Mormon. It can help us ask better questions to better understand more of its message.

An appeal to Joseph’s amazing Technicolor Dream Map raises more questions than it pretends to answer. If Joseph’s purpose were to add “local color” and evidence, as Jenkins and others imply, why pick a tiny spot whose name almost nobody would ever hear of in his lifetime? Why not use any major names and features from the map? Why did Joseph and his conspirators never allude to the evidence after it was so carefully built into the text? Latter-day Saints were thrilled when Nehem was found on an old map in 1978 — surely a similar boost in morale and book sales could have been achieved in the 1830s. Opportunity lost? Or is this, like the river that never was, actually a case of fraud that never was?

To me, a more reasonable explanation for Lehi’s trail is that whoever wrote 1 Nephi had firsthand knowledge of the region, knowledge going far beyond what anyone in the US could glean from any map in Joseph’s day and virtually any map in ours. The real mystery here is not why Joseph sneaked off to a remote library to gaze at a map, only to never use any of the detailed “local color” he later could have pointed to (but never did) to impress people. The real question, if we are looking for answers, is who knew of these places, apparently from firsthand observation, and how was that information transmitted to Joseph? Better questions lead to better answers.

**Where We Stand So Far: Frustrated?**

In reviewing the numerous arguments that critics have thrown at the account of Lehi’s trial, some LDS people feel great frustration. Surprising evidence from archaeology, geography, history, ancient languages, etc., including remarkable finds from actual fieldwork using 1 Nephi as a guide, have turned many great weaknesses, long mocked by critics, into strengths of the Book of Mormon. Some are frustrated with how they are minimized with hairsplitting, reading flaws and fiction into a text that is rooted in real terrain. When details that the critic demands
are missing though they can easily be filled in by a “generous reading” of the text, this is taken as evidence of modern origins, yet a world of missing detail can be read into a few words (e.g., Joseph’s solitary, vague statement about Lehi’s journey) to concoct evidence against the Book of Mormon. A word or even a letter (e.g., should “sacrifice” be plural, or does a wordplay with NHM fail if an H sound differs?) is turned into reasons to reject the text. Literary elements and allusions to other events, especially when intricate and skillfully made, are just evidences that the text is merely a literary creation. In explaining the origins of the text, the critic’s eyes only turn toward modern sources for parallels, and finding a few, however unsatisfactory, the work of explaining the condemned text is over. To students of the Book of Mormon who feel frustration with that, I have one message: Welcome to the world of biblical criticism.

The methodology of our critics, particularly RT, reflects what I consider to be weaknesses that are hailed as triumphs of scholarship in the secular arena of “Higher Criticism” or “historical criticism,” where some scholars today feel they have eviscerated the case for a living God who has spoken to prophets and given us scripture. Have they succeeded, and have they ruled out the Book of Mormon, without ever having to consider its evidence? This is our next topic.

IV. Does Higher Criticism of the Bible Trump All Book of Mormon Evidence? Or, Could Nephi Have Known and Used the Exodus Story?

RT argues that Book of Mormon evidence related to Lehi’s Trail can be dismissed because Nephi’s use of Exodus themes and related material from what is known as the priestly source (“P”) rules out any chance of historicity. Biblical scholarship apparently gives us all we need to reject the Book of Mormon, no reading and pondering required.

While it will catch some Latter-day Saints by surprise, this is a serious argument that RT is raising. His point is related to the modern world of biblical scholarship offering what is known as the “Documentary Hypothesis” and other flavors of “Higher Criticism” (also called “historical criticism”) wherein scholars have dissected biblical texts and created theories about the multiple sources or traditions that appear to be woven together.

In spite of a serious appeal to modern scholarship, RT, like Philip Jenkins, overlooks some important information in his dismissal of 1 Nephi. Significant scholarship provides support for the concept of some kind of ancient Exodus of Hebrews from Egypt and for the existence
of scriptural records regarding the Exodus well before Nephi’s time. What Nephi knew of the Exodus from the brass plates is not evidence of fabrication by Joseph Smith.

**Suggested Resources**

For Book of Mormon students interested in understanding modern debates over the Bible as history and the impact of Higher Criticism on the Book of Mormon, there are several resources I wish to recommend:

- Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible* — a widely read, popular work that has introduced many people to source-criticism, the branch of Higher Criticism that examines the text (especially the Pentateuch) to determine the role of different hypothesized documents that were assembled together. Friedman offers arguments for a priestly source composed in the days of Hezekiah, well before Nephi, greatly weakening RT’s argument. He is a strong advocate of the Documentary Hypothesis, discussed below, which is still a subject of debate.

- James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidences for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* — an extremely thorough examination of the plausibility of the Exodus in spite of the absence of clear archaeological evidence (from regions where it is unreasonable to expect the kind of evidence some critics demand). Hoffmeier, a significant scholar, provides a credible and wide-ranging case against the claim that the Exodus account was largely created after the Exile. His approach has some lessons in methodology that are relevant to Book of Mormon studies.

- James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* — a book that builds on his previous case for the reality of the Exodus, now exploring what we can learn of Sinai. He shows that archaeological evidence, textual material, geography, place names, and personal names all combine to create a reasonable case for the historical reality of the wilderness tradition. He also updates some of his proposals made in his earlier *Israel in Egypt* to reflect more recent discoveries. Hoffmeier provides evidence, for example, that the wilderness itinerary in Numbers 33 has support from
the fourteenth century BC, in contrast with the widespread view that it must be from the priestly document of much later origin. His discussion of the possible connection between Israel’s religion and the religion of the Midianites (Jethro’s people) is interesting in light of Lehi’s Trail, for as he explains, the Midianites took over the copper mines at Timna (near Lehi’s trail) after the Egyptians abandoned the mines around 1150 BC. If Lehi & Sons were metal workers familiar with Timna, it would be consistent with several elements in the text such as their ability to travel back and forth to Jerusalem from near the Red Sea on their own without help from their father or the Liahona and Nephi’s expertise in working with ore and metals.

- K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* — an extensive and colorful, if not sometimes overly passionate response to the many critics who minimalize the Old Testament. Based on abundant data, Kitchen concludes that we can firmly reject the hypothesis that the Old Testament books originated as late as 400 to 200 BC, as many minimalists maintain, and that we have strong evidence for the reality of the Exodus from Egypt and a Sinai covenant that must have originated between 1400 to 1200 BC. Kitchen’s work is also useful in showing weakness in the methodologies used to downplay the biblical text, many of which may resemble some of the techniques used against the Book of Mormon.

- James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, editors, *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*. Relevant highlights in this compilation include Richard E. Averbeck, “Pentateuchal Criticism and the Priestly Torah” and Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Old Testament Source Criticism: Some Methodological Miscues.” Chisholm critiques traditional source-criticism (the Documentary Hypothesis) by exploring the two most famous “parade cases” from source-criticism, the Flood story and the account of David in Saul’s court. He challenges the reasons given for viewing these as a patchwork from contradicting original documents and goes on to show that their literary design and coherence points to either a single source or
a masterful blending if multiple sources were used. He condemns the arrogant attitude of many scholars who seem to say that “if the text does not fit my idea of what literature should look like, it must be flawed,” when in fact a more careful reading can resolve alleged problems and reveal that the Hebrew author was more knowledgeable and skilled than the critics admit. I also recommend Richard L. Schultz, “Isaiah, Isaiah, and Current Scholarship,” with important information relevant to the presence of allegedly late Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon, and James K. Hoffmeier, “‘These Things Happened’: Why a Historical Exodus Is Essential for Theology,” which provides a good review of the rise of biblical minimalism and the devaluation of the Bible as a text with historical content, with a clear review of how vital the Exodus theme is throughout the Bible.

In addition to the above books, many shorter articles and papers could be cited. A few of note include:

- Joshua Berman, “Was There an Exodus?” — a fascinating recent contribution looking at long overlooked evidence from Egypt in support of the reality of the Exodus. This publication in *Mosaic Magazine* includes responses from other scholars, both for and against.

- Yosef Garfinkel, “The Birth & Death of Biblical Minimalism” — a bold critique of the biblical “minimalists” and their panicked response to compelling archaeological evidence for the reality of the House of David. The application of his insights to the Book of Mormon was appropriately made by Neal Rappleye and Stephen Smoot in another highly recommended work directly related to the Lehi’s trail, “Book of Mormon Minimalists and the NHM Inscriptions: A Response to Dan Vogel.”

- Kevin L. Barney, “Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis” — a thoughtful and frequently cited essay from a faithful LDS scholar who explores how Latter-day Saints may respond to widely accepted scholarly theories on the origins of Bible documents.
Is the Exodus Fiction?

Scholars today frequently insist that the Exodus story of the Bible is pure fiction, a belief that supports the assignment of late post-exilic dates to the creation of major parts of the Pentateuch. If the story of Hebrew captivity in Egypt and their escape to Israel is fiction, the Book of Mormon has a problem, and if that story wasn’t even written down and accepted by the Jews until centuries after Nephi, it would be fatally flawed. This is why it’s important to recognize what scholars really know versus what they might claim.

The case against Exodus is rooted in the absence of evidence. While that absence once was tolerated, today it is taken as evidence of fraud and the Bible, unlike most ancient texts (apart from the Book of Mormon) seems to be treated as guilty until proven innocent. Egyptian records do not record the divine humbling of any Pharaoh by their slaves. Archaeologists have not found evidence of Hebrew encampments stretching across the Sinai. The conquest of Canaan and the rise of the House of David have been rejected as fiction due to their lack of archaeological support, making it easier for scholars to criticize the Bible as a literary creation without a connection to actual history.

These many issues are beyond the scope of this paper, though well addressed in the resources given above. But several points should be made. First, the absence of evidence is understandable and need not be evidence that the recorded events never happened. A realistic understanding is needed of what archaeology can deliver. Some significant events in history simply lack archeological evidence. For example, the Egyptian military incursion into Canaan by Thutmose III and a major battle against Megiddo “is one of the best documented reports from the ancient Near East as it is recorded both in royal sources … and in private documents and biographies of officers who accompanied the king.” But in spite of a large body of textual evidence and a seven-month siege of Megiddo, “there is still no archaeological evidence from Megiddo for the Egyptian attack” — even though Megiddo “is probably the most excavated site in ancient Israel, having been investigated with regularity since 1903.” The Egyptian documents about the attack were “shaped by religious, ideological, and propagandistic agendas,” yet are accepted as obviously having historical content by some of the same scholars who see the Exodus as fiction due to its alleged lack of archaeological evidence.

In some areas, it is futile to demand much in the way of archaeology. The Egyptian Delta, where the Hebrew slaves were in Goshen and
from whence they escaped, is a surprisingly poor source of ancient archaeological information due to its high water table, flooding from the Nile, and frequent rain. Further, heavy farming has destroyed many potential sites. It was also highly picked over before archaeology became an established discipline. Thus, as Hoffmeier points out, in that region not a single scrap of papyrus from pharaonic times has survived. As for the lack of Egyptian records supporting the Exodus, the highly censored records of grand leaders are unlikely to corroborate their defeat.

However, Egyptian records and other sources of information do provide a great deal of evidence that support the plausibility of numerous details in Exodus, while also pointing to the improbability of Hebrews centuries later fabricating a record rich in authentic details dating to the right era. Hoffmeier’s *Israel in Egypt* and *Israel in Sinai* are particularly compelling challenges to those who claim that there is no evidence for the Exodus.

Hoffmeier’s treatment of the Exodus is wide ranging. In *Israel in Egypt*, he addresses the question of whether the picture painted in Genesis 39 through Exodus 15 is compatible with history. In reaching his affirmative conclusion, he deals with evidence for:

- The presence of Semitic-speaking people from western Asia who came to Egypt seeking relief in times of famine, as suggested in Genesis, and that this was plausibly in a time frame consistent with the Old Testament.
- The ability for a Semite like Joseph to have reached a high position in the Egyptian court — an event possibly related to the case of an Egyptian official named Aper-el, apparently a Semite with an Egyptian wife.
- Detailed geographical and historical details that shed light on the plausibility of the route taken by the Israelites out of Egypt.
- Plausible relationships between a variety of the plagues and the ecology of the Nile.

His treatment of the wilderness era in Sinai is equally broad and yet finely granular, exploring such details as the numerous Egyptian elements associated with the Tabernacle, including, for example, the plausibility of silver trumpets in Israel’s Egyptian phase versus being a late borrowing from much more recent Roman trumpets in a late fabricated text. Not only are the many objects associated with the Tabernacle and garments of priests plausible, many of the terms used
to describe them can be shown to have Egyptian etymologies, which would not be expected if the account is fiction crafted after the Exile. Likewise many individuals in the Exodus and following stories have authentic Egyptian names. Hoffmeier asks if the account were written after the Exile by Jews with no connection to Egypt, how could they have added so many realistic elements appropriate to a remote land and time, including making reference to Egyptian cities such as Ramses that had been abandoned centuries ago? And what motivation would there be to conduct research to add such authentic details to a fabricated text for an audience that would not appreciate them?309

For further dramatic evidence of the ancient origins and physical reality of the Tabernacle, read Joshua Berman’s original discoveries and his inspiring perspective in “Was There an Exodus?”310 There is compelling evidence to recognize that ancient Jews did experience and commemorate an Exodus from Egypt. Perhaps it was of a smaller scale than we are used to thinking, but there is evidence that real events are behind it, not just stories concocted after the Exile.

Also of note in the dating of the priestly source is discovery of two small silver scrolls found at Ketef Hinnom near Jerusalem that have been carefully examined and dated to pre-exilic times around 600 BC. These silver scrolls quote from a passage in Numbers that is part of the P source.311 The debate isn’t over on these scrolls,312 but there is apparent archaeological evidence in favor of an early date for at least some of the material in P.

The theory of the Exodus being a late creation not widely known to the Hebrews before the Exile raises numerous difficulties in accounting for the Hebrew text and the traditions of the Jewish people. In both, the Exodus runs deep. Allusions to the enslavement, the deliverance, the crossing of the sea, the years in the wilderness, and the role of Moses are made throughout the Old Testament. It is deeply engrained in texts from Nephi’s contemporaries, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, and his predecessors such as Isaiah (Isaiah 10:24–27, 11:16), Amos (e.g., Amos 2:10), and Hosea (Hosea 2:14–20, 11:1, 13:4, 5).313 It is inseparable from the traditions and theology of the Hebrews, and yet we are to believe that it was a late concoction after the Exile, sold to a gullible people ignorant of their past? That is a radical new theory that comes not from new archaeological evidence but, in my view, from a new breed of skeptical scholars, the “minimalists,” who now insist that the evidence is not enough to justify any respect for historical material in texts they desperately wish to reject.
In spite of the evidence not only for the historicity of the Exodus but also for the reality of Jews before the Exile having widely accepted its themes, RT insists that a Hebrew in 600 BC could not make literary allusions to the Exodus:

[T]his situation could not possibly have obtained in the time of Nephi. The broad consensus of contemporary biblical scholarship is that while parts of the Pentateuch may have been written during the late monarchy and been in existence when Nephi supposedly lived, the narrative did not become culturally authoritative for Jews in any significant sense until the Persian and Hellenistic periods.314

In Section 1 (in Part 1 of this paper) I’ve already pointed to RT’s radical position that Jeremiah and Ezekiel may not have even existed. But will he tell us that Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah did not exist? I don’t think his stance represents the consensus of two centuries of scholarship on these matters (as if there were any consensus in the chaotic and rapidly shifting world of biblical scholarship).

Theories that the Pentateuch was a “modern” fabrication from a post-exilic con man have many of the same glaring weaknesses that we see in theories that Joseph Smith fabricated the story of Nephi’s exodus. We are to believe that he researched Arabia and filled his account with authentic details and evidence from Arabia that his audience could not possibly appreciate, and that he would never exploit. In fact, the trek through Arabia, in spite of the latent built-in evidence that Joseph didn’t seem to know was there, would be a sore point that critics would mock for a century and a half. The parallels between Nephi’s exodus and that of the Israelites are more numerous than we realized.

The evidences in favor of key Old Testament accounts have not received the dispassionate, scholarly interest we might hope for. For example, shortly after the minimalists had declared that the kingdom of David was a myth and that Israel in that era was just a group of agrarian tribes with no king of any kind, several fragments of an Aramaic stela clearly from the ninth century BC were found in 1993 and 1994 at Tel Dan in Israel. The text mentions a king of Israel and a king of the “House of David” (Hebrew, bytdwd ), that is, a king of the dynasty of David. The response of minimalist scholars, as described by Garfinkel, was one of panic with desperate efforts to justify skewed readings of the text to excise the evidence for David, displaying “paradigm-collapse trauma” through their “compilations of groundless arguments, masquerading
as scientific writing through footnotes, references and publication in professional journals.”315

Archaeologist William G. Dever points to such desperate efforts as leading scholars attempting to paint the Tel Dan stela fragments as a forgery, while “other revisionists have turned amusing intellectual somersaults to avoid the obvious meaning of the Dan inscription. The irony is that biblical scholars have long demanded that an archaeologist supplement our ‘mute’ artifacts with texts. But when we do find a spectacular text, they discard it! [emphasis added]”316 That response may not be a surprise for students of the Book of Mormon, in light of the reception that the evidence from Arabia has received. Fortunately, the testimony of three witnesses in stone from the altars of Marib and the details of their excavation by non-LDS scholars leave no room for charges of forgery and should keep scholars focused on more pedantic steps to minimalize the impact.

One day, I hope that biblical scholars will recognize that in the Book of Mormon, we have found a spectacular text with treasures of information to enhance our knowledge of biblical origins and ancient Israel.

There are many other issues that can be explored with respect to the reality of the Exodus. One potentially controversial but interesting line of thought is from Noel Reynolds in “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis.”317 Reynolds argues that the intricate relationship in language and themes between the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses can best be explained by having the material of the Book of Moses or something similar present on the Brass Plates. The dependence, he argues, can be seen to be one-way: the Book of Mormon appears to be relying upon content in the Book of Moses and not the other way around. It’s an interesting approach, not unlike the textual analysis behind aspects of the Documentary Hypothesis. Part of its significance is that the Book of Moses was given by revelation after the Book of Mormon translation was completed, but the intertextuality appears to reflect Book of Mormon writers drawing upon Book of Moses language and themes, as they do with Exodus and Isaiah, for example, and not the other way around.

To Reynolds’ analysis I can add my own observation about the “strength of Moses” in one of the offending Exodus-related passages cited by RT, 1 Nephi 4:2. Nephi’s words appear to be an allusion to strength and Moses that is not found in the Old Testament, but is clearly found in Moses 1, including verses 20–21 where Moses receives strength from the Lord to overcome Satan, but especially in verse 25, where God tells Moses
“thou shalt be made stronger than many waters; for they shall obey thy command as if thou wert God.” It’s a reference to the miraculous crossing of waters by Moses, endowed with strength from God, and Nephi and his audience appear to have known that concept.\(^{318}\) David Bokovoy has also observed that Nephi’s call to be strong appropriately reflects ancient Near Eastern military contexts,\(^{319}\) which I suggest adds to the sense of historicity in this passage from Nephi.

Perhaps the alleged weakness of Book of Mormon references to stories of Moses will turn out to be a strength, and will be recognized for its role not only in being a second witness for Christ, but also a second witness for the reality of Israel’s ancient deliverance from bondage, a symbol of the deliverance Christ offers through his Atonement. The literary and theological value of such a symbol in no way detracts from its reality. Were it not real, the theological value would be greatly diminished. Each of our lives can parallel the Exodus of Israel and the exodus of Nephi, and be every bit as real as they were.

**Too Literary to Be Real?**

RT’s post at *Faith Promoting Rumor* leads up to his use of Higher Criticism by first pointing out that Nephi’s parallels to the Exodus are suspicious.

The first problem that the apologetic argument faces with regard to Nahom as an authentic ancient reference is that the larger journey narrative recounted in 1 Nephi is for the most part implausible as real history. The account contains many story elements and language that indicate it originated as imaginative mythological literature modeled along biblical patterns, whereas it lacks evidence of certain details that we would expect to find if it were in fact a realistic report of an Israelite family journeying from Jerusalem through the deserts of Arabia.\(^{320}\)

Many of the recommended sources above complain of the tendency of modern “biblical minimalists” to rule that a story must be fictional if it has strong literary themes. Texts that may have been carefully crafted are criticized as being literary, theological, etiological, etc., and therefore just fiction, especially when “expected” details are not present, while the same scholars readily find historical value in other ancient documents such as Egyptian reports of battles (e.g., at Kadesh and Megiddo) that
may have similar characteristics, including the presence of miraculous content. 321 There is a pervasive bias against the Bible.

For the Book of Mormon, the presence of literary story elements and allusions to other miraculous events is not a problem if one understands that Nephi is writing a sacred text, and that he is likening the scriptures to their situation and creating a moral parable from his journey that he sees as a divinely crafted parallel to the Exodus. In my opinion this fits what we know of the ancient religious mindset. Given the significance of the Exodus to the Hebrews, I think a sacred journey to the Promised Land that didn’t consider parallels to the Exodus would raise even more serious questions. The interwoven biblical themes in his text are crafted so well, that it may, in my view, count as evidence in favor of ancient origins rather than modern. 322 Indeed, Nephi’s use of biblical allusions and themes in his writing, including clever Hebraic word plays, is a fertile field for ongoing scholarship and discovery, not a trivial exposé of poor modern authorship from young Joseph.

However, RT has a significant point that may overthrow my reasoning above, for if he is right, there is no way that a real Nephi could have written about the Exodus. Let’s explore RT’s most potent weapon as he unleashes Higher Criticism against the Arabian Peninsula evidence.

The Documentary Hypothesis and the Higher Criticism Axe: Making Mincemeat of 1 Nephi?

Here is what I consider to be the most serious attack RT makes in his post:

[P]erhaps most damagingly, the allusions and references to the book of Exodus in the Book of Mormon show that the form of the narrative it presumes corresponds to that found in the Bible, combining both non-priestly (non-P) and priestly (P) material. As is well known, one of the more significant conclusions of two centuries of biblical scholarship is that the story of the Exodus is actually a product of multiple literary sources/strands that were developed and combined over time, including a non-P source (sometimes divided into separate Yahwist [J] and Elohist [E] sources or early non-P and late non-P strands) and a P source that covered similar material but had distinctive theological emphases and content as well. Although many scholars believe that some of the non-P material may date to the pre-exilic or monarchic period, the P source is at the earliest exilic and more likely
from the post-exilic/Persian period. The P source would also by necessity have been composed before it and non-P were combined together into one continuous Torah narrative, meaning that the project to conflate the sources would have occurred even later during the Persian period. So in direct opposition to what we would expect if the Book of Mormon were ancient, the author of 1 Nephi seems to have known and made use of an Exodus that contained both P and Non-P.

The knowledge of P is reflected in 1 Nephi 3:3 (Genesos 46:8–27; Exodus 6:14–25); 4:2 (Exodus 14:21–22); 16:19–20 (Exodus 16:2–3); 17:7–8 (Exodus 25:8–9); 17:14 (Exodus 6:7–8); 17:20 (Exodus 16:3); 17:26–27, 50 (Exodus 14:21–22); 18:1–2 (Exodus 35:30–33).


The extensive borrowing and revisioning of the Exodus story in the Book of Mormon is thus most easily reconciled with a modern origin for the narrative. Not only would this provide a setting for such an all-inclusive revisioning to have taken place, but it would explain why various aspects of the borrowing do not reflect the social, intellectual, and literary world of ancient Israel.\(^{323}\)

That sounds devastating. If the cumulative weight of two centuries of scholarship compels us to recognize that the Jews of 600 BC were not thoroughly familiar with the Exodus story as Nephi uses it and cites it, then this is a problem for the Book of Mormon.

The Documentary Hypothesis owes much to Julius Wellhausen, a scholar who over a century ago pulled together a great deal of previous scholarship and painted a compelling picture that attempted to reverse engineer the making of the Bible, explaining how different styles of language, different names of deity, and different versions of the same story were patched together in the Old Testament. Using what is now
called “source criticism,” which takes a microscopic look at the Hebrew text and dissects it into hypothetical source documents, he concluded that there must have been four original documents behind the Pentateuch, each known by a single letter:

- J, the Yahwist source (J is the first letter of Yahweh when written in German), written around 950 BCE in the southern Kingdom of Judah, so named because it tends to use Yahweh (Jehovah) as the name for God;
- E, the Elohist source, written c. 850 BCE in the northern Kingdom of Israel, so named because it prefers to use “Elohim” as the name for God;
- D, the Deuteronomist source (essentially the book of Deuteronomy), written circa 600 BCE in Jerusalem during a period of religious reform (Josiah’s era); and
- P, the priestly source, written c. 500 BCE by Kohanim (Jewish priests) in Exile in Babylon.

The Documentary Hypothesis gained growing support over the century following Wellhausen’s work and appeared to have fairly wide consensus among biblical scholars. Some modern European scholars such as Konrad Schmid, whom RT cites,324 question the existence of several of the source documents of the Documentary Hypothesis, and see the Old Testament as a more complex literary product from the Persian and Hellenistic period long after 600 BC. There are now multiple schools in addition to source criticism contending with differing explanations for biblical origins. These schools include tradition criticism,325 which explores the influence of Israel’s ancient traditions and oral legends on the modern text; and redaction criticism,326 which focuses on the work of late redactors and their goals and techniques in shaping the text for theological or other reasons. New hypotheses such as the “Fragmentary” or “Supplementary” Hypothesis have been proposed which build upon rather than overthrow the extensive work behind the Documentary Hypothesis.327 Through all these lines of thought, there is often a sense that ancient Hebrews couldn’t write history, especially in the early days of the rising people of Israel. While the scholars are not united on numerous points, many loudly agree that the Exodus is not historical and would agree with RT that a Hebrew writer in 600 BC should not be quoting and using Exodus material from whatever is behind what we call the priestly source.
The Priestly Source May Predate Nephi

The Documentary Hypothesis is a theory in flux, as are other theories arising from Higher Criticism that tend to challenge the reality of the miraculous in scripture. While there are reasons to question some aspects of the Documentary Hypothesis and other conclusions from Higher Criticism, if we accept that multiple documents, including a P source, were used to patch together the Bible as we know it, there is still room for the Book of Mormon (another highly redacted document from many original sources). The critical issue would be the date of the Exodus material.

What RT does not acknowledge in his presentation of the consensus of scholars is that there are significant scholars who reject Wellhausen’s late date for the priestly source. Richard Elliott Friedman, one of the world’s premier Bible scholars and a leading proponent of the Documentary Hypothesis, places P before the Exile, probably in Hezekiah’s era, which was before Josiah, before Lehi, and before Nephi. Friedman’s academic credentials are impressive. He was a student of Frank Moore Cross at Harvard, where he obtained his ThD. He is now the Ann and Jay Davis Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia and the Katzin Professor of Jewish Civilization Emeritus of the University of California, San Diego, and was a visiting fellow at Cambridge and Oxford and a Senior Fellow of the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. He is the author of seven books, including the bestselling *Who Wrote the Bible* and *Commentary on the Torah*.

Let’s consider the credible case made by Richard Elliott Friedman in *Who Wrote the Bible?* He identifies three serious mistakes that led Wellhausen and others to place P after the Exile. These were:

1. The idea that the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah and Ezekiel) do not ever cite material from P.
2. The notion that the Tabernacle was not historical but a fiction created after the Exile and inserted into P to provide a rationale in the words of Moses for the centrality of the Temple, which is never mentioned in the Pentateuch. The fabricated Tabernacle, according to Wellhausen, was created in P to help justify the Temple.
3. The idea that P takes the centralization of worship for granted, as if it were written in a time when there was no doubt that centralization was the norm (i.e., after the Exile).
Friedman shows how each of these were serious mistakes. Jeremiah and Ezekiel actually do cite P material several times, showing that P existed before the Exile. For example, Ezekiel 5 and 6 provide a lawsuit of sorts against Israel for not keeping her covenant with God, and the covenant referred to is detailed in Leviticus 26, a P source which Ezekiel relies on with many nearly verbatim passages. Ezekiel and Jeremiah use other portions of P as well (e.g., Ezekiel draws upon P elements of the Exodus narrative).

The evidence that made the Tabernacle, in Wellhausen’s view, seem like a conveniently crafted half-scale model of the Second Temple was based on considering the dimensions of the First Temple, not the second, and Wellhausen got other things wrong in his analysis. Friedman points to a strong strand of textual evidence showing that the Tabernacle was historical and, in fact, was stored in the First Temple. Friedman’s conclusion that Tabernacle was finally housed within the First Temple has been criticized, but Hoffmeier, after reviewing the criticism, provides further analysis and finds significant merit in the proposal, even though Friedman’s analysis of Tabernacle dimensions can be debated. Finally, Friedman points out that P sources repeatedly teach the need for centralization of worship at the Tabernacle, rather than assuming centralization is already widely accepted, something Wellhausen missed.

Further evidence for Friedman’s early dating of P include analysis from Professor Avi Hurvitz of Hebrew University in Jerusalem showing that the language of P is an earlier stage of biblical Hebrew than Ezekiel. Since that 1982 publication, at least five other scholars have published linguistic evidence that P’s version of Hebrew comes from before the Exile to Babylon.

Finally, Friedman points out that Wellhausen’s theory of P being a post-exilic document and a pious fraud to justify the second Temple does not fit the content of P. P emphasizes the ark, the tablets, cherubs, and the Urim and Thummim — relics that were completely absent from the second Temple. “Why would a second Temple priest, composing a pious-fraud document, emphasize the very elements of the Tabernacles the second Temple did not have?”

Friedman notes that the person who wrote P “placed the Tabernacle at the center of Israel’s religious life, back as far as Moses, and forever into the future.” This person had to be living before “They cast your Temple into the fire; They profaned your name’s Tabernacle to the ground”
Lindsay, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Map: 2 • 299

(Psalm 74:7, one of several passages alluding to the Tabernacle having been kept in the first Temple). 337

The data related to the content and the purposes behind the priestly source led Friedman to not only conclude that P was pre-exilic, but that it could be dated specifically to the time of King Hezekiah. 338 That leaves plenty of time for P material to become available to Nephi, or even be recorded on the brass plates.

A thoughtful article for LDS readers on the Documentary Hypothesis was written by Kevin L. Barney, 339 who accepts much of Friedman’s thinking, as does David E. Bokovoy in his scholarly work on the Documentary Hypothesis written for an LDS audience. 340

In general, I should note, Latter-day Saints need not fear the tentative Documentary Hypothesis and its variants. Indeed, it can be a useful tool for understanding some aspects of the Book of Mormon 341 and even Joseph Smith’s work with scripture. The complexity and textual sophistication of the Book of Mormon record is one that can help us better appreciate the origins of the Bible. This is especially so when we try to infer what was on the Brass Plates and how their content might differ from today’s Masoretic text. John Sorenson, for example, wrote favorably of the Documentary Hypothesis. 342 He proposed that the brass plates may have largely been related to E, the Elohist document. Evidence for that proposal includes the heavy use of “Lord” instead of “Jehovah” among the names for deity in the Book of Mormon: apart from a quotation from Isaiah, “Jehovah” only occurs once, in the last verse of the book. Further evidence includes the many prophets from the Northern Kingdom that are quoted.

But the Documentary Hypothesis and its cousins should be viewed as tentative and applied with caution.

RT’s Questionable Identification of P Material in the Book of Mormon

Closer examination of RT’s list is still worthwhile in evaluating his argument and in understanding the relationship between the various sources of the Old Testament and the contents of the Book of Mormon. First, note that the presence of a story or theme that is linked to P does not mean that it did not exist in Hebrew records or oral traditions before P was composed, whenever that was. In fact, making up major story elements that were unknown to anyone in the intended audience would obviously lead to trouble in getting the story to stick. Friedman makes
that point in his famous work, *Who Wrote the Bible?* Another respected scholar, Joel Baden, wrote:

> This conclusion can be extrapolated over the entire priestly narrative. Where the priestly and nonpriestly stories diverge (and similarly where the J and E diverge), we may attribute the differences to the unique traditional bases on which the authors drew or to the unique renderings of common tradition among different schools and authors. Where the priestly and nonpriestly stories converge, we may attribute the similarities to the common elements of the tradition known to the authors. Only if it is imagined that the nonpriestly authors invented the entirety of the pentateuchal narrative out of whole cloth can it be argued that the similar narratives in P derive from non-P. If, on the other hand, we accept that J and E wrote their narratives on the basis of common Israelite traditions, then there is no reason to believe that P could not have done the same. The claim that P is a reaction to the nonpriestly text cannot be established on the grounds of its general plot outline, at least as long as we take seriously the insights of tradition criticism.

The bulk of the argument for P as a reaction lies in its specific differences from non-P. Yet a striking number of these differences have no theological or ideological contents; they are simply differences in detail. The genealogy of Genesis 5 presents a variation on that of Genesis 4:17–26, but there is no obvious significance to the variation.343

With that in mind, let’s examine RT’s list of P-related verses in the Book of Mormon.

First up is 1 Nephi 3:3, which supposedly draws upon priestly material in Genesis 46:8–27 and Exodus 6:14–25. Already I’m puzzled at RT’s approach. Nephi merely states that the brass plates contained “a genealogy of my forefathers.” To claim that the brass plates contain the genealogy of Nephi’s forefathers somehow requires P? Yes, the long genealogies listed in the OT were hypothesized by Harvard scholar Frank Moore Cross, the professor and mentor of Richard Elliott Friedman, to come from a priestly source, a non-extant “Book of Generations” or “Book of Records.”344 Sources that P may have used naturally existed before P. Since the Book of Generations appears to be used by P, J, and E,345 at least some versions of the Book of Generations are likely to be
pre-exilic. Even if one believes priestly sources were all created out of whole cloth after the Exile, the idea of having a written or oral genealogy of one’s forefathers surely was not a late innovation in the Hebrew world that had to wait until the Exile.

That’s not just my opinion, either. The astute reader will note that Joel Baden in the quoted paragraph above points to a pair of related genealogies, one priestly and one non-priestly, as an example of the differences in detail that occur between purported OT sources. A table of sources for Genesis and other books in the Pentateuch provided at ThreeJews.net is helpful in looking up sources. These tables compare assignments made by Richard E. Friedman in *The Bible With Sources Revealed* (2003) and Samuel Driver’s *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*. The Genesis table shows that Genesis 4:17–26 is attributed to J (the pre-exilic “Yahwist” source) by both scholars, while the genealogy in Genesis 5 is almost entirely priestly (listed as P by Driver and as from the Book of Records, a priestly source, by Friedman). So if the genealogical information in Genesis 4 can be found in a non-priestly source, what is the basis for claiming that 1 Nephi 3:3 shows impossible knowledge of P in the Book of Mormon through its mention of genealogy on the plates of brass?

The second item on the list is less of a stretch. 1 Nephi 4:2 definitely refers to the Exodus. Here are Nephi’s words to his brethren:

> Therefore let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea.

RT writes that 1 Nephi 4:2 as well as 1 Nephi 17:26–27, 50 draws upon priestly material in Exodus 14:21–22. The Exodus table at ThreeJews.net, however, shows that the part about crossing the “dry ground” in Exodus 14:21b (the language used in both of the accused passages of 1 Nephi) comes from the J source. The other parts of Exodus 14:21–22 are assigned to P. But this does not mean that the other sources were unaware of the crossing of the Red Sea. (Nephi’s use of “strong” in 1 Nephi 4:2 to describe Moses will be mentioned below.)

Next, 1 Nephi 16:19–20 is said to rely upon Exodus 16:2–3, and 1 Nephi 17:20 is said to be related to Exodus 16:3. The murmuring of some family members in the wilderness and the desire to have stayed back in the comfort of Jerusalem have a parallel to the murmuring of the Israelites in Exodus 16:2–3, which is assigned to P. The parallel, possibly
intended, does not require a unique priestly source (many modern parents can attest to such things on difficult journeys away from home). Some language is similar, which may be due to Nephi or may be partly influenced by the translation process in which KJV phrasing appears to be deliberately and frequently used when it fits (yes, sometimes even New Testament wording, too\(^3\)).

Moving along, 1 Nephi 17:7–8, where the Lord shows Nephi how to make his ship, is said to rely on Exodus 25:8–9, where the Lord shows Moses the “pattern of the Tabernacle.” There may be an allusion here, but it’s not necessary to explain the text. In any case, the Tabernacle was an ancient physical reality, according to investigative work from Richard Elliott Friedman discussed in *Who Wrote the Bible?*\(^3\) Also see Friedman’s explanation of why he concludes that Exodus is *not* fiction, shared in a 2014 interview.\(^3\)

Returning to RT’s argument regarding 1 Nephi 17:7–8, the priestly source does focus on the intricate details of how the Tabernacle was to be made, but the idea of an inspired or revealed Tabernacle was not a late invention, and especially not a post-exilic invention, as discussed above. Further, Nephi being shown how to make the ship does not require knowledge of Exodus 25.

Next on the list, 1 Nephi 17:14 supposedly draws upon Exodus 6:7–8, both using the phrases “deliver from destruction” and “bring you out.” This may be Nephi drawing upon a P source, or a related E source, or it may be an artifact of the Book of Mormon translation. The Lord bringing Israel out of Egypt is a pervasive theme in the Bible, one of the indications of just how deeply Exodus themes permeate the Bible in ways similar to its role in the Book of Mormon. But we need not cherry-pick allegedly late P material to find it. In the eighth century BC the prophet Amos wrote that God said “I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness” (Amos 2:10), one of several clearly pre-exilic writings that remind us that the Exodus was known to Jews before 600 BC.

Finally, 1 Nephi 18:1–2 is said to be linked to Exodus 35:30–33. The instructions to Nephi on how to create “curious workmanship” in timber for the building of the ship is supposed to be related to the “curious works” in gold, silver, and brass that an inspired Israelite created. Something of a stretch, perhaps, and not the kind of thing that requires an ancient priestly source. “Curious workmanship” to describe skilled work is a well attested term in the English of Joseph’s day and, while related to “curious works” in the Bible, can plausibly appear in
the English translation without requiring Nephi to have been using a P source.\textsuperscript{352} It’s an acceptable old-fashioned way to say that something was done skillfully, and that’s a pretty universal concept.

Overall, the alleged reliance on P material is not compelling (perhaps the murmuring language is the best fit). Even if there were serious evidence of relying on unique material from P, that would not necessarily be a problem, given the evidence that P predates the Exile and, of course, that the Exodus involved at least some real history.

**Must Bible Believers Fear the Documentary Hypothesis? Insights from the Book of Mormon**

The Documentary Hypothesis, while it has weaknesses and many detractors, must be recognized as having a great deal of serious scholarship behind it. But many people who believe in the Bible as the word of God may feel threatened when they encounter this. After all, it can be quite disturbing to suddenly learn that Moses apparently didn’t write the Books of Moses (that is, the Books of Moses as we now have them — the Hypothesis does not prevent him from having written or having passed sacred history on through oral traditions). To be told that the great stories that are the foundation of the Bible might have been cobbled together from multiple conflicting sources can turn the miraculous word of God into a much more imperfect, man-made work. Can that even be trusted as scripture anymore?

The editorial processes that are being uncovered in the Bible actually reflect some of the Book of Mormon’s warnings that the record of the Jews in our day, the Bible, would be heavily edited and have significant losses. That complex editorial process is also what Book of Mormon readers see happening right before their eyes as they observe the many records that Mormon and Moroni cobbled together from records written in reformed Egyptian as well as Hebrew and modified Hebrew from the later Nephites, and at least one Jaredite language. These records he then redacted and commented upon to give us the “crazy patchwork” record of the Book of Mormon, which then went through further changes as it was translated into English (or rather, a puzzling mix of pre-\textit{kjv} Early Modern English influences\textsuperscript{353} coupled with \textit{kjv} English and some later English — what these various influences are and how and why they are there remains a hot topic for research and speculation). To study the Book of Mormon carefully is to unveil a complex combination of sources used by Mormon in his work of redaction. Still today, the more we learn about the Book of Mormon and its translation, the more complex and
varied it becomes. Surely we should be able to be comfortable with a complex and heavily edited Bible, especially when LDS scripture teaches us to expect heavy human editing over the centuries of its transmission.

If we can accept the Book of Mormon in spite of its human influences, we should be able to benefit from the divine richness of the Bible that remains in spite of questions, problems, and abundant human influences. We must temper our expectations and remain flexible, recognizing that some things we thought we understood may not necessarily be that way. But that same recognition needs to be applied to the decrees of scholars: what is declared as fact today may not be so tomorrow, and in my view, it would be a shame to abandon God in the process because of what may one day become an abandoned theory of humans.

In an age when the Documentary Hypothesis is shattering the faith of some Jews and Christians, the true but patchwork and human-smudged Book of Mormon may be just the thing to bear witness of the core truths of the Bible. The Book of Mormon may help remind us that the fingerprints of Deity are still in those ancient records in spite of human influences. The Book of Mormon may be just the thing, that is, if it in turn can withstand the assault of the Documentary Hypothesis and Higher Criticism on its own integrity.

Recognizing that multiple sources may have been combined to give us the Bible may be especially important in considering the content of the brass plates in the Book of Mormon. Sorensen, as previously noted, suggested that the content on the brass plates seems to favor the Elohist (E) source and may reflect northern origins. In his study of intertextuality between Nephi’s writings and the Old Testament account of David and Goliath, Ben McGuire observed that the apparent allusions to the David and Goliath story in the Book of Mormon are exclusively related to the shorter version of the story found in the Septuagint, and this may be useful in clarifying the origins of the biblical story.

If the assessment of literary dependency holds true [i.e., that Nephi’s account intentionally draws upon the David and Goliath story], we have discovered a unique source of insight into the formation of the traditional text of the Bible, as well as into the contents of the brass plates. There has been a long-standing debate with regard to the original composition of the Samuel texts. This debate has lingered because of the differences between various manuscripts and textual families. For the purposes of this study, this is particularly significant because, as Johan Lust writes, “As far as the Books of Samuel
are concerned, the story of David and Goliath is by far the most important of the contexts in which several manuscripts of the Septuagint, among which the early majuscule B, differ considerably from the present Hebrew text. The Greek version … is much shorter than the Hebrew. It omits 1 Samuel 17, 12–31.41.48b. 50.55–18, 6a.10–12.17–19.21b.30.” Lust further asks: “Which text is to be preferred, the longer or the shorter one? Which criteria allow us to make a proper choice?” The contribution of this study with regard to these questions is to note that the specific markers that Nephi uses within the Samuel text fall exclusively within the shorter source. Nephi only references 17:4–7, 11, 32, 34–37, 45–46, 51, and 54. The notable omission of the longer (and arguably later) additions to the text may well represent the notion that the text of Samuel contained in Nephi’s brass plates did not include these additions. This might also suggest some degree of confirmation for the idea that perhaps the earlier text of the account of David and Goliath stemmed from a northern source. The brass plates, belonging to the descendants of the northern tribe of Manasseh, may represent such a source.

The Book of Mormon may be exactly what the world of Bible scholars and students need to re-evaluate, revise, and perhaps even validate theories on the origin of scripture. If Nephi uses something from P, for example, and we have evidence for the authenticity of Nephi’s record, that’s the kind of evidence that ought to help us push back on any theories that require P to be post-exilic. When RT applies a popular theory to exclude Book of Mormon evidence, he may actually have things quite backwards. The evidence, if it holds, may be a useful tool in the end for revising weak spots in the theory. Of course, much further work remains to be done.

Conclusion

In his blog post, RT admits that the south-southwest direction, the description of fertile regions, turning east, etc., suggest a realistic trip. I love the way he sums it up:

In my opinion, the most plausible detail provided in the narrative of 1 Nephi 1–18 is the description of the general route followed by Lehi on his way through Arabia to the coastal location of Bountiful. From all the reporting of events that occurs in this part of the Book of Mormon (setting aside
the reference to Nahom), the few comments that clarify that the party of Lehi traveled to the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:5–6) and then moved along the Red Sea in a south-southeast direction down the western side of the Arabian peninsula (1 Nephi 16:13), “keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 16:14), and then turning east before reaching the coast of Irreantum (1 Nephi 17:1, 5) seem to represent informational detail most certainly rooted in real world geography. That is to say, the route appears to accurately account for the shape of the Arabian Peninsula in relation to the Red Sea and Arabian Sea and further agrees in a general way with what we know about the topography of the region and where cross-country travel was most practicable therein. Some of the more “fertile” parts of Arabia are indeed in the high western zones and foothills of the Hijaz, where the climate is slightly more temperate and rare rainfall in the mountains has contributed to the creation of oases on the eastern slopes that sustain more diverse flora and fauna. For millennia this strip of land “bordering the Red Sea” has enabled human transit and trade from north to south and facilitated the development of overland roads. So for Lehi to have followed this general track is notable and [here we go!] in theory could lend support to the assumption that the author of the account was trying to depict real history.356[emphasis and “here we go” are mine]

Hmm, plausible directions and description for going from Jerusalem to Bountiful — a previously mocked and unknown place that now has an excellent and plausible candidate nearly due east of Nahom — all amount to a general track that that is “notable.” OK, at least we have an admission that this achievement is notable. Then comes the fun part, where the impact of the evidence from Arabia gets boiled down to something that “in theory could lend support to the assumption that the author of the account was trying to depict real history.”

In my opinion, RT’s treatment here displays the mindset and training of “biblical minimalists,” who use what they feel are advanced tools of biblical scholarship to whittle away evidence and eviscerate unwelcome documents. I think there are good reasons to question the methodology, motivations, and meaning of such scholarship, and no reason to reject Lehi’s Trail or the growing body of evidence from Arabia for the plausibility and authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Biblical
scholarship has much we can learn from, but we must also recognize that scholars are not free from agendas, biases, and blindness. Those seeking an intellectually satisfying journey of faith should recognize how little substance can sometimes be behind ponderous claims of vast scholarly consensus.

So where do we stand in light of the new attacks on Lehi’s Trail? Here we have examined two creative weapons: 1) the Dream Map Theory, which posits that Joseph must have had access to a high-end European map of Arabia to obtain details such as Nehem in the right place, and 2) the Higher Criticism Axe (or the “Exodus Didn’t Really Happen Theory”) which would chop 1 Nephi into mere pulp fiction for its implicit and explicit references to Old Testament material from an allegedly late priestly source.

Regarding the second weapon, credible modern scholars have offered plausible reasons why the priestly source predates Nephi’s departure from Jerusalem. Scholars also remind us that regardless of when our version of Exodus was finally edited, its basic stories must have been known among the Hebrews long before. Further, there is significant evidence that an exodus of some kind from Egypt actually happened. A written account of the Exodus certainly could have been known to Nephi and his family, allowing him to recognize and refer to parallels between his journey to the promised land and that of Moses and his brethren. Higher Criticism here fails to trump hard evidence from the Arabian Peninsula.

If anything, the evidence from the Arabian Peninsula about the plausibility of Nephi’s journey also indirectly becomes evidence for the reality of a written Exodus tradition in his day. When properly understood, the evidence and witness from the Book of Mormon’s gold plates (and their citation of content from the brass plates) may ultimately be used to push back on some of the excesses and flawed assumptions that may come from the ongoing academic debates in biblical studies, just as the ancient silver scrolls from Ketef Hinnom near Jerusalem appear to further challenge the dating assigned by some scholars for the priestly source. The Book of Mormon teaches of great loss and change that would come to parts of the scriptures, consistent with some of the findings of Higher Criticism, but it also is a witness for the divine origins of the Bible and, among other things, the reality of the Exodus.

As for the first weapon, the Dream Map Theory is buoyed by RT’s confidence in the Higher Criticism Axe. Grudgingly recognizing that there is some appearance of evidence that theoretically could support
the assumption that Joseph was trying to write real history or something, there is a need to explain where this evidence came from. Why, it’s the Dream Map, of course. The best single map, though, is pathetically inadequate, as is any combination of the world’s best maps in Joseph’s day. The River Laman, Shazer, and Bountiful in the right places cannot be plausibly explained. Yes, there were some European maps that could have been used to select the name Nehem as one of many dozens of random names to pick — but why? For what purpose? Local color — color that nobody would notice for over a century?

The inability of even a modern Dream Map to explain the crown jewels of the Arabian evidence for Book of Mormon plausibility is well illustrated by one of the most interesting and counterintuitive aspects of Bountiful: its apparently pristine, uninhabited state when Nephi arrived. Remarkably, after having studied the best maps of Arabia and reviewed extensive information about Arabia, with the world’s treasures of knowledge at his fingertips as he prepared his heavily footnoted critique of Lehi’s Trail, our very educated and very modern RT concludes that it would “simply be impossible” for a place like Bountiful to be uninhabited.\(^{358}\) That argument was fairly reasonable once, until the day a weary Warren Aston and his fourteen-year-old daughter stepped off a boat to explore a secluded area that didn’t look at all promising from the sea, only to discover what careful work would confirm is a remarkable and still uninhabited candidate for Bountiful.\(^ {359}\) That’s one of many important details in our crown jewels from Arabia that even well trained modern scholars with a world of maps can’t quite figure out. If understanding Bountiful is beyond their abilities, it certainly wasn’t possible for Joseph to come up with that, no matter how many books and maps he downloaded from the Erie Information Supercanal.

Our modern critics also miss the significance of the eastward turn that so beautifully and plausibly links Nahom and Bountiful. And there are many more details from the evidence that simply cannot be explained from maps in Joseph’s day. Plucking Nehem off a map doesn’t explain the mystery of Nahom in the “right place” — meaning a Nahom from whence you can physically turn east and survive, a Nahom where you can find a verdant Bountiful nearly due east on the coast, a Nahom that is associated with ancient burial places, and a Nahom with a name linked to an ancient tribe that was obviously present in Lehi’s day, courtesy of archaeological evidence — three times over, in fact. Those details aren’t on any map that Joseph could have seen, unless it’s in somebody’s dreams.
I must emphasize that the Arabian evidence, useful as it is, must not be understood as “proving” the Book of Mormon to be true. In the Gospel plan, faith is essential, so we understand that evidence should generally play a secondary role such as helping individuals facing intellectual obstacles to have the courage and hope needed to move forward in faith. Sometimes, however, the evidence, mercifully, can do more than just help a traveler step over a nasty new barrier on the path. Sometimes the evidence is a gift box laden with nutrition and sweet delights for those willing to open it and taste. The evidence from Arabia is such a gift, in my opinion, and must not be minimalized, in spite of secular imperatives to do so at all costs. It is a case where there are mighty strengths in the Book of Mormon that demand to be considered and applied. So far, detailed, lengthy, and creative efforts to turn those strengths back into weakness have failed.

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Endnotes

181  RT, “Part 3.”

182  Philip Jenkins, “The Nahom Follies.”

183  A list of items available at the great Allegheny College Library as of 1821 is found in Library of Allegheny College, Catalogue (Meadville, PA: Allegheny College, 1823), published at Google Books: https://books.google.com/books?id=K5xAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false, where you can see an item from Niebuhr that features a map inside the book, as listed on page 44 of the Catalogue: https://books.google.com/books?id=K5xAAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=allegheny+college&hl=en&ei=6MxqTMKbKY7UngfL5rSIAg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=niebuhr&f=false or via this short cut: http://tinyurl.com/aliniebuhr.


185  300 miles is my estimate using Mapquest.com and modern roads. I subsequently learned that an estimate of 275 to 325 miles was provided by Rappleye and Smoot, “Book of Mormon Minimalists,” 181.


Carsten Niebuhr, *Voyage en Arabie & en d'autres pays circonvoisins*, 2 vols., translated from the German (Amsterdam: S.J. Baalde, 1776 (vol. 1), and 1780 (vol. 2)). Vol. 1 is at https://books.google.com/books?id=ZD1RAAAAcAAJ (but the map of Yemen is not visible in this digital version) and Vol. 2 is available at https://books.google.com/books?id=soT7fCFcLq0C. To see the map of Yemen, see vol. 1 at Archive.org: https://archive.org/details/voyageenarabiee00vatigoog. The fold out map of Yemen (Yemen only) is right after the list of figures and before page 1.


Ibid., 57.
194 Ibid., 40–57.
195 Ibid., 41.
199 James Gee, “The Nahom Maps,” 44.


205 James Gee, “The Nahom Maps.”

206 For example, a search for Arabian maps at World Digital Library is provided at http://www.wdl.org/en/search/?q=arabian+maps. For David Rumsey.com, use the Luna browser and search for Arabia, or use this short cut: http://tinyurl.com/rumseymaps.


213 Morse, American Universal Geography, 650.

214 Ibid., 653–654.

215 Ibid., 655–656.

216 Statements about Nikkum that I have found can be traced back to Niebuhr, Travels Through Arabia, vol. 1, 403 (however, the relevant page has a misprinted page number, 340, though it should be 403). See Bayard Taylor, Travels in Arabia New


222 RT, “Part 3.”


227 RT, “Part 3.”


231 “Irreantum,” *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*.


233 “Irreantum,” *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*.

234 RT, “Part 1.”

235 Ibid., “Part 3.”

236 Ibid., “Part 1” and “Part 2.”


239 RT, “Part 3.”

information from floating libraries, see 106–108); https://www.academia.edu/14076691/Joseph_Smith_Captain_Kidd_Lore_and_Treasure-Seeking_in_New_York_and_New_England_during_the_Early_Republic.


242 Ibid., 107–108.


244 Ibid., 19, as evidenced from a search for “bookstore” within Google Books, available via this shortcut: http://tinyurl.com/johnsonsearch1 (the original search is at https://books.google.com/books?id=7Mmw13BXOZsC&printsec=frontcover&dq=editions:R9zoAmOXrgwC&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjN5PqA2sPJAhWDHpQKHR95BnwQ6AEIHDAAb&v=snippet&q=bookstore&f=false).


255  Library of Allegheny College, Catalogue.

256  Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia*.


258  DavidRumsey.com, Publisher’s Note for D’Anville’s “*Orbis Veteribus Notus*,” http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~3039~410038:Orbis-Veteribus-Notus-.

260  J.B.B. d’Anville, *Géographie ancienne abrégée*, par m. d’Anville. *Avec un frontispice, et neuf cartes géographiques indispensables pour l’intelligence du texte*, 3 vols. Paris: Merlin, 1786. The maps (nine, according to the title) in the digitized versions given below are incomplete and only partially visible at best, but the maps from these volumes are shown by Schilb Antiquarian Books in part at http://www.ebay.com/itm/1769-DANVILLE-Atlas-Ancient-World-Scholarly-/260812854006, accessed Dec. 6, 2015 and also at the vendor’s website, http://schilbantiquarian.com/store/1768-danville-atlas-geography-africa-egypt-maps-holy-land-palestine-asia-rome/ (or this shortcut: http://tinyurl.com/arabianmaps2). The only full map of Arabia in this 1786 publication is that shown on this book’s version of “Orbis Veteribus Notus” which again lacks Nehem. The three volumes are available at the Hathi Trust Digital Collection, Hathitrust.org, http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008588108. Vol. 1, dealing with Europe, can be found at http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433000467856;view=1up;seq=47. Before page 229 in the digitized vol. 1 is the map “Orbis Romani” which contains a portion of Arabia with few details. It is unclear if the volume that was digitized contained “Orbis Veteribus Notus,” which as discussed above shows all of Arabia
but without Nehem. Vol. 2, dealing with Asia and beginning with a short section on Arabia, is at: http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433000467864;view=1up;seq=15. There is a fold-out map of “Les Tribus” (the Tribes) in vol. 2 at page 152 with Palestine, ending with the northern portion of Egypt and a small section of Arabia, but most of it is not visible in the digitization. Vol. 3, dealing with Egypt and other parts of Africa, is at http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc1.0037121650;view=1up;seq=5 and http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nnc1.0037121650. At Google Books, vol. 3 of Geographie ancienne abrégée (Avec cartes) is at https://books.google.com/books?id=3TNSAAAAAcAAJ.


262 James Gee, “The Nahom Maps.”


265 A Catalogue of the Medical Library Belonging to the Pennsylvania Hospital.


276 Ibid., 514.

59; available as individual volumes at the Library of Congress, http://lccn.loc.gov/52060000, and available digitally at Monticello. org, http://tjlibraries.monticello.org/tjandreading/sowerby.html. The search tool is at http://tjlibraries.monticello.org/search/search. html (use the Google tool there on the lower half of the page; the first search tool doesn’t work well).


280  Aaron Arrowsmith and Samuel Lewis, A New and Elegant General Atlas, comprising all the new Discoveries, to the present Time, Philadelphia: John Conrad & Co., 1804; an 1812 printing of this volume is at Archive.org: https://archive.org/details/newelegantgenera00arro.


282  RT, “Part 1.”


284  Richard Elliott Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible.

285  James K. Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt.

286  James K. Hoffmeier, Ancient Israel in Sinai.

287  Ibid., Kindle edition, chapter 4, section “II. The Biblical Sources.”

288  Ibid., chapter 11, section “I. The Origins of Israel’s God.”


290  Ibid., 499–500.


294 Ibid.


296 Joshua Berman, “Was There an Exodus?,” Mosaic Magazine, March 2, 2015; http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2015/03/was-there-an-exodus/.


298 Neal Rappleye and Stephen O. Smoot, “Book of Mormon Minimalists and the NHM Inscriptions.”


301 Hoffmeier, “‘These Things Happened,’” in Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?, Kindle edition, section “The Exodus and Theology.”

302 Ibid.

303 Ibid.

304 Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt, 52–68, 224.

305 Ibid., 94–95, 224.

306 Ibid., 176–191, 224.

307 Ibid., 146–153, 224.

309 Ibid., Chapter 11, section “V. Conclusion.”

310 Joshua Berman, “Was There an Exodus?”


314 RT, “Part 1.”

315 Garfinkel, “The Birth & Death of Biblical Minimalism.”


318 This concept and additional relationships between the Book of Moses and the Book of Mormon will be explored in a forthcoming publication at *The Interpreter*, and some preliminary details are


320 RT, “Part 1.”


322 Consider, for example, the deliberate ways in which his slaying of Laban is patterned after David and Goliath, serving as an important basis for his descendants in recognizing the validity of Nephi’s claim to be the rightful ruler of the people. This is explained in detail by Ben McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon” and Ben McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath: A Reappraisal.” Also see Terrence L. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus.”

323 RT, “Part 1.”


328 Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible?

331 Ibid.
332 Ibid., 174–187.
335 Ibid., 171–172.
336 Ibid., 175.
337 Ibid., 187.
338 Ibid., 207–216.
339 Kevin L. Barney, “Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis.”
340 David E. Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014). Some of Bokovoy’s views may be troubling to some LDS readers, such as his leaning toward Blake Ostler’s “expansion theory” for the Book of Mormon, arguing that Joseph may have taken a simpler ancient text and expanded it, enriching it with detailed prophecies about Christ that the Nephites might not have actually had. I struggle with that notion but still feel this work is a valuable one for serious LDS students of the Bible to consider.
See the Documentary Hypothesis Tab at Three Jews, Four Opinions, ThreeJews.net, with tables from posts in 2008–2009; http://www.threejews.net/search/label/documentary%20hypothesis.


John Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates’ and Biblical Scholarship.”


See the previously discussed “Bible Texts on Silver Amulets Dated to First Temple Period,” Haaretz.com, Sept. 19, 2004, and related references.

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Lehi in Arabia, DVD.
Abstract: The prominence of circles and circular motion has been one present in scientific discussion of the structure of the universe from Aristotle to Einstein. Development through Ptolemy, Copernicus and Kepler created elliptical variations, but in essence, the scientific community has been unable to break free of a certain degree of circular motion that ultimately seems fundamental to the very nature of the universe. Just as the circle featured prominently in Aristotle’s cosmology, it remains an integral aspect of reality, though perhaps it is more difficult to pick out in its present forms as planetary ellipses and curved space-time. In this paper I analyze the intellectual tradition surrounding the circle as a reflection of God’s eternal nature as discussed in Doctrine and Covenants 3:2. Essentially, I argue that the traditional Mormon conception of “one eternal round” is evidence of the eternal and divine nature of circles, which, the tradition indicates, is an inescapable feature of physical reality, and indicative of God and his purposes.

Heaven-Earth Resonances

In the premodern West, people reflexively assumed that the heavens and the earth mirrored each other. Science was not merely the art of discovery on earth, but it was a means for discovering truths on earth, which could yield insight about the heavens. It was assumed that there was correspondence between macrocosm (the heavens) and microcosm (the earth). Of such a worldview, Margaret Osler writes:

Individual objects on the earth — minerals, plants, and gems — contain the signature of the heavenly bodies to which they supposedly correspond. An adept who understands the
correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm as well as the symbolic relationships among things in this world, is able to read these signatures.¹

In short, the universe was taken to be permeated with the stamp of the divine. The nature and will of the divine was thought to inform and reflect itself in the patterns that ordered the operation of nature.² Symbolism then, was considered an essential part of interpreting those operations.

Then came the scientific revolution and with it the concept of a mechanical universe. In this mechanical universe, there is no longer purpose. Under the modern worldview, the universe is orderly, but it no longer has inherent religious or metaphysical meaning. With this change, is it possible that we may have lost something? By removing ourselves from a thought world where metaphysical and theological contemplation of the universe is considered acceptable, we limit ourselves to a single-valued understanding of the world around us — an understanding devoid of any layered meaning.

From a Mormon perspective, this worldview does not seem to hold up. While Mormons often pay lip service to the idea that “the book of God’s work” (the created world) can yield spiritual insight, just as “the book of God’s word” (scripture) does, it is usually only in a limited sense that we mean this. C.S. Lewis astutely clarifies that for our premodern ancestors, the universe “had a built-in significance. And that in two senses; as having “significant form” … and as a manifestation of the wisdom and goodness that created it.”³ When a Mormon says that nature can teach us about God, it is typically only in Lewis’s latter sense that he means this, i.e., nature witnesses of a creator. We are predisposed by modern science to venture no further than this general insight. But is this vague tribute to the premodern worldview really what Mormonism espouses? What about Lewis’s first sense? Can the form of the universe or its components really be significant? Can it yield specific insights and truths about God and his nature, not just witness to his existence? Many Mormon prophets were shown the vast expanse of the universe as a starting point for learning spiritual truths. The Mormon temple ceremony reviews the creation of the universe, and then emphasizes learning through symbolism. Moses 6:63 tells us that things on the earth, in the earth, and under the earth have a likeness in the heavens. While the naturalistic worldview of modern science does not incline one to search for heaven-earth resonances, it seems that being Mormon would.
Circles

The Greek philosopher Empedocles is popularly quoted as saying, “The nature of God is a circle of which the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.” From the time of the ancient Greeks, the cosmos were assumed to be circular and complete in nature, and in turn, this was assumed to reflect the nature of the divine. The laws and nature of the universe as being fundamentally rooted in circularity (here curved, closed-circuit motion and patterns) was a facet of both religious and scientific thought that would continue throughout the premodern era. Here, of course, it is important to note that in this paper I will use the term “circle” loosely, indicating a route, line, or movement that starts and finishes at the same place — i.e., both circles and ellipses (see endnote 5).

The prominence of circles and circular motion is a persistent theme in scientific writings spanning from Aristotle to Einstein. Under the Aristotelian worldview, uniform circular motion was a fundamental feature of the superlunar cosmos and consequently of the perfection of the gods. These and other Aristotelian ideas would become deeply embedded philosophical traditions in the West and despite undergoing various permutations in accordance with the development of scientific theory, would nonetheless continue to be influential and relevant. In modern times, the groundbreaking field of Einsteinian relativity has resurrected the notion of a circular, curved cosmos. The theory of general relativity has led to new conceptions of space, time, gravity, and their interaction, culminating in a four-dimensional circular or curved spacetime.

Likewise the persistence of circles is a timeless one in the religious sphere. Talk of God as infinite and without beginning or end has often led to representational discussion of God and his qualities as like those of a circle. While in this modern age such dialogue is of course kept strictly separated from similar topics in the scientific world, such was not the case in Aristotle’s time, his cosmology being considered inherently religious and vice versa. Interestingly enough, the modern religious world is not devoid of such scientific-religious discussion. Mormon concepts of cosmic circles and their ties to the perfection of God are reminiscent of traditional Aristotelian conceptions of the same. Indeed, the prominence of the Aristotelian tradition’s circle developed and remained relevant throughout the advancements of Western science, culminating in the curvature of contemporary Einsteinian spacetime.
and receiving a religious context reminiscent of its origins in Mormon theology of the divine nature.

**Aristotle on Circles: Uniform Circular Motion**

The scientific worldview of Aristotle was the primary and unquestioned one for more than two thousand years. Intricate and ranging across a wide variety of the sciences, the Aristotelian worldview was yet relatively simple in its basic components. Fundamentally, the Aristotelian universe was essentialist and teleological. Within its framework all objects in the universe had natural essences — a sort of inherent nature. Hand in hand with the essentialism of Aristotle’s universe was the fact that it was an end-driven system — teleological and purposeful. In illustration, it was this teleology that lent the traditional and clean explanation of falling objects: with the earth as stationary center of the universe as per thought of the time, the natural place of “earthy” or solid objects becomes the center of the universe, and consequently solid objects fall towards this center when dropped. Earth as the central and therefore “heaviest” element was followed sequentially by water, air, and then fire. In this worldview the superlunar region was the realm of the divine and therefore associated with a perfection assumed to be inherently different from anything to be found in the sublunar. Accordingly, the element of the superlunar was an ether different altogether from these other three elements. The ether of the superlunar region was essentially defined by its “natural inclination” to travel circularly, and this explained the movement of celestial bodies such as the moon, planets, and sun, which were thought to revolve around the earth.

Richard DeWitt, a prominent scholar in the history of science, gives an Aristotelian explanation of this phenomenon of the superlunar region. He explains this circular motion as something caused by the intimate connection of the cosmos with the divine:

> Whereas the heavens are a place of almost unchanging perfection, the only sort of absolute perfection would be the perfection of the gods. So in something like the way I move out of a desire to be near my wife, the heavenly bodies must move out of a desire to emulate the perfection of the gods. The best way for the heavenly bodies to emulate the perfection of the gods would be through perfect motion, and perfectly circular motion at uniform, unchanging speed, is the most perfect sort of motion.⁶
For Aristotle, then, the source of the continuous and therefore circular motion of the heavenly bodies was something tied up in the mysterious connection of the heavens with the gods.

As stated above, in Aristotle’s worldview the universe consisted of two separate and distinct regions: the sublunar and the superlunar. The sublunar region — the realm of humans — was a place of imperfection, starkly contrasting with the perfect and unchanging circular motions of the superlunar. Aristotle truly believed that “this circular motion is necessarily primary. For the perfect is naturally prior to the imperfect, and the circle is a perfect thing. This cannot be said of any straight line.” Indeed, this belief in perfect circles and uniform circular motion as constituting fundamental, essential features of the universe would become so deeply held that for the next two thousand years it would be treated as fact — a given of scientific theory. DeWitt points out that much like Newtonian assumptions of absolute space and time (only recently challenged with the rise of relativity) these were “philosophical or conceptual facts” that were so deeply held and fundamental to the prevailing worldview of the time that they were mistaken for empirical facts.

Development: Ptolemy, Copernicus, and Kepler — More Circles and the Ellipse

The centrality of the circle and circular motion to the scientific model of the cosmos was not one that died with the Aristotelian worldview, though it was elaborated upon, amended, and eventually even totally replaced. First in succession was Ptolemy’s astronomical system, positing perfectly circular planetary orbits traveling at constant speeds around a stationary earth — an Aristotelian, geocentric model of the cosmos. In the Ptolemaic system, the heavens were intended to be the model of symmetry, perfection, and circularity that Aristotle had posited. However, in contrast to Aristotle, Ptolemy endeavored to take the rough notion of uniform circular motion in planetary orbits and develop it into a precise, mathematical theory. This theory was the first in history to be capable of accurate astronomical prediction and explanation. However, giving a predictive and explanatory theory, while yet preserving Aristotle’s perfect circles, required complex features such as epicycles, equant points, and eccentrics.

While the nature of each of these features will not be discussed in detail here, their advantage was significant. Incorporating them gave Ptolemy flexibility to create a wide range of motions by using a system
of layered, interrelated perfect circles. In particular, they allowed him to account for “retrograde motion of the planets” (when planets appear to move backward from their usual motion) — something that Aristotle’s theory could not. In general, Ptolemy’s system endeavored to preserve the integrity of Aristotelian cosmology based on the principle of perfectly uniform circular motion while rendering such a cosmology useful and predictive. The extra features were tools that simultaneously could allow for uniform circular motion while forcing the system to produce accurate predictions. Where Aristotle’s theory had failed to provide predictive power and did not achieve perfect agreement with observations of planetary orbits (in the case of retrograde motion), Ptolemy’s theory did, if somewhat artificially.

Next came the Copernican system, which is famous today for its revolutionary heliocentricity. In practice though, the Copernican system remained very true to Ptolemy’s Aristotelian background insofar as it retained a position of prominence for the perfect circle and perfectly uniform circular motion, simply applying them to a new, heliocentric universe. While the Copernican system was relatively comparable to the Ptolemaic in terms of predictive power by shifting to a sun-centered universe, Copernicus was able to eliminate Ptolemy’s equants and create a somewhat cleaner model in one sense. However, in other ways Copernicus’s model was more problematic technically. While the model could be considered less artificial (in some ways) in its attempts to preserve both accuracy and a uniform circular foundation, it had a new problem — empirical evidence of the time (and in fact until the nineteenth century) heavily supported a stationary earth over Copernicus’s orbiting one.10

Interestingly though, the features used in these two systems to both preserve the Aristotelian conceptions of perfect circles and uniform circular motion and to optimize useful predictive and explanatory power are each, in themselves, perfectly circular in nature. Perhaps even more indicative of just how deeply the Aristotelian perfect circle had permeated the philosophical foundation of the scientific community is the fact that even as Copernicus turned from an earth-centered to a sun-centered cosmos, in what by many was considered a radical scandal, he remained unwilling to sacrifice the Aristotelian integrity of his system as far as it concerned the circle and circular motion.

The next significant astronomical model11 was also the one that would, when combined with other contemporary scientific developments and discovery (the telescopic observations of Galileo for example),
signal the end of the Aristotelian worldview. This was Kepler’s model, with its groundbreaking planetary laws. With their indisputable powers of precision and explanation, these three laws would, despite the resistance of two thousand years of philosophical entrenchment, eventually overthrow the two pillars of Aristotelian astronomy: the perfect circle and uniform circular motion. Indeed, with the overthrow of the Aristotelian scientific worldview, many would argue that the cosmologically fundamental nature of circles and circular motion had come to an end. However, I posit, rather, that two of Kepler’s laws were in fact variations on the nature of planetary movement that, while costing the Aristotelian worldview its premier place in the scientific community, nonetheless preserved a model of circular or curved movement.

Under Kepler’s first law, the perfect circle of planetary orbits was replaced by the ellipse. An ellipse is a sort of elongated circle — with two central foci, as opposed to one center point. According to Kepler, each planet’s orbit held the sun at one of these foci, with the other focus being empty. Kepler’s second law of planetary motion overthrew Aristotle’s uniform circular motion with a model that swept out equal amounts of area (within the elliptical orbit) in equal amounts of time — essentially a non-uniform orbit with a planet speeding up and slowing down depending on its position. While these shifts from perfect circles and uniform motion to ellipses and non-uniform motion were staggering at the time of their inception (sufficiently so that they were significant hindrances to their initial acceptance) they still remain true to the fundamental principle of curved, non-perfect circular motion. This is significant. There still remained, at the center of Kepler’s universe, closed-circuit, curved patterns of motion. In fact, it is easily arguable that the venerable notion of uniform planetary motion was abandoned only in the most obvious sense — curvilinear velocity varied, but areal velocity remained constant. So while the notion of unchanging circular motion had perhaps been lost, the notion of complete circular motion remained intact. In addition, it may be helpful to remember that mathematically, the circle, though a different conic section than the ellipse, is in fact an ellipse with zero eccentricity.

Despite these developments of the astronomical model itself however, the question of what keeps the heavenly bodies in these orbits (albeit now elliptical ones) remained. For with the loss of Aristotelian essentialism, so was lost the explanation for perpetual curved motion — the why, rather than the how. While one answer to this question came with Newtonian physics and gravity (not discussed in this paper), it is here that modern science of the last century contributes in a fascinating way.
General Relativity and the Curvature of Spacetime

In 1916 Einstein published his general theory of relativity. Under General Relativity, motion affects space and time in just the same way that gravitational forces do. In other words, an accelerating reference frame becomes indistinguishable from a strong gravitational field. While the mechanics of this theory and its implications are complex, in essence general relativity causes space and time to take on four dimensions, and the nature of gravity makes a fundamental shift from its Newtonian origins. In Einsteinian relativity, the “mutually attractive gravitational force” of Newtonian physics is replaced with a view that explains “gravitational effects” instead as those of massive objects causing the curvature of four-dimensional spacetime, much like the placing of a heavy object in the center of a trampoline.

![The Warping of the Geometry of Spacetime Due to Mass (Connell)](image)

As this happens, the shortest path between two points becomes a curved line. These “straight lines” in curved space are called geodesics and cause the bending of starlight and other observable phenomenon. Thus, the movement of the planets is found to be inertial motion in a straight line, rather than the effect of some sort of “mutually attractive force” — the line simply happens to be in a curved space that creates a roughly closed-circuit ellipse. These sorts of circular motions in the cosmos are not limited to planetary orbits but extend from the rotation of planets on their axes to the circular motions of the Milky Way galaxy itself. In regard to the fundamental nature of circularity in the universe, Einstein himself concluded:

The results of calculation indicate that if matter be distributed uniformly, the universe would necessarily be spherical (or
elliptical). Since in reality the detailed distribution of matter is not uniform, the real universe will deviate in individual parts from the spherical, i.e., the universe will be quasi-spherical.\(^\text{13}\)

**One Eternal Round: Mormon Perspectives on the Centrality of the Circle**

Mormon scripture explicitly describes the nature of God as being fundamentally, if metaphorically, circular: “For God doth not walk in crooked paths, neither doth he turn to the right hand nor to the left, neither doth he vary from that which he hath said, therefore his paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round”.\(^\text{14}\)

However, the theme of circles and circularity has been a part of traditional Christian discussion of the eternal nature of God since the Middle Ages. Medieval theologian Nicholas of Cusa studied the circle for theological insight. In an argument stunningly similar to that of curved spacetime rendering the universe fundamentally circular, he posits the nature of God as being fundamentally circular. According to Nicholas of Cusa, God’s path is an infinite circle, which means that any finite segment of the circle must be a straight line (otherwise the segment would produce a finite circle). Thus God is both finite and infinite, both rectilinear and circular in the manner of achieving his ends.\(^\text{15}\) We might say (echoing D&C 3:2) that he varies neither to the right nor to the left, but his course is one eternal round.

Again, in D&C 35:1, Mormon scripture highlights this same truth: “Listen to the voice of the Lord your God, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whose course is one eternal round, the same today as yesterday, and forever.”\(^\text{16}\) Here, we get a sense of the eternal nature of God and of its fitting symbolism in the circle and circular motion. Indeed, this emphasis on the perfection of the circle, and its consequent association with the divine, is reminiscent of Aristotle. The circle, with neither beginning nor end, of which any point is both the first and the last, could just as well be dubbed Alpha and Omega.

The book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price also brings to light interesting aspects of the circularity of the Latter-day Saint cosmos, especially as presented visually in Facsimile 2:
Here the universe is presented in an almost Aristotelian-looking two-dimensional circularity, but we see that a possible reason for such is the ultimately trumping center of God and his dwelling place. That is, we see a parallel to the curvature of spacetime. Here, in a religious application of Einstein’s relativity, the trumping significance (and/or mass) of God bends space and time around him, creating the “straight” paths of eternity, namely, the geodesic. In fact, prominent Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley speaks of this facsimile and its connections to the cosmos when he tells us, “it is round, the universal concept of completeness”\textsuperscript{17} and “brings the cosmos down to earth.”\textsuperscript{18}

Nibley stimulates an interesting discussion with his provocative suggestion that “the placing of the hypocephalus (Facsimile 2) between earth and heaven (Facsimiles 1 and 3) points to its function as a link between the two.”\textsuperscript{19} What sort of link could this be? Under the Aristotelian worldview, to speak of a link between the sublunar and the superlunar regions, i.e., between earth and heaven, was a short-lived discussion.
In his model of the cosmos, the difference between heaven and earth could not be greater because they manifest the difference between perfection and imperfection. Aristotle himself said that “we may infer with confidence that there is something beyond the bodies that are about us on this earth, different and separate from them; and that the superior glory of its nature is proportionate to its distance from this world of ours.” However, the development of scientific thought on the matter, as traced in its progression from Aristotle to Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, and finally Einstein, has led to a homogenization of the universe — no longer is the superlunar region considered separate and distinct in its physical laws and essential nature. Under this concept, then, comes potential meaning for Nibley’s suggestion of cosmological models as a link between heaven and earth — they teach us what sort of universe we inhabit. Zelia Nuttal, a scholar of ancient religion, suggests (quoted in One Eternal Round) that the facsimile’s model is thus “an image of the nocturnal heaven as it is of a vast terrestrial state … established as a reproduction upon earth of the harmonious order and fixed laws which apparently govern the heavens.” Such models teach us that the heavens, the realm of God, are just like earth, the realm of mankind. Here, for the first time, we see suggestions of Mormon doctrines of deification — if God’s realm is just like ours, intuitively the next conceptual step is that on some fundamental level, God is just like us.

Viewed through a religious lens, the connection of the circle with both science and the divine can no longer be considered an accident but becomes rather a teaching tool on the nature of the universe and our place in it. This fundamental connection between the cosmos and the divine is further embedded in the very language of circles. A thesaurus will cite synonyms of “circle” that immediately bring to mind the astronomical: ring, sphere, cycle, halo, orbit, revolution. More neutral entries include “round” and “wheel,” and those with theological connotations range from “crown,” “halo,” and “wreath,” to “compass.” Though many will argue about whether the fundamental philosophical concept of the circle in science comes prior to the concept in religion, or vice versa, the fact remains that regardless of which may be prior, our very language speaks to an intimate connection of the circle with both the universe and the divine.

By examining the persistence of circles throughout the development of Western science, we see that there seems to be something eternal in their connection to the cosmos. From the Aristotelian tradition through the modern advancements of Einstein’s spacetime, the circle
as something fundamental to the universe has, despite undergoing permutation, refused to be removed from the scientific dialogue. With the context of Mormon doctrine, I suggest a return to the implications originally applied by Aristotle — there is something intrinsically eternal and divine about the circle that inextricably ties it to the nature of our universe. In other words, hearkening back to a premodern worldview, the circle is a heaven-earth resonance.

**Final Thoughts**

C.S. Lewis says that “nature gives most of her evidence in answer to the questions we ask her.” The plague of the modern religionist is that we are conditioned by our scientific worldview to no longer ask spiritual questions of nature. While my argument for the heaven-earth resonance of circles may ultimately be a flawed reach for parallels and may not even accurately reflect the divine, it is my attempt to resurrect the thought world of Moses 6:63. That is, the thought world of our premodern ancestors — the thought world where the natural universe around us has meaning and purpose — can teach us spiritual truths. Dan Burton and David Grandy write of a “multi-storied universe” in their book, *Magic, Mystery, and Science*:

> Today any criticism of astrology [or, I would contend, heaven-earth resonances] employs the straightforward, confident language of science, … the assumption being that reality is a single linear story made up of precise, single-valued meanings. Ideally, those meanings are mathematical values, which is to say they lack metaphysical or spiritual import. … however, [others] sometimes protest that the world is multi-storied and that science selectively captures just one story and then exalts it to the exclusion of all the others.

Looking for heaven-earth resonances is not to discount the scientific findings of our time. Rather it is to look beyond those findings for further meaning. It is to believe in more commerce between heaven and earth.
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Endnotes

1 Margaret J. Osler, Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010), 32.


5 Used here of course in the physical, not philosophical or argumentative sense. Throughout the course of this paper I will use the terms “circle,” “circular,” and “circularity” to refer to the circles and ellipses that constitute the closed-circuit conic sections (i.e., not the parabola and hyperbola). While not entirely accurate linguistically, I have not found a satisfying alternative to express the general category of the continuous conic section. When referring to a circle proper, I will hereafter use the term “perfect circle,” “perfectly circular,” or “perfect circularity.” While such a characterization combining the perfect circle and the ellipse may seem problematic to some, it may prove helpful to remember that mathematically, the circle, though a different conic section than the ellipse, is in fact an ellipse with zero eccentricity.


8 DeWitt, *Worldviews*, 34.


10 The most significant problem with positing a heliocentric universe at this time was the failure to empirically detect stellar parallax, or the shifting of the stars that would be necessary and expected in such a universe. This was not accomplished until a sufficiently powerful telescope was developed c. 1838, and prior to this time the immense distance to the stars that required such a powerful telescope was not considered scientifically plausible.

11 Insofar as it represented only a return to geocentrism under the same mathematical model of the Copernican system, the Tychonic cosmological model will not be discussed in this paper.

12 DeWitt, *Worldviews*, 230-232. It is important to note that with general relativity, Einstein also proved the precession of the perihelion of Mercury, in which Mercury’s planetary orbit does not start and end in the exact same place for every rotation around the sun, but varies slightly each time. This anomalous variation may seem problematic for my definition of a circle as “a route, line, or movement that starts and finishes at the same place.” However, the orbit nevertheless remains, in essentials, elliptical and I do not believe that this slight variation poses a serious problem for the purposes of this paper’s discussion and analogy.


14 Doctrine and Covenants 3:2


16 See also Book of Mormon — 1 Nephi 10:9, Alma 37:12


22 The doctrine of deification shows plainly that to posit circularity as both a feature of the universe and of the divine, is not to suggest that all aspects of Mormon theology reflect circularity. While discussion of such is outside the scope of this paper, non-circular, “linear” progression is also a fundamental aspect of Mormon theology and its conception of the divine.

23 Lewis, The Discarded Image, 223.

24 Burton & Grandy, Magic, Mystery, and Science, 111.

Images


Abstract: The biographical introduction of Alma the Elder into the Book of Mormon narrative (Mosiah 17:2) also introduces the name Alma into the text for the first time, this in close juxtaposition with a description of Alma as a “young man.” The best explanation for the name Alma is that it derives from the Semitic term ġlm (Hebrew ʿelem), “young man,” “youth,” “lad.” This suggests the strong probability of an intentional wordplay on the name Alma in the Book of Mormon’s underlying text: Alma became “[God’s] young man” or “servant.” Additional lexical connections between Mosiah 17:2 and Mosiah 14:1 (quoting Isaiah 53:1) suggest that Abinadi identified Alma as the one “to whom” or “upon whom” (ʿal-mî) the Lord was “reveal[ing]” his arm as Abinadi’s prophetic successor. Alma began his prophetic succession when he “believed” Abinadi’s report and pled with King Noah for Abinadi’s life. Forced to flee, Alma began his prophetic ministry “hidden” and “concealed” while writing the words of Abinadi and teaching them “privately.” The narrative’s dramatic emphasis on this aspect of Alma’s life suggests an additional thread of wordplay that exploits the homonymy between Alma and the Hebrew root *ʾlm, forms of which mean “to hide,” “conceal,” “be hidden,” “be concealed.” The richness of the wordplay and allusion revolving around Alma’s name in Mosiah 17–18 accentuates his importance as a prophetic figure and founder of the later Nephite church. Moreover, it suggests that Alma’s name was appropriate given the details of his life and that he lived up to the positive connotations latent in his name.

“And He Was a Young Man”

As I have noted in a previous study,1 one of the most transparent examples of onomastic wordplay in the Book of Mormon text is found in Mosiah 17:2. This verse mentions the name Alma for the first time, and the name’s bearer, Alma the Elder, is introduced into Mormon’s Abinadi narrative:

But there was one among them whose name was Alma ['lm'] he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a young man [cf. Heb. 'elem] and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them; therefore he began to plead with the king that he would not be angry with Abinadi, but suffer that he might depart in peace.

Hugh Nibley posited many years ago that the name Alma means “young man.” Paul Hoskisson concurred with Nibley, analyzing “Alma” as cognate with 'elem which had been *glm at an earlier stage of the Hebrew language) with the meaning “youth” or “lad” (cf. Ugaritic glm; Old South Arabic glm, “child, boy, youth”; and Arabic gulâm, “boy, youth, lad; slave; servant, waiter”). Alma is an attested Semitic name but is not found in the biblical corpus, although it may be related to the personal and place name Alemeth [or Alameth] and the place name Almon. The textual juxtaposition of the name Alma with “young man” — its

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2 Hugh W. Nibley (An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 3rd ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 76) wrote that “Alma” can mean “a young man, a coat of mail, a mountain, or a sign.”


4 Cf. CAT 1.14 ii 40-41.


9 1 Chronicles 7:8; 8:36; 9:42. In the latter two passages, Alemeth is the name of a descendant of Saul, a member of the displaced royal family.

10 1 Chronicles 6:60 [MT 6:45]: Alemeth occurs as a place name in the tribal area of Benjamin.

evident etymological meaning — strongly suggests intentional authorial wordplay on the name (or a play on the meaning of the name).

In this essay, I revisit the wordplay on Alma in Mosiah 17:2 in order to show that the wordplay goes well beyond the polyptoton\textsuperscript{12} on Alma and ʿelem there. I will incorporate a previous observation by Aaron P. Schade and myself\textsuperscript{13} that the text of Mosiah 17:2 also alludes to Abinadi’s use of Isaiah 53:1 (in Mosiah 14:1), converting the phrase “to whom” (ʿal-mî) into a literary echo of Alma’s name in Mosiah 14:1. Moreover, I will show that the text of Mosiah 17–18 includes a much lengthier paronomasia that exploits the homonymy of the name Alma and the Hebrew verbal root ʿlm, to “hide,” “conceal,” “be hidden,” “be concealed,” “hide oneself.”\textsuperscript{14}

**Alma, God’s Young Man and Descendant of Nephi**

If the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon is any indication, we are fortunate to be able to detect the wordplay of Alma and “young man” (ʿelem) in Mosiah 17:2 at all.\textsuperscript{15} The words “he also being a descendant of Nephi & he was a young man” were almost omitted from the printer’s manuscript when Oliver Cowdery made this copy from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. He subsequently reinserted these phrases in supralinear fashion into the printer’s manuscript. Writes Royal Skousen:

> There are no similar words or phrases here that could have led Oliver Cowdery to visually skip this part of the text. Instead, his eye seems to have skipped down past an entire line of [the original manuscript] as initially copied from [the original manuscript] into [the printer’s manuscript]. Later, probably while proofing [the printer’s manuscript] against [the original manuscript], he discovered his error and supplied the text that he had originally omitted (the supralinear insertion is in heavier ink). Clearly, the passage would have read perfectly fine without the added text;

\textsuperscript{12} Polyptoton = a wordplay on cognate terms — i.e., words derived from the same root.

\textsuperscript{13} Aaron P. Schade and Mathew L. Bowen, “To Whom Is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?” *Religious Educator* 16/2 (2015): 91-111.

\textsuperscript{14} See, e.g., HALOT, 834-835.

thus there was no motivation to insert this line of text except that it was the reading of the original manuscript.16

Oliver Cowdery must have attached some importance to the nearly missed clauses in the text, hence his re-inscribing them into the printer’s manuscript “in heavier ink” as if for conscious or subconscious emphasis. However, Oliver probably did not appreciate that his restoration of the missed text preserved strong evidence of intertextuality between Alma the Elder’s narrative biographical introduction and Nephi’s autobiographical introduction (as well as Enos’s and Zeniff’s later autobiographical introductions in Enos 1:1 and Mosiah 9:1).

Indeed, the aforementioned wordplay on “Alma” as a “young man” becomes even more striking in view of earlier wordplay in the Book of Mormon. For example, when we compare the biographical introduction of Alma to his ancestor Nephi’s autobiographical introduction and a related biographical description of himself and why his faith diverged from his brothers, the textual dependence of Alma’s biography on Nephi’s autobiography is clear:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Nephi 1:1; 1 Nephi 2:16</th>
<th>Mosiah 17:2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I, <em>Nephi,</em> having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father [ʾăbî] and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. (1 Nephi 1:1)</td>
<td>But there was one among them whose name was <em>Alma,</em> he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a <em>young man,</em> and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them; therefore he began to plead with the king that he would not be angry with Abinadi, but suffer that he might depart in peace.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And it came to pass that I, *Nephi,* being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father [ʾăbî]; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. (1 Nephi 2:16)

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On one hand, the onomastic wordplay on Alma and “young man” imitates the autobiographical wordplay of 1 Nephi 1:1 (on Nephi and nfr, “good[ly],” “goodness,” etc.). On the other hand, the wordplay cunningly incorporates Nephi’s subsequent autobiographical description of himself as “young.” Beyond this, the two texts from Nephi’s personal writings share numerous lexical connections that Mosiah 17:2 utilizes — e.g., Nephi, knowledge/know, my father, “taught in all the learning of my father”/“did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father” (see further below).

Against the backdrop of pre-Lehite biblical scripture, the narrator’s evoking of the term ʿelem through wordplay recalls the David-Saul-Jonathan cycle wherein ʿelem occurs twice. In the King James Version of the Bible, it is translated “young man” in one instance (“if I say thus unto the young man [lāʾelem]...,” 1 Samuel 20:22) and “stripling” in the other: “Enquire thou whose son the stripling [šēʾal ʾattā ben-mî zeh haʾālem] is” (1 Samuel 17:56). Thus the juxtaposition Alma with “young man,” in addition to linking Alma with his ancestor Nephi, serves to associate Alma with the positive portrayal of the ʿelem David in 1 Samuel 17.

The ʿelem (“young man”) in 1 Samuel 20:22 was clearly a servant (i.e., a kind of ʿebed) and thus in this instance preserves the semantic nuance of ʿelm as found in Arabic ġulām, a “young man” being a “servant.” Here we might compare the epithets ascribed to Kirta (or Kirtu) in the Ugaritic Epic of Kirta, ʿelm il (“young man of El,” KTU/CAT 1.14, col I, line 40-41; col II, line 8-9) and ʿbd il (“servant of El,” KTU/CAT 1.14, col. II, lines, 49, 51). This sense of ʿelem is perhaps conceptually important to the later narrative’s depiction of Alma as God’s servant (Mosiah 18:12; 26:20; 27:14; cf. 17:3) and the spiritual successor of Abinadi (Mosiah 26:15, 20). Nevertheless, there is still more to the narrator’s onomastic portrait of Alma.


Alma, the One “To Whom” and “Upon Whom” the Lord Revealed His Arm

Aaron P. Schade and I have elsewhere proposed that the narrator intended the phrase “And he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:2) as a direct allusion to Mosiah 14:1 where Abinadi begins his full-length citation of Isaiah 53 to king Noah and his priests, including Alma. Abinadi declares: “Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and to whom [ʿal-mî, or “upon whom”] is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (quoting Isaiah 53:1). By identifying Alma as the one who “believed” Abinadi’s report in Mosiah 17:2 (cf. Mosiah 14:1), the narrator also identifies Alma as the one “to whom” (ʿal-mî) — or “upon whom” — the “arm of the Lord” had been “revealed.”

Confirmatory evidence for Mosiah 17:2 as an allusion to Isaiah 53:1/Mosiah 14:1 surfaces during Abinadi’s martyrdom with his declaration that many others would be similarly martyred because they “believe in the salvation of the Lord their God” (Mosiah 17:15). Abinadi’s words also allude to Isaiah 52:10 (“The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God”), a text which one of Noah’s priests — perhaps Alma himself — had quoted to Abinadi (see Mosiah 12:24) and that Abinadi himself quoted to the priests including Alma (see Mosiah 15:31 and 16:1. In the latter passage he calls it “the salvation of the Lord.” Abinadi’s phraseology (“believe in the salvation of the Lord”) thus subtly combines the language of Isaiah 52:10 with “believe” from Isaiah 53:1 (cf. Mosiah 14:1, “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”) In the immediate context of Abinadi’s discussion of Isaiah, the language of Mosiah 17:2 causes the language of Isaiah 52:10 and especially Isaiah 53:1 to revolve around Alma as the only one in Noah’s court to recognize that “the Lord [had] made bare his holy arm” and was thus the only one to “see the salvation of … God.” Alma was the only one “to whom” (ʿal-mî) “the arm of the Lord [was] revealed” (Mosiah 17:2).

Alma’s ancestor Nephi’s “goodness” (or, “goodliness”), as implied in the latter’s name, was at least partly attributable to “goodly parents” including a goodly father who had “taught [him] somewhat” in all his learning and prepared him to seek and acquire “a great knowledge of the goodness of and the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1). Nephi, though

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19 Schade and Bowen, “To Whom is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?” 91-111.
20 Ibid., 92-94.
he was admittedly “young,” had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God.” Alma too, though a “young man” (i.e., an `elem) and a priestly member of a corrupt royal court, nevertheless sincerely listened to Abinadi’s prophetic “report.”

On account of his desire, Nephi was “visit[ed]” by the Lord and the Lord “did soften [Nephi’s] heart that [he] did believe all the words which had been spoken by [his] father” (1 Nephi 2:16). Alma’s listening to Abinadi’s report was so sincere that he had the arm of the Lord revealed “to” him and (later) “upon” him (cf. <<'al-mî>>) and “he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken.” Both Nephi and Alma his descendant experienced what Nephi described in these words: “For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and {{the mysteries of God shall }}be {{unfolded unto them}}, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round” (1 Nephi 10:19). Mormon seemingly alluded to both Nephi’s and Alma’s experiences when he wrote autobiographically: “And I, being fifteen years of age and being somewhat of a sober mind, therefore I was visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15; cf. 2:1). Nephi, Alma, and Mormon all became prophets — witnesses “to whom” and “upon whom” the Lord had revealed his arm.

Alma’s “Hidden” Ministry

Mosiah 17:2 emphasized Alma’s being an `elem — a “young man” who believed the words of Abinadi, his spiritual “father” (cf. Hebrew ʾab/ʿābî), and implicitly the revelation which led him to believe Abinadi’s report — the revealed arm of the Lord. In Mosiah 17:3-4 the narrator shifts the emphasis to Alma’s “hid[ing] himself” and beginning his prophetic ministry “concealed” from King Noah and his priests, Alma’s former colleagues. The result is another thread of onomastic wordplay on Alma:

But the king was more wroth, and caused that Alma should be cast out from among them, and sent his servants after him that they might slay him. But he fled from before them and hid himself [cf. Heb. hit’allam] that they found him not. And he

21 Cf. the sincerity requirements given by Moroni later in Moroni 10:3-5.
being concealed [cf. ne’lam]24 for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken.

It is no small detail that Alma’s prophetic ministry begins in hiding. Alma’s name was not only appropriate given that he was a “young man” … but also of because he successfully “hid himself,” presumably with divine help. Had he been immediately discovered by the king, Alma’s efforts would have been fruitless.

Here the narrator breaks off from his biographical introduction of Alma in order to tell the story of Abinadi’s martyrdom (Mosiah 17:5-20). Following Abinadi’s death, the narrator (Mormon), resumes the biography of Alma the Elder that he had briefly begun. He also resumes his emphasis on the “hiddenness” or secrecy of Alma’s prophetic activities:

And now, it came to pass that Alma, who had fled from the servants of king Noah, repented of his sins and iniquities, and went about privately [i.e., in a “hidden” manner]25 among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi — Yea, concerning that which was to come, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven.

And as many as would hear his word he did teach. And he taught them privately, that it might not come to the knowledge of the king. And many did believe his words. (Mosiah 18:1-3)

The resumption of Alma’s biography marks a progression in his nascent prophetic ministry: he had fully “repented of his sins and iniquities,” yet he was not content merely to have written Abinadi’s words while having “hid himself,” but now also “went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi.” Again, the narrative creates a paronomasia on the name Alma, based on the homonymy of Alma and the Semitic/Hebrew root *ʿlm — or at least the interpretive, paronomastic meaning created for Alma by the homonymic

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24 Cf. 1 Kings 10:3; 2 Chronicles 9:2.
25 Cf. Latin privatus as “withdrawn from public life” (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/private). In Webster’s 1828 dictionary, one meaning of “private” is “Sequestered from company or observation; secret; secluded; as a private cell; a private room or apartment; private prayer” (http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/private).
relationship of Alma (from *ǵlm) and *lm (i.e., the play on the midrashic/paronomastic idea of Alma as “hidden one” could also be accomplished with Hebrew synonyms like *hb’ and *str or even other terms).²⁶

The narrator’s (Mormon’s) repetition of wordplay on Alma is not quite an example of Wiederaufnahme (i.e., a resumptive narrative repetition) since it is not simply a reiteration or restatement of what he has already narrated. However, the twofold use of a word/phrase translated “privately” dramatically recalls the “hidden”/“concealed” beginnings of Alma’s life as a prophet, this while emphasizing the difficult — and perhaps appropriate — nature of Alma’s current prophetic and evangelical labor.

As Mormon begins to describe the importance of the place that became his namesake, he provides a final yet emphatic wordplay on Alma and “hide” (cf. *lm):

Now, there was in Mormon a fountain of pure water, and Alma resorted thither, there being near the water a thicket of small trees, where he did hide himself in the daytime from the searches of the king. And it came to pass that as many as believed him went thither to hear his words. (Mosiah 18:5-6)

Alma continues his “hidden” prophetic ministry by baptizing in the waters of Mormon, a “thicket of small trees” affording Alma all of the secrecy he required. The language of Mosiah 18:5-6 additionally recalls Mosiah 17:2: just as Alma “believed” Abinadi’s prophetic report (cf. Mosiah 14:1), now many others were “believ[ing]” his. The arm of the Lord was being revealed to some “four hundred and fifty souls.”²⁷

The “discovery” of Alma and his “hidden” ministry marks the end of his people’s sacred time at the waters of Mormon — a time that was remembered ever after among the Nephites.²⁸ Mormon records:

And these things were done in the borders of the land, that they might not come to the knowledge of the king. But behold, it came to pass that the king, having discovered a movement among the people, sent his servants to watch them. Therefore


²⁷ Mosiah 18:35: “And they were in number about four hundred and fifty souls.”

²⁸ See, e.g., Mosiah 18:30; 3 Nephi 5:12.
on the day that they were assembling themselves together to hear the word of the Lord they were discovered unto the king. (Mosiah 18:30-32)

Alma and his people’s “hiddenness” came to an end at that time. However, once they were “discovered unto the king” and his servants, divine providence ensured that Noah and his henchmen did not crush the nascent church: “And it came to pass that the army of the king returned, having searched in vain for the people of the Lord” (Mosiah 19:1). Alma remained “hidden” long enough to establish a church and a movement that would eventually renovate Nephite religion, politics, and society. The importance of what Alma the Elder accomplished in secret at the waters of Mormon can scarcely be overestimated. The impact that his son Alma the Younger (upon whom he, of course, bestowed his own name) and his later descendants had upon Nephite politics and religion was similarly tremendous.

Conclusion

The evident wordplay in Mosiah 17:2 stands as yet another example of wordplay that is imitative of 1 Nephi 1:1, but also draws together and incorporates other elements of Nephi’s biography (see also 1 Nephi 2:16). Moreover, the same language deliberately recalls Abinadi’s utilization of Isaiah 53 to preach repentance to King Noah and his court and suggests that Alma himself was the answer to Abinadi’s appropriation of Isaiah’s question: “Who hath believed our report, and to whom [‘al-mî] is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Mosiah 14:1, quoting Isaiah 53:1).

Finally, Alma the Elder was truly the “hidden” prophet: he recorded Abinadi’s exchange with Noah and his priests and the former’s prophetic words while “hid[ing] himself” and “being concealed” from the latter (Mosiah 17:3-4); he “went about privately” (Mosiah 18:1) and “taught [his word, i.e., Abinadi’s words] privately” (Mosiah 18:3); and “he did hide himself” while baptizing and establishing a church at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18:5).

The three-dimensional wordplay on the name Alma in Mosiah 17–18 demonstrates yet again how sophisticated onomastic wordplay in the Book of Mormon can be. Recognizing and appreciating its use can help us better understand the messages intended by the book’s ancient authors/editors.
The author would like to thank Suzy Bowen, Daniel C. Peterson, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Tim Guymon, Andrew C. Smith, Parker Jackson, and Heather Soules.

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Abstract: Jonathan Neville, an advocate of the “Heartland” geography setting for the Book of Mormon, claims to have identified a novel chiastic structure that begins in Alma 22:27. Neville argues that this chiasmus allows the reconstruction of a geography that stretches south to the Gulf of Mexico in the continental United States. One expert, Donald W. Parry, doubts the existence of a fine-tuned chiasmus in this verse. An analysis which assumes the presence of the chiasmus demonstrates that multiple internal difficulties result from such a reading. Neville’s reading requires two different “sea west” bodies of water: one “sea west” placed at the extreme north of the map and a second sea to the west of Lamanite lands, but neither is to the west of the Nephites’ land of Zarahemla. Neville’s own ideas also fail to meet the standards he demands of those who differ with him. These problems, when combined with other Book of Mormon textual evidence, make the geography based upon Neville’s reading of the putative chiasmus unviable.
There are some parallel structures identified in the early parts of Alma 22, but none after verse 17. I met with Dr. Parry on 14 January 2015 to discuss my findings. He agreed that verses 27–34 have chiastic elements that he had not seen before. Pending his further review, in this article I [Neville] present my own ideas (286).

I wrote to Parry to inquire about his conclusions. He replied:

In my work *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon*, I specifically did not format Alma 22:27 as a chiasmus because the verse lacks the proper corresponding elements and structure to be a proper chiasmus. Although it is evident that bordering, east, west, and land of Zarahemla correspond with land of Zarahemla, borders, east and west (within the same passage), other elements of the passage break down the idea of a fine-tuned chiasmus.5

I here assume—for the sake of argument—that Neville is correct and that this passage is chiastic, though Parry’s expertise weighs heavily against this assumption. It is still instructive to see where this assumption leads us. I believe it functions as a type of *reductio ad absurdum*: assuming the truth of a proposition yields an unworkable answer, demonstrating that the claim is likely false, at least as Neville has used it.

Happily, Neville takes the vital step of using his reading of the scripture to begin constructing an internal geography: a theoretical map that incorporates how he reads the text into a visual diagram. He carries this diagram through several iterations; a representative one appears in Figure 1.6 This figure, however, lacks an important element of Neville’s geography: it does not include a sea west near the land of Bountiful, at the “narrow neck of land.” Neville is, however, very definite that there is not a continuous “sea west” from Lamanite lands to Nephite lands in the north. (The omission of the northern “sea west” from the schematic diagram is potentially misleading; it omits one of the most contentious novelties of Neville’s model.)
Even if we grant that the identification of this section of Alma 22 as chiastic is potentially important, it does not seem to make a huge difference in how we read this section for geographic purposes. “In the case of Alma 22:27–34,” Neville says, “the parallel structures provide an entirely new abstract geography … that suggests a predominantly east/west orientation of the Nephite territory” (319–320, emphasis added). Yet, in most respects, Neville’s internal geography does not differ substantially from views of those who have read these verses without the benefit of the chiastic insight. For example, Sorenson’s model of the same features (reproduced in Figure 2) looks substantially the same (though the seas are not labeled in Sorenson’s diagram, they are clearly present). The key difference is the “sea west” — Sorenson’s is westward, while Neville has two features which share the name. How does Neville arrive at this layout? He first draws on verse 27, and Table 1 reproduces his chiastic interpretation, which will make his reading clearer.
Table 1: Neville’s chiastic reading of Alma 22:27 (from Neville, 301).

Bold, underlines, and punctuation in original.

A amongst all his people who were in all his land who were in all the regions round about

B which was bordering even to the sea on the east and on the west and

C which was divided from the land of Zarahemla by a narrow strip of wilderness,

D(a) which ran from the sea east
D(b) even to the sea west
D'(a) and round about on the borders of the seashore
D'(b) and the borders of the wilderness

C' which was on the north by the land of Zarahemla

B' through the borders of Manti by the head of the river Sidon running from the east towards the west

A' –and thus were the Lamanites and the Nephites divided.
Neville argues:

Lines B and B¹ refer to the east/west orientation of the Lamanite land. B explains that the land was bordering even to — in other words, extended as far as — the sea on the east and on the west. The omission of the term sea before on the west leaves the phrase somewhat ambiguous. The text could have said “the sea on the east and the sea on the west.” Alternatively, it could have said “the seas on the east and on the west.” The ambiguity can be resolved by inferring either that there was [not? – sic] a sea on the west, or that if there was a sea, the border did not coincide with it; i.e., the border may have extended beyond or fallen short of any sea west. Or maybe it was just undefined — somewhere out west (302).

If a paralellistic pattern is intended in these lines, as Neville believes, it is indeed strange that the line does not read “even to the sea on the east and the sea on the west.” There is, however, a more serious potential problem for Neville’s reading. In lines C, Da, and Db we are told explicitly that there is “a narrow strip of wilderness, which ran from the sea east even to the sea west.” Thus the wilderness stretches from sea to sea, which would seem to rule out both the possibility that there is no sea west, or that the borders of the narrow strip do not encounter a more distant sea west. Given that this clarification immediately follows the ambiguous line to which Neville has called our attention (and upon which interpretation much of his analysis rests), it seems that the ambiguity is an artifact of Neville’s decision to break the text into small, chiasmus-fragment units for analysis. A reader of the text without this interpretive apparatus would simply read, “his people who were in all his land … which was bordering even to the sea, on the east and on the west, and which was divided from the land of Zarahemla by a narrow strip of wilderness, which ran from the sea east even to the sea west” (Alma 22:27, emphasis added). The second phrase clarifies the intent of the first, and in this case the modern punctuation which has the sea modified by both “on the east and on the west” is almost certainly correct.

Surprisingly, Neville seems to concede the force of this analysis when he later writes that “an obvious question arises about the sea west, which is mentioned in D(b) but not in B. This supports the interpretation that the sea was omitted in B because it was implied” (304). Indeed it does. But, if so, why all the torturous effort to cast doubt on the existence of a “sea west”?
Neville writes:

D describes the east/west boundary [of the Lamanite king’s land], while D1 describes the north/south boundary. You start at the sea east and go to the sea west, then “round about” on the borders of the seashore (coming back to the east sea) and continuing round about on the borders of the wilderness back to the sea west.

We understand the “borders of the seashore” are on the south because we’re also told that the north part of the king’s land was the wilderness bordering on the land of Zarahemla. (303–304)

This reader is not certain he understands. To aid in visualization, I created a diagram in **Figure 3** that illustrates Neville’s reading.

![Figure 3: Graphic representation of Neville’s chiastic reading of Alma 22:27. See Neville’s similar schema in his Figure 79 (Neville, 303, see Figure 4).](image)

Neville’s Figure 79 (303) [reproduced in **Figure 4**] sees D1(a) (“round about on the borders of the seashore”) as describing a deep southern route, while D1(b) (“and the borders of the wilderness”) details the far northern reaches of the Lamanite king’s realm.
This is a tricky, close argument to follow, so I make explicit what I take to be his five contentions:

1. The Da-Db-D'a- D'b center of the chiasm is intended to describe the north/south and east/west boundaries of the Lamanite king’s land.

2. D'a and D'b describe the extreme north/south Lamanite borders.

3. Da and Db describe seas to the east and west.

4. There are “borders of the seashore” at the far south of the Lamanite lands.

5. The west boundary of Nephite territory is partly sea and partly landmass.

Let us examine each point in turn. The first two are the most involved; once they have been examined, the others fall into place easily.

1. Chiastic Center Describes Borders of the Lamanite King’s Land, North/South and East/West

We must remember that the claim that this is properly read as a chiasmus, and that the putative center is intended to describe the four
boundaries of the entire Lamanite lands, is a hypothesis. It is not stated in the text.

If this is a chiasmus, then, as Neville notes, the center ought to be the most important “turning point” (303). John W. Welch reminds us, “The crux of a chiasm is generally its central turning point. Without a well-defined centerpiece or distinct crossing effect, there is little reason for seeing chiasmus.” But, as Neville has analyzed Alma 22:27 (see Table 2), the lines do not seem especially chiastic by these criteria.

We might expect a chiastic structure to pair sea east with sea west, and borders of the seashore with borders of the wilderness. In a chiasmus, this would normally be laid out to achieve an A-B-B-A pattern (e.g., sea-borders-borders-sea). As seen in Table 2, we have A-A-B-B (sea-sea-borders-borders). So perhaps we are mistaken in seeing this as chiastic or at least chiastic as Neville has diagrammed it. For Neville to be correct, the putative chiastic “reflection” must be understood differently: the seas are not the parallel elements but are instead each paired with another element to which they are related. This claim risks being circular, however, since there is no a priori reason to see the elements paired as Neville wishes, save his presumption that we are dealing with a chiasmus.

Table 2: Purported Chiastic Center Detail of Alma 22:27 (Neville, 301), Label of “Turning point” Added for Clarity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(a) which ran from the sea east</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) even to the sea west</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Turning point]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>(a) and round about on the borders of the seashore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) and the borders of the wilderness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Nils Lund noted of chiasmus, “The centre is always the turning point. At the centre there is often a change in the trend of thought and an antithetic idea is introduced.” It is not at all clear, however, that here we have much of a turning point at all. There is certainly no change in the thought, or transformation of the thrust of the passage. These deficits call Neville’s reconstruction into further doubt.

2. D'a and D'b Describe the North/South Borders

If Table 2 is a chiastic center, then sea east is linked to borders of the seashore (Da–D'a), and sea west with borders of the wilderness (Db–D'b).
Neville reads this as a complete circle of boundaries circumscribing all the Lamanite land, as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 (his Figure 79).

But why? In Neville’s reading, Mormon has described both the northern boundary and the narrow strip of wilderness. But Neville claims that the intent of the chiasmus is to describe the entire Lamanite territory. As diagramed, however, he has not walked us “around” the territory but has instead bisected it and then walked around the Lamanite borders north and south of the narrow strip of wilderness (see Figure 4, his Figure 79).

Of what relevance is the narrow strip of wilderness to the entire Lamanite territory if it is not one of the boundaries? The narrow strip has typically — and, to my mind, properly — been seen as the de facto border between the Nephites and Lamanites. Why, then, does Mormon — a Nephite general — concede Lamanite sovereignty over an area north of the narrow strip in Neville’s model? “The sequence of the northern [Lamanite] border,” writes Neville, “from east to west, goes like this: Zarahemla, head of Sidon, Manti” (303). This apparently places the northwestern edge of Lamanite territory right on the border of Zarahemla, which is well north of the narrow strip of wilderness.

It is not clear if he is here referring to the city of Zarahemla or the land of Zarahemla. To add to the confusion, Neville defines the “land of Zarahemla” as all Nephite-controlled land including “the land of Bountiful and other Nephite territories” but without extending beyond the narrow strip [58, Figure 10, see Table 3]. Elsewhere, he portrays it as extending well south of the “narrow strip of wilderness” [136, Figure 32, see Table 3].
Table 3: Neville’s Variable Configuration of “the land of Zarahemla.”

Neville’s Figure 10 (p. 58): “Surrounded by water” in Alma 22.

Neville’s Figure 32 (p. 136): “Land of Zarahemla” as of Mosiah 27:6.

“The land of Zarahemla, which encompassed the land of Bountiful and the other Nephite territories, was also nearly surrounded by water” (58).

“The text does not describe the boundaries of ‘the land’ at this point. Certainly at this point the Nephite civilization was expanding in population and territory, but it likely was centered around Zarahemla and along the Sidon River and its nearby tributaries, as proposed in Figure 32” (136).

He elsewhere says that “in my analysis, I assume designation of a land means either the area administered by the government located in the city of the same name, or the area in general proximity of [sic] the city of the same name” (144). This terminological variation and imprecision allows him considerable interpretive flexibility regarding the meaning of “land of Zarahemla” in any given verse, which in my judgment renders the text far too malleable in his hands. I think the larger area in his Figure 10 is, in any case, far too large to be administered by the city government in Zarahemla, and this may be true of Figure 32 as well.

Despite these confusing aspects, the Book of Mormon explicitly rules out the configuration that Neville’s narrow strip boundary of Zarahemla — head of Sidon — Manti requires, as we will now see.

Captain Moroni’s son, Moronihah, would suffer a somewhat embarrassing defeat when a later Lamanite army smashed through the Nephites’ southern borders to capture the relatively undefended capital city of Zarahemla. Mormon excuses Moronihah’s disposition of his troops, noting that although “they had not kept sufficient guards
in the land of Zarahemla,” this was because “they had supposed that
the Lamanites durst not come into the heart of their lands to attack that
great city Zarahemla” (Helaman 1:18, emphasis added in all cases). “This
march of Coriantumr through the center of the land gave Moronihah
great advantage,” (1:25) Mormon editorializes, “For behold, Moronihah
had supposed that the Lamanites durst not come into the center of the
land, but that they would attack the cities round about in the borders
as they had hitherto done” (1:26). The Lamanites “had come into the
center of the land, and had taken the capital city which was the city of
Zarahemla” (27), and this initial tactical success had only “plunged the
Lamanites into the midst of the Nephites, insomuch that they were in
the power of the Nephites” (1:32) since “the Lamanites could not retreat
either way, neither on the north, nor on the south, nor on the east, nor
on the west, for they were surrounded on every hand by the Nephites”
(1:31). This is simply not a description of a city acting as a border with the
hostile Lamanite polity, as Neville’s model claims.

It would also be difficult to argue that Mormon is engaging in a type
of political rhetoric in which Lamanite control of land north of the narrow
strip of wilderness near Zarahemla is ignored or contested in official
propaganda, even though the Lamanite border “really” extended as far
as Neville’s model requires. No, Nephite generals count on Zarahemla’s
relative safety and distance from any Lamanite threat as a key tactical
reality — Moronihah was surprised by Coriantumr’s assault precisely
because it was strategically suicidal to plunge so deeply into enemy
territory while leaving Nephite armies and territories in the Lamanite
rear. No one as pragmatic as Mormon, Moroni, and Moronihah would
have let propaganda dictate how they understood such a key military
issue.

Moronihah’s father (Moroni) likewise indicates that Zarahemla is
nowhere near the Lamanite threat, either from the south-western or
-easter theatres. He blasts the governing class at Zarahemla, accusing
them of “sit[ting] upon your thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor”
(Alma 60:7), perhaps “because ye are in the heart of our country and ye are
surrounded by security” (60:19). It is clear, then, that the Nephites could
be sorely pressed in and around the southern border while Zarahemla
could still repose complacently in considerable safety. In fact, Helaman’s
armies in the south and west faced starvation conditions while holding
the Nephite line, yet remained ignorant of conditions in Zarahemla.
They neither knew why supplies and reinforcements had not reached
them, nor what the political situation was at home (58:34–36). This
cannot have been a matter of somehow being surrounded by Lamanites and thus besieged, since letters and prisoners could be sent to Zarahemla (57:15–17, 30–33), and relief forces and food supplies from the capital were eventually able to reach the southern front without a battle (61:16; 62:12).

Furthermore, Helaman’s small band “having traveled much in the wilderness towards the land of Zarahemla” (58:23) from Manti eventually frightened the Lamanite army by persistent “marching towards the land of Zarahemla” (58:24). Again, we see considerable travel effort between the frontiers before even approaching “the land” (much less the city) of Zarahemla — neither of Neville’s maps allows this construction. All of this demonstrates that Mormon’s focus on the narrow strip of wilderness reflects a key Nephite tactical reality: the strip is the key northern Lamanite border. If Neville is arguing that Lamanite territory lies to the north of the narrow strip near Zarahemla, this is not borne out by the text. If he agrees that the northern border is contiguous with the narrow strip of wilderness, then his chiasmus structure makes even less sense, as Moroni gives us two trips over the east to west northern border (see my Figure 3 above).

I think the real goal of Neville’s reading is to allow him to assume the existence of a seashore around the southern end of Lamanite territory — a feature otherwise unattested in the Book of Mormon, and far from the areas of Nephite interest or interaction. Such a reading does not really make much of the chiastic parallelism that Neville believes he has identified. We note that by breaking up the lines for the chiastic analysis, he has also separated the which in Da from its antecedent: the narrow strip of wilderness. Once again, the focus on the narrow strip is incongruent if the Lamanite border is far to the north, near Zarahemla, but completely understandable if we see the narrow strip for what it clearly is: the key Nephite frontier against the Lamanites.

I suspect that Neville’s error in Alma 22 hinges on ignoring that there is another wilderness on the east, as his own diagram shows. It is from this eastern wilderness that Captain Moroni later drives the Lamanites southward, in order to fortify his defensive east/west line along or near the narrow strip. (I return to this point a few paragraphs below.) Let’s look at the phrase again without the chiastic markings that create this artificial separation (I have, following Neville’s practice [13, 286], omitted the modern punctuation):

[the Lamanite land] was divided from the land of Zarahemla by a narrow strip of wilderness which ran from the sea east
even to the sea west and round about on the borders of the seashore and the borders of the [east?] wilderness which was on the north [of Lamanite lands] by the land of Zarahemla through the borders of Manti by the head of the river Sidon.

The thing which runs “round about on the borders of the seashore” seems to me to refer not to the Lamanite king’s complete boundaries (much less to the extreme south of his realm), as Neville claims, but exclusively to the same narrow strip of wilderness, north of the Lamanites. That we are still talking about the narrow strip is evident, since this section concludes, “through the borders of Manti by the head of the river Sidon,” and Manti and the Sidon’s head are in the southern reaches of Nephite territory, just north of the narrow strip of wilderness (as even Neville concedes, 303).

My proposed interpretation is supported by Mormon’s later description of a tactic used by Captain Moroni to increase Nephite security:

And it came to pass that Moroni caused that his armies should go forth into the east wilderness; yea, and they went forth and drove all the Lamanites who were in the east wilderness into their own lands, which were south of the land of Zarahemla.

And the land of Nephi did run in a straight course from the east sea to the west.

And it came to pass that when Moroni had driven all the Lamanites out of the east wilderness, which was north of the lands of their own [i.e., Lamanite] possessions, he caused that the [Nephite] inhabitants who were in the land of Zarahemla and in the land round about should go forth into the east wilderness, even to the borders by the seashore, and possess the land. (Alma 50:7–9, emphasis added)

This “east wilderness” seems a strong candidate for the “borders of the [east] wilderness which was on the north [of Lamanite lands] by the land Zarahemla” (Neville’s D and C of Alma 22:27), with which the narrow strip of wilderness merges on the east. Verse eight might seem to reinforce Neville’s reading of B — we again have an east sea but only a reference to west without a sea. But, before we become too enamoured of this possibility, the next two verses call it into question:

And [Moroni] also placed armies on the [Nephite] south [i.e., the Lamanite north], in the borders of their possessions, and
caused them to erect fortifications that they might secure their armies and their people from the hands of their enemies.

And thus he cut off all the strongholds of the Lamanites in the east wilderness, yea, and also on the west, fortifying the line between the Nephites and the Lamanites, between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi, from the west sea, running by the head of the river Sidon (Alma 50:10–11, emphasis added).

Mormon thus gives us a picture of a “straight course from the east sea to the west,” which separates Lamanite and Nephite territory, with an explicit mention of fortifications from the west sea. Helaman would later march “as if we were going to the city beyond, in the borders by the seashore” (Alma 56:31; compare 53:22), which likewise suggests that a Nephite city near the west seashore anchored the Nephite line of defense.

This west sea must, therefore, be placed at the northern end of Lamanite territory, and be sufficiently large that the Lamanites cannot simply detour around it. We also know that it extends as far north as the narrow neck of land, since Hagoth launches ships “into the west sea, by the narrow neck which led into the land northward” (Alma 63:5). A later reference makes it again clear that the west sea is near the Nephite borders:

And now it came to pass that the armies of the Lamanites, on the west sea, south, while in the absence of Moroni on account of some intrigue amongst the Nephites, which caused dissensions amongst them, had gained some ground over the Nephites, yea, insomuch that they had obtained possession of a number of their cities in that part of the land (Alma 53:8).

Alma 53:8 is a description of Nephite reverses, thus in the south of the Nephite lands (which is north of Lamanite lands). Mormon presumably clarifies with south because the west sea stretches from at least the southern Nephite borders to the narrow neck in the north. It is important for the reader to realize that the problem occurs on the southern border, not somewhere along the Nephite western flank. Helaman will later lead his two thousand men “to the support of the people in the borders of the land on the south by the west sea” (Alma 53:22). So once again, the existence of a sea west bounding Nephite lands is both explicit, and placed near the northern Lamanite borders, at the southern extent of Nephite territory.
Later Nephites will likewise explicitly spread from a sea west to sea east:

[T]he people of Nephi began to prosper again in the land, and began to build up their waste places, and began to multiply and spread, even until they did cover the whole face of the land, both on the northward and on the southward, from the sea west to the sea east. (Helaman 11:20, emphasis added)

This moves the sea west’s boundary north of the narrow neck, which serves as the boundary between the land northward and southward. We thus have the sea west from at least the narrow strip of land, to the land northward (at least north of “Bountiful” in Neville’s map, Figure 1).13

All of this makes it increasingly difficult to accept Neville’s far southern “loop around” hypothesis at a chiastic center of Alma 22:27 as the proper reading. Far from describing a loop southward (through an area that never comes into the story, and which is of no importance to Nephite warfare or security) or the entire Lamanite territory, Alma 22:27 seems to detail the dimensions and rough boundaries of the vital narrow strip of wilderness that Nephite generals had to defend. Parry is, I suspect, right: “other elements of the passage break down the idea of a fine-tuned chiasmus.”14

3. Da and Db Describe Seas to the East and West

This contention seems to me true of the line along the narrow strip of wilderness, at least, and if there are seas there, they would constitute the borders of Lamanite land. This seems the only incontestable part of Neville’s reading.

4. There are “borders of the seashore” at the South of the Lamanite Lands

To repeat, this seems rather ad hoc. There is clearly a sea west near the narrow strip of wilderness (stretching northward to beyond the narrow neck, unless we accept Neville’s claim that there are two such “west seas” — see the discussion below), and yet Neville insists upon reading references to the borders of the seashore as implying a sea to the south instead. His rationale is examined in the next point.
5. **The West Boundary of Nephite Territory is Partly Sea and Partly Landmass**

As illustrated in point 2 above, the west sea must stretch at least from the narrow strip of wilderness in the Nephite south to the narrow neck in the north, and likely beyond that. Neville, however, disputes this in his reading of Alma 22:28. He again produces a parallelistic reading of the verse (though not a chiastic one), which I reproduce in **Table 4** for clarity.

**Table 4:** Parallelistic Analysis of Alma 22:28 (Neville, 305)

| Now, the more idle part of the Lamanites lived in the wilderness, and dwelt in tents |
| A and they were spread through the wilderness on the west in the land of Nephi |
| C [yea, and also on the west of the land of Zarahemla] |
| B in the borders by the seashore |
| A¹ and on the west in the land of Nephi, in the place of their fathers’ first inheritance |
| B¹ and thus *bordering* along *by* the seashore. |

This is a much less complex example of parallelism than the previous putatively chiastic one. The insertion of C might lead us to question whether the parallel analysis is correct. Neville treats C “as a sort of parenthetical to A,” that “tells us there is land west of Zarahemla that is not part of the land of Nephi — sort of a no-man’s land, or an unclaimed wilderness where idle Lamanites live in tents” (305). He uses the absence of a counterpart to C in his parallel structure to argue:

the idle Lamanites live on the west *in* the land of Nephi (*within* Lamanite territory) and along the borders by the seashore, but setting off C this way suggests that those living on the west of the land of Zarahemla do not live by the borders of the seashore. In other words, those idle Lamanites living in the wilderness west of Zarahemla do not live by a seashore. The “sea west” does not extend north or west far enough to form a western border near Zarahemla … . Verse 28 seems to clarify that all of the west does not border on a sea; only those areas that are in the land of Nephi border on the sea (306, emphasis in original).

Neville thus posits a sea to the west of Lamanite territory, but declines to do so for Nephite territory. But as we have seen already, there are significant indications that a sea west stretches from the narrow strip of wilderness to beyond the narrow neck of land in the north — the Nephites even have an unnamed western city down by the western
seashore. There is nothing in this text that would lead us to conclude that the western Lamanites were not “in the borders by the seashore” — only Neville’s parallelistic construction might suggest that this is so. And he cannot even accommodate the key phrase into the parallelistic interpretation; he must make the line which disproves his model a supposed “parenthetical” insertion. It is far simpler, does less violence to the text, and makes fewer assumptions if we simply take the text at its word that there were Lamanites in “the wilderness on the west, in the land of Nephi; yea, and also on the west of the land of Zarahemla, in the borders by the seashore” (Alma 22:28) — west of Zarahemla, there is a seashore with Lamanites. Yet these Lamanites are not a huge tactical concern for Moroni after he fortifies the east/west defensive line, with an anchoring city at its extreme edge’s western seashore. Neville’s model makes it difficult to see why this would be so.

Tactics

Besides making Moroni’s unconcern for the western Lamanites difficult to understand, an absence of a sea on the west of Nephite territory makes a hash of Lamanite tactical choices during the wars. Neville decides that “the narrow strip of wilderness consists of the Ohio and Missouri Rivers” (53). His figure 9 (reproduced in Figure 5) provides a graphic representation of this, with the lower Mississippi (his southern “sea west”) in a heavier line.

Figure 9 - Narrow strip of wilderness

Figure 5: Neville’s Figure 9 (53) — Narrow Strip of Wilderness (Thin Line, the Ohio and Missouri Rivers) and Southern “sea west” (Thick Line, Lower Mississippi River).
Here again, the model encounters major problems. We are told explicitly that Moroni’s defensive line stretches “from the west sea” (Alma 50:11) toward the eastern wilderness from which Moroni has driven the Lamanites and introduced Nephite settlers (Alma 50:9). Neville’s narrow strip, however, continues far to the west beyond his southern “sea west.” One can understand why he does so; if the “narrow strip of wilderness” does not extend as he has diagrammed it, what is to stop the Lamanites from simply crossing to the west bank of the Mississippi deep in their own territory and bypassing the Nephite defensive line anchored at the “sea west”? This would allow them to hit Zarahemla on the west bank of the upper Mississippi/Sidon with ease. But the fact that Neville must thus contradict the text is good evidence that his model isn’t working. Why, with their vastly superior manpower, do the Lamanites never attempt an “end run” to the west around Moroni’s fortified line of defense that stretches along the narrow strip of wilderness? Why does Moroni show no concern at all about fortifying against the vast stretch of territory to the west, which Neville’s model requires? Why is Moroni unconcerned about the Lamanites that inhabit that area, and why does an attack on Zarahemla never come from that direction? As we have already seen, the capital was regarded as very safe, even when the southern Nephite frontier was under assault. Outnumbered as they are, Moroni’s men would not be able to maintain the defensive line with sufficient manpower to repel a determined Lamanite effort to flank them if the geography offered by Neville was even approximately accurate.

Summary

Far from disproving the basic “hourglass” model bounded by seas of Sorenson and others, our analysis of Neville’s reading has essentially reconfirmed it:

a) We agree that there is a sea on the west of the Lamanite polity.

b) A west sea is a likely textual requirement from the northern Lamanite borders to the northern Nephite lands (unless we introduce, as Neville does, a novel “second sea west”; see next section).

c) Furthermore, this west sea acts as an anchor point for Captain Moroni’s fortified east/west line.
These facts argue strongly that there is a single west sea that stretches from southern Lamanite land, north past the Nephites’ territory, to the narrow neck and likely beyond.

**Two “West Seas”?**

To counter the force of an analysis such as I have just provided, Neville insists that there are, in fact, *two* bodies of water properly denominated a “sea west.” He declares that his “next step was to find a mighty river that would fit both the chiastic map and the real-world geography” (34). It is not at all clear to me, however, that Alma 22 — or any other part of the Book of Mormon text — demands or even permits two west seas. This requirement seems, instead, to be dictated by Neville’s determination to shoehorn his model into part of North America. In fact, combining the chiastic and real-world map is premature. Neville first ought to prepare and justify a theoretical, internal map without any reference to an external location.

Neville decides, at any rate, that the “sea east” is the Atlantic Ocean (36), the “lower Mississippi” serves as the “sea west” near the narrow strip of wilderness (36), whereas the “west sea” (note the inversion of the terms) near the narrow neck of land near the Nephite land northward is Lake Michigan (37): Mormon “referred to the sea west when he was describing the narrow strip of wilderness that separated the lands of the Nephites from the lands of the Lamanites, and he referred to the west sea when he was describing the land Bountiful, a subset of the larger lands of the Nephites” (36).

I think the difference in terminology is trivial and of no consequence. In fact, only a paragraph later, Neville cites Alma 53, verses 8 and 22. We have just examined these verses in the previous section, in which Helaman and his stripling warriors are said to be “on the west sea south” and “on the south by the west sea.” Thus, in these verses we have Mormon using the term “west sea,” which Neville claims refers to the lower Mississippi in Alma 53, and to northern Lake Michigan in the Alma 22 chiasmus. Thus, to appeal to sea west versus west sea as a meaningful distinction in Alma 22 seems ungrounded and inconsistent. It is also curious that seas denominated as “west” are also both eastward of Zarahemla, which in Neville’s map is west of both the Mississippi and Lake Michigan.

Neville appeals to Hebrew usage (33–34), since the Hebrew word *yam*, normally rendered *sea*, is occasionally used to refer to the river Nile (e.g., Isaiah 19:5, Nahum 3:8). While technically possible, this approach smacks of desperation. Why would Mormon — or Joseph Smith as the
translator — use “sea” instead of “river”? Why would the Mississippi be denominated a “sea,” the same term applied to Lake Michigan and the Atlantic Ocean? Why would the Nephites’ “river Sidon” (which also corresponds to the upper Mississippi river in Neville’s schema; see 284) be rendered as “river,” while the lower Mississippi is labeled a sea? The Isaiah and Nahum passages are poetic, not attempts to lay out geography for the reader as Mormon is explicitly doing in Alma 22.

Neville answers none of these questions, and betrays no awareness that they ought to be answered. One again has the impression that the text is constantly being measured and contorted for the procrustean bed of Neville’s North American setting.

A Double Standard Applied to Other Authors

This impression is furthered by the way Neville treats those he regards as his ideological opponents. Of Sorenson’s Mesoamerican model, Neville writes:

Now, you might wonder why the sea east is north and the sea west is south of the supposedly “narrow” neck of land that is 125 miles wide. The answer is that Joseph Smith didn’t understand Mayan mythology so he didn’t know how to translate the book correctly. Well, that’s not fair. When he translated 1 Nephi, Joseph translated directions accurately because when Nephi lived in the Middle-East, he used the same cardinal directions we do today. But when he came to the New World, Nephi and his successors immediately rejected the Hebrew customs and embraced Mayan mythology and worldview.15

We will ignore the elements of caricature here and focus on Neville’s key contention: he insists that it is unreasonable for the Book of Mormon’s directional scheme to differ from “the same cardinal directions we use today.” Elsewhere, Neville touts the fact that his model “accepts [the] entire [Book of Mormon] text literally,” including “cardinal directions” and “four seas.”16 Safely unmentioned, however, is the fact that Neville’s “literal” reading of the seas requires the term “sea” to describe many different features: a freshwater lake, a river, and an ocean, while another part of the same river is termed a “river,” and both seas are labeled west though located east of the Nephite capital and heartland. Accepting a text “literally” is, it would seem, in the eye of the beholder.

Neville elsewhere expands on this claim at length, arguing that
Brant Gardner’s response to both Wunderli and Matheny reflects his skepticism about the accuracy of Joseph’s translation: “Although the English text of the Book of Mormon subconsciously encourages us to read our own cultural perceptions into directional terms, the text’s internal consistency tells us that the directional system works. If we allow the hypothesis that the text is a translation of an ancient document, then the modern assumption of directions is the problem, not the presentation in the Book of Mormon.”

“Our own cultural perceptions” is a euphemism for “ordinary meaning of the English language.”

The key point, for our purposes, is that Neville insists — when it comes to directions — that Joseph Smith’s translation must match modern western ideas about cardinality. To do otherwise is to threaten Joseph’s status as a translator:

Basically, the Mesoamerican proponents insist that Joseph Smith mistranslated the Book of Mormon. Here’s how Gardner puts it: “We have evidence that Joseph dictated ‘north.’ What we do not have evidence of is what the text on the plates said.” So Joseph Smith’s translation is not evidence of what the plates said!

It is difficult to conceive of an argument that undermines the Book of Mormon more than this one. Not even Wunderli goes that far. If Joseph’s translation of “north” is not evidence of what the plates said, is anything he translated evidence of what the plates said?

No Mesoamerican theorist, to my knowledge, has ever argued that Joseph “mistranslated” the Book of Mormon text or that he used “the wrong terms.” They have, however, recognized that translation is not necessarily a straightforward process. Neville insists that when Sorenson, Gardner, et al. speak of “our own cultural perceptions,” that this “is a euphemism for ‘ordinary meaning of the English language’, ” which is a spectacularly blinkered way of misunderstanding their point.

Perhaps a modern example will help clarify. There is a French expression: Occupes-toi de tes oignons. Literally translated it means, Occupy yourself with your onions. Idiomatically, it means something like, “Mind your own business; don’t meddle in that which doesn’t concern
you.” Now, imagine that a translator is confronted with this French phrase. How ought it to be rendered into English?

One could opt for a strictly literal translation: *Occupy yourself with your onions.* But what does this convey to an English reader? Very possibly nothing. Or one could opt for a more idiomatic translation: *Mind your own business.* This is better, but it lacks something of the playful irony of the original. The best translation for conveying the spirit of the original that I have come up with is, *Mind your own beeswax*.

But consider the problems this introduces: the term *beeswax* works only because it has humorous affinities for the English word *business*. Yet, without it, we miss some of the playfulness of the original. Would such a translation wrongly suggest that the Nephites had bees and beeswax, plus a word for *business* that was similar in sound to *beeswax*? Yet the association with bees is an artifact of the translation, and this problem crops up even when translating between two languages and cognitive systems as closely related as French and English.

If we opt instead for *Mind your own business*, then we have still introduced another term that has no analogue in the original. The French version invokes a tranquil agricultural image with *onions*, while the English has a more active commercial tinge with *business*. The lack of an informal second-person singular form in modern English introduces more difficulties in precisely capturing the sense: maybe we need *Mind yer own beeswax*. And so on.

One suspects Neville has never done any translation, or he would be aware of these kinds of difficulties. These sorts of issues are a constant theme of Gardner’s, who labors to understand this aspect of the translation, as Neville would know if he read Gardner with any attention or charity.19

The translation of the plates will involve at least the following steps:

1 Nephite word for a direction is read;
2 Translator discerns literal meaning of term;
3 Translator discerns culturally understood meaning of the term;
4 Translator chooses an English translation of the term (translator must ideally grasp both the literal meaning and the culturally understood meaning, though he may not);
5 English reader must properly interpret the chosen English word.
No step is entirely straightforward and there is no perfect solution to the problem unless we insist that the Nephites thought and spoke about directions precisely as we do. But we know from our study of ancient cultures that many peoples did not. So on what grounds do we presume that the Nephites must have done so? Even a “perfect” translation (if such a thing exists) does not solve the fifth problem: we are not infallible readers or interpreters of the English text.

Even such a sequence can be difficult in modern English. Does a writer mean “magnetic north” or “celestial north” if she writes “north”? Or does she even know there is a difference and that it matters? As a Boy Scout in the northern Canadian latitudes, I was constantly cautioned about the difference when navigating over even short distances. The purposes for which one writer writes may not suit the needs or priorities of a reader. We can only work with what we’re given.

A more literal rendering of what was on the plates might make their meaning clearer to a specialist (like Gardner), while making the text less accessible to most readers — such a tradeoff might not be worth it. Or, conversely, the problem may be that in this case Joseph’s translation was more literal, not less. We might understand the scheme more clearly if he had glossed the term, rather than rendering it as the plate text had it. Perhaps the Nephites said east, and Joseph wrote east; the problem is in our unfamiliarity with how the Nephites understood the concept of east. Neville is also too hasty in presuming that the small plates of Nephi will necessarily use the same directional scheme (even if they use the same word for east) as Mormon’s abridgement written nearly a millennium later following much cultural and geographic movement from Lehi and Nephi’s Ancient Near East.

Sorenson has said that the cardinal directions might have been reoriented in the new world by the Nephites but by 1992 was characterizing this as a “suggestion.” By then, he was already offering other possible models drawing on indigenous cultural practices that resemble the more detailed schema offered by Poulsen. In 2013, Sorenson made reference to the Aztec habit of treating “the directions south, east, north, and west … not as distinct points, but as quadrants.” He also discusses similar schemes among the Quiché Maya, and concludes, “We can be sure that Nephite ‘north’ or ‘northward’ made reference to a direction, probably a quadrant, and that was an approximation of our north, although it did not match exactly what our term means.” Gardner has made similar observations, writing that Mesoamerican (and thus Nephite) “east is not a line toward the sun at the equinox, but the entire wedge created by
tracing the passage of the sun along the horizon from solstice to solstice from the center.”

In these matters, one need not think the Mesoamericanists are right in order to realize that Neville’s characterization is unfair and clearly prejudicial. It partakes of a double standard: Gardner, Sorenson, et al. are not permitted by Neville to have the Nephites see directions in the same way that the Maya did, even though the Maya represent a type of “host culture” in time and place for Book of Mormon events in their model. Neville insists that words like “north” and “west” must match “the ordinary meaning of the English language” and the cardinal directional scheme which we associate with them, instead of an adaptation of our system to translate a different but valid approach.

But, when confronted with the Mississippi river, Neville is quite happy to label part of it a “sea” through appeals to a few Jewish poetical texts. If Joseph Smith is bound to render directions just as the modern Neville thinks he should, we must also insist that the same Joseph Smith avail himself of perfectly good English words like “lake” and “river,” which are used on multiple occasions in the same volume. It can be nothing but special pleading to have one part of the Mississippi become the river Sidon, and another part a west sea, with a great lake labeled a second sea west for good measure. There is no common interpretive rule or principle that guides Neville’s exegesis — instead, he seems to pick and choose depending on the needs of the North American model.

Conclusion

I am reluctant to accept Neville’s chiastic argument based upon Alma 22:27 on at least three grounds: (1) the existence of the chiasmus is dubious; (2) assuming its presence in Neville’s reading leads to conclusions at variance with the Book of Mormon text, many of which make the actors’ military choices nonsensical; and (3) Neville’s reading requires him to make ad hoc assumptions and leaps at least as large as those he roundly condemns in others.

Neville’s production of a map and detailed explanation for how it was produced is a major step forward for Heartland advocates. Unfortunately, an examination of even a few verses reveals this model’s errors, ad hoc assumptions, and ignored details. These flaws suggest the need to begin again, and this would be best done via an internal model justified on its own terms without reference to any real-world location.
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Endnotes

1 Jonathan Neville, *Moroni’s America: The North American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Digital Legend, 2016). All references in the main text are to this work, unless otherwise noted. Neville also critiques articles with which he differs on a blog, opining that the peer review was inadequate: *Interpreter Peer Reviews blog*, http://interpreterpeerreviews.blogspot.ca.


Donald W. Parry, personal correspondence with Gregory L. Smith, 30 November 2015, cited with permission, copy in my possession.

Figure 1: Neville’s internal geography based on Alma 22 (from Neville, p. 30).


Basic Sorenson model (*Mormon’s Map*, 43, Map 5).


Neville at times agrees with this, making it difficult to understand his model on this point (50).

This raises another difficulty with Neville’s model. He argues that the only mention of “narrow neck of land” is in Ether 10:20 (21–22), and so claims that Hagoth’s “narrow neck” is instead likely a different feature (54, 60, 186–89). He places Ether’s “narrow neck of land” near either modern Detroit or Buffalo (264), and thus 156–325 straight-line miles (250–520 km) from the shore of
Lake Michigan. While it is understandable that he would attempt to distinguish the “narrow neck of land” from the “narrow neck” to save his model, this seems yet another ad hoc claim forcing a fit with North America. These issues require more attention than I can give them here, but the reader should realize that Neville’s model encounters such difficulties repeatedly.

13 Neville deals with some of these issues by proposing two “west” seas. I address these claims in detail in the section entitled “Two ‘West Seas’?”

14 Parry to Smith, 30 November 2015.

15 Jonathan Neville, “Seriously … this is the map you’re supposed to accept,” Book of Mormon Wars blog (18 August 2015), http://bookofmormonwars.blogspot.ca/2015/08/seriously-this-is-map-youre-supposed-to.html.


18 Neville, “Peer Review of Brant Gardner trying to defend the Mesoamerican theory.”


23 Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company with Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 124. See also 299–300 for another discussion of the idea.

24 Mormon’s Codex, 125, 127.

Abstract: Shulem is mentioned once in the Book of Abraham. All we are told about him is his name and title. Using onomastics, the study of names, and the study of titles, we can find out more about Shulem than would at first appear. The form of Shulem’s name is attested only at two times: the time period of Abraham and the time period of the Joseph Smith papyri. (Shulem thus constitutes a Book of Abraham bullseye.) If Joseph Smith had gotten the name from his environment, the name would have been Shillem.

Buried in the facsimiles from the Book of Abraham is the statement that one of the figures represents “Shulem, one of the king’s principal waiters” (Book of Abraham, Facsimile 3, figure 5). There are a number of things we can say about this figure.

The first is the name Shulem. The name itself is widely attested in Semitic languages. The name is a hypocoristic form of the name meaning that it normally appears with a divine name attached but the divine name is omitted. The name first appears in Old Akkadian in the Sargonic Period (2334-2154 BC) with a hypocoristic form as Salimmu, and without a hypocoristic form as Salim-ahu, Salim-beli, and Salim-Šamaš. In Eblaite, the form of the name used is the hypocoristic Sulum. During the Ur III Period (2112-2004 BC), the forms Šalim-beli, Šalim-MI, and Šalim-šillumII are attested. In the Old Assyrian Period (1900-1814 BC) the hypocoristic form is not found, but the forms Šalim-Adad, Šalim-ahu, Šalim-Aššur, Šalim-beli, Šalum-ahu, and Šalum-Aššur are. The name is not popular during the Old Babylonian period (1894-1595 BC), but it still occurs, appearing, for example, in its hypocoristic form as both Salmu, and Sulum, and in non-hypocoristic forms as Šalim-Šamaš. The name appears in Middle Babylonian texts (1595-1155 BC) in two forms: in the hypocoristic form, Šulum, and with a divine name attached Šullim-Adad. Contemporarily
at Ugarit, the name is attested both as a hypocoristic form Šlmy, but it also survived in an alternate forms. The hypocoristic forms were Šullumā, Šulmī, Šulmu, and Šulmā for men, and Šulmitu for women. Neo-Assyrian non-hypocoristic forms include Šulmu-ahhe, Šulmu-ahhešu, Šulmu-ahi, Šulmu-ahu’a, Šulmu-Aia, Šulmu-Aššur, Šulmu-beli, Šulmu-beli-lamur, Šulmu-beli-lašme, Šulmu-birati, Šulmu-ereš, Šulmu-ilani, Šulmu-ilī, Šulmu-iqiša, Šulmu-Issar, Šulmu-lamur, Šulmu-lušeri, Šulmu-mat-Aššur, Šulmu-mati, Šulmu-Sin, and Šulmu-šarri for men, and Šulmu-abisha for women. In Neo-Babylonian times (625-539 BC), the name is attested both in hypocoristic forms, like Šullumu, and non-hypocoristic forms like Simil-bel, Šulum-aḥi, Šullumaya, and Šulum-(ana)-Babili.

In Hebrew, the name is attested in a number of forms. There are two hypocoristic forms, Šillēm (kjv: Shillem; LXX: Συλλημ and Σελλημ), and Šelomî (kjv: Shelomi), and the non-hypocoristic forms Šelumîʾēl (kjv: Shelumiel), Šelemyā (kjv: Shelemiah), and Šelemyāhū (kjv: Shelemiah).

So the name is Semitic, though the form of the name varies across time and place. The form in the Book of Abraham is closest to the second millennium forms and the third century Alexandria form found in the Septuagint, matching the time periods of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri, respectively.

Not only does the vocalization of Shulem match Abraham’s day, the social situation of that day is informative as well. Egyptian interest in the Levantine littoral had increased in the last few reigns of the Twelfth Egyptian Dynasty, mainly those of Sesostris III and Amenemhet III. This included military incursions as far north as Ullaza as well as military campaigns further south in the area that is now Israel. That empire seems to have disappeared by the end of the Twelfth Dynasty.

The Twelfth Dynasty was succeeded by the Thirteenth Dynasty in the Nile valley and the Fourteenth Dynasty in the Nile delta. The Fourteenth Dynasty was “a local dynasty of Asiatic origin in the north-eastern Delta” who are notable for “kings with foreign, mostly West Semitic, names.” The names of the royal house and of the treasurers of the Fourteenth Dynasty are mainly of foreign origin, though there are a few Egyptian names among them.” While some have argued that the Fourteenth Dynasty “ruled in the Delta contemporary with the Thirteenth Dynasty,” others argue that “some overlap between the
14th and 13th Dynasties does seem probable, but the evidence suggests that this occurred toward the end of Dynasty Thirteen rather than at its beginning.” The exact extent of Fourteenth Dynasty territory is in doubt “due to the scarcity of monuments, the complete lack of contemporary documents from this dynasty, and the fact that the Delta, archaeologically speaking, is extremely poorly documented as regards to this period (with the notable exception of Tell el-Dab‘a).” Four reasons have been suggested for this lack of documentation: (1) the lack of available stone in the Delta, (2) Canaanite tradition may have avoided making monuments, (3) deliberate destruction of monuments during the New Kingdom, (4) lack of excavation in the Delta, since only three of twenty-nine sites with Second Intermediate Period material have been excavated. The Second Intermediate Period levels are generally below the water table in the Delta. It does not help that “scholarly controversies concerning the absolute dates of Middle Kingdom-Second Intermediate Period archaeological deposits both in Egypt and the Levant attest to the problematic nature” of dating archaeological deposits from the time period.

Whether one dates the arrival of the Fourteenth Dynasty toward the beginning or the end of the Thirteenth Dynasty, there would have been a dynastic change during Abraham’s life, with rulers of a different dynasty in Egypt at the time of his visit than had been in charge during his attempted sacrifice.

Early in the Thirteenth Dynasty (in the reign of Sobekhotep III), we have an account of various servants in the vizier’s household who were transferred. “The main item is a fragmentary list of ninety-five servants, of whom at least forty-five are of Asiatic origin.” Many of the Asiatics have Northwest Semitic names, but many of them have been given Egyptian names “copied or built on the names of their masters,” in this case, the vizier Resseneb, or his father, the vizier Akhu. Since “all eight of the Asiatic children and at least five of their elders have Egyptian names,” one can conclude that “the Semitic names borne by most of the adults of our group suggest that they, at least, were relatively recent importations.” Since those with Egyptian names were named after the owners, it suggests also that the owners, or someone in their families, may have given the names to the children.

Shulem’s title is “king’s principal waiter” which seems like a different translation of the title wdpw “butler” or “cupbearer,” or wb; “butler.” There are a number of variations on the title from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. These include wdpw iry iḥ “butler and keeper of the crescent,”
"butler of the meat-pantry,\(^{93}\) "butler of the water-pantry,\(^{94}\) "butler of the catch-pantry,\(^{95}\) "butler of the provisions-pantry,\(^{96}\) "butler of the bread-pantry,\(^{97}\) "butler of the meat-pantry,\(^{98}\) "butler of the provisions-pantry,\(^{99}\) "butler of the pantry,\(^{100}\) "butler of the provisions-pantry,\(^{101}\) "butler of the pantry,\(^{102}\) "butler of the provisions-pantry,\(^{103}\) "butler of the ruler,\(^{104}\) "butler of the sealer,\(^{105}\) "butler of the royal seal-bearer,\(^{106}\) and "trustworthy butler.\(^{107}\) The range of titles show that the butler primarily dealt with foodstuffs.

Of these titles, the closest to “king’s principal waiter” is "butler of the ruler." This title is attested once, on a Twelfth Dynasty stele from Abydos in the Musée de Marseille dating to late in the reign of Amenemhet III;\(^{108}\) the title is borne by a man named Pepy, who seems to be the son of Senuseretseneb-Sobekhotep.\(^{109}\) It is important to recognize that the butler of the ruler did not own the stele, his father who was a "sealer and assistant to the overseer of the treasury"\(^{110}\) did. Generally, owners of stele are only very high government officials; a high government official might be able to afford a stele, but a butler might not. During the time when Abraham visited Egypt, probably the Fourteenth Dynasty, personal monuments are even rarer.\(^{111}\) Therefore we should neither expect the title or those who held it to appear much in the archaeological or historical record. It also indicates that the title is not a very high ranking one.

Another possibility is the "the cupbearer of the outer palace." The outer palace (\(^{n}\)nty) was “the sector for state affairs, in opposition to the private quarters of the palace.”\(^{112}\) The cupbearers of the outer palace served as “intermediaries” who supplied the palace.\(^{113}\) Conceptually, the palace consisted of “the main palace building(s), divided into two principal sections, the official quarters at the front (\(^{hnty}\)) and private quarters at the back. Around these would stand the storerooms and general servicing quarters (\(^{sn\alpha}\)).”\(^{114}\)

In a ritual context, the most likely candidate is the "butler and keeper of the moon" or “cupbearer, keeper of the crescent” because he was “the cupbearer of the king in the context of sacred ceremonies.”\(^{115}\) The title seems to be used “as a designation for the cupbearer who had to bring food to the king himself.”\(^{116}\) This title “first appears in the reign of Amenemhat III.”\(^{117}\) One of the holders of the title
claims that he was “one truly known to the king, his beloved, pure of arm in the sight (?) of Horus, when he offers the vital sustenance of the king, overseer of stores.”

One of the duties of the wdpw “butler” or “cupbearer” was to convey orders for goods from the palace to the scribes in the outer court who would write it down to be delivered to those who would provide the supplies. The cupbearer would also “have brought the food from the preparation room to the place of eating.” In later times, the butler or cupbearer was an attendant on royal family members along with bodyguards.

Another possibility is that the term “waiter” represents the Egyptian title wbꜣ, since “the wbꜣ ‘foodbearer’ seems to have represented the same function [as the wdpw ‘cupbearer’], perhaps lower status or less formal expression.” The title wbꜣ is also translated “butler.” Besides the generic term, there existed more specific titles, including wbꜣ n it-nṯr “butler of the god’s father,” wbꜣ n ṣt ḫnqt “butler of the beer-pantry,” and wbꜣ n šnꜥw “butler of a storehouse.”

The precise form of the title, wbꜣ or wdpw or variants, is not determinable at this point. There are a number of possibilities which give a general indication of position and function of the principal waiter.

So from Shulem’s name and title and we can surmise the following: From the form of his name, we know that Shulem lived during the late Middle Kingdom or the Second Intermediate Period. Shulem was not a native Egyptian. He was probably a first generation immigrant. He served in the court of a Fourteenth Dynasty ruler, who was probably not a native Egyptian either. If we had the entire translation of the Book of Abraham, we might be able to see how Shulem might have fit into the story or know more about him.

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Endnotes

1 For a general discussion see, Johann Jakob Stamm, Die akkadische Namengebung (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), 121, 316, 369.


5 E.g. CUNES 49-09-015 15, in Milano and Westenholz, *The Šuilisu Archive and Other Sargonic Texts in Akkadian*, 80.

6 E.g. CUNES 49-13-086 r 5, in Milano and Westenholz, *The Šuilisu Archive and Other Sargonic Texts in Akkadian*, 59.


11 Watson, *Neo-Sumerian Texts from Umma and Other Sites*, 49.


15 Ibid.


19 Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 337.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.


32 Ibid.


34 *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2011), 3/II:1269

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 3/II:1270.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 3/II:1269-70.

40 Ibid., 3/II:1270-72.

41 Ibid., 3/II:1272.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 3/II:1272-74.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 3/II:1274-75.

49 Ibid., 3/II:1275.

50 Ibid., 3/II:1275-76.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 3/II:1276-77.

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 3/II:1277.
60 Ibid., 3/II:1277-80.
61 Ibid., 3/II:1270.
62 Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, 340.
64 MMA 86.11.68, 86.11.226, and 86.11.88m in Spar and Jursa, The Ebabbar Temple Archive and Other Texts, 38, 47, 57.
65 MMA x.706.2, in 86.11.88m in Spar and Jursa, The Ebabbar Temple Archive and Other Texts, 48.
67 Ibid.
72 1 Chronicles 26:14; Ezra 10:41; Jeremiah 36:14, 26; 38:1; Tel Ira Ostraca 1, in Dobbs-Allsopp, Roberts, Seow, Whitaker, Hebrew Inscriptions, 197; Lachish Ostraca 9, in Dobbs-Allsopp, Roberts, Seow, Whitaker, Hebrew Inscriptions, 327; Horvat Uza Ostraca 4, in Dobbs-Allsopp, Roberts, Seow, Whitaker, Hebrew Inscriptions,


75 John Garstang, *El-Arabah* (London: EEF, 1901), pls. IV-V.


78 Ibid., 94.


80 Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*, 103.

81 Ibid., 116-17.

82 Ben-Tor, Allen, and Allen, “Seals and Kings,” 53.

83 William C. Hays, *A Papyrus of The Late Middle Kingdom In the Brooklyn Museum* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1955); Stephen Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom* (New Malden, UK: Sia Publishing, 1990), 127-54. For the origin of the servants in the vizier’s household, see Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom*, 148-49.

84 Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom*, 147.

85 Hays, *A Papyrus of The Late Middle Kingdom In the Brooklyn Museum*, 92, 99.

86 Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom*, 148.
87 Hays, A *Papyrus of The Late Middle Kingdom In the Brooklyn Museum*, 93.

88 Ibid., 99.


90 Stephen Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom* (New Malden, UK: Sia Publishing, 1990), 36.


92 Ibid., 91; a more recent translation is provided in Stephen Quirke, *Titles and bureaux of Egypt 1850-1700 BC* (London: Golden House Publications, 2004), 35.


95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., see also the comment in Henry George Fischer, *Egyptian Titles of the Middle Kingdom: A Supplement to Wm. Ward’s Index* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 63.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid., 92.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom*, 36.

Ibid.


For the individual, see Franke, Personendaten aus dem Mittleren Reich, 310. For the title, see Ward, Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom, 139.

Ryholt, The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, 359-83 lists only king Nehsy as being attested by anything other than scarab-seals and the Turin King List. If royal monuments are so rare as to be almost non-existent, we should expect private monuments to be even rarer.

Quirke, The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom, 37.

Ibid., 38.

Ibid., 39.

Ibid., 91.

Quirke, Titles and bureaux of Egypt, 35.

Quirke, The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom, 195.

Quirke, Titles and bureaux of Egypt, 35.

Ibid.

Ibid., Egyptian omitted.

Quirke, The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom, 102-4.

Quirke, Titles and bureaux of Egypt, 66.

Quirke, The Administration of Egypt in the Later Middle Kingdom, 99 n. 7.

Quirke, Titles and bureaux of Egypt, 66.
125  Ward, *Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom*, 84-85.

126  Ibid., 85.

127  Ibid.

128  Ibid.

129  Ibid.
Abstract: Conversations with Mormon Historians is a compilation of interviews with sixteen Latter-day Saint scholars. The book reveals why they went into their chosen professions, their rise to prominence as historians, and their thoughts regarding important topics such as the Prophet Joseph Smith and the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Part of understanding history is to understand the historians who wrote it. In other words, to truly grasp historical interpretations and perspectives, we need to know the historians behind the works of historical writing. Only then can we recognize how and why various historical events and people are being portrayed.

The field of Mormon history, like any other field of study, has its luminaries. Perhaps the best known and respected of these is the late Leonard J. Arrington, recognized for years as the leading Mormon historian and labeled by some as the founder of New Mormon History. It appears, however, that Arrington never mentioned New Mormon History in anything he published, nor is there anything in his papers at Utah State University indicating he paid much attention to the debate over what exactly constituted New Mormon History. Arrington, who passed away in 1999 after a stellar career, was a LDS Church historian and the founder and first president of the Mormon History Association. He earned a plethora of accolades and awards for his groundbreaking research and publications.

Arrington, however, was not alone in well-earned recognition and respect. Over the years there have been a number of men and women
who have, for lack of a better phrase, become stars in the field of Mormon history and who deserve special notice for their contributions to better understanding the Latter-day Saint story.

*Conversations with Mormon Historians* presents the histories of sixteen “remarkable men and women who have made careers out of researching, writing, and teaching about the past” (vii). It contains interviews previously published in *Mormon Historic Studies* and *Religious Educator*. All sixteen historians were born and raised in the United States as a part of the Silent Generation — those born between 1925 and 1942 (vii) — and have either passed on, retired, or are in the twilight of their careers.

The sixteen historians in the book are Thomas G. Alexander; James B. Allen; Richard Lloyd Anderson; Milton V. Backman, Jr.; LaMar C. Berrett; Claudia L. Bushman; Richard L. Bushman; Kenneth W. Godfrey; Dean C. Jessee; Stanley B. Kimball; Carol Cornwall Madsen; Robert J. Matthews; Max H. Parkin; Charles S. Peterson; Larry C. Porter; and Laurel Thatcher Ullrich.

A compilation such as this leads to questions about the criteria for inclusion. Why these particular sixteen scholars were selected while others (such as Davis Bitton, Glen M. Leonard, Jan Shipps, and Ronald W. Walker) were excluded is unclear. These four scholars were also members of the Silent Generation, and they are well respected for their important contributions to LDS history. The volume could have been enriched by their additional insights.

Nevertheless, the exceptional historians discussed in this book have been able to unite their work with their passion, making a living doing what they would have otherwise done for pleasure. In the process, they “inherited and helped lead what has been termed the ‘New Mormon History’” (viii). This approach is described as attempting to present history in a dispassionate, professional way, avoiding the polemics of previous generations.  

Admittedly, such an approach to religious history is fraught with the potential problems of producing a history either too defensive — or too critical — of that which is held in sacred reverence by millions. The historians discussed in the book have traversed this proverbial minefield with varying degrees of success.

Obviously, each interview is a work unto itself, independent of the others; some interviews are better and more informative than others.

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Nevertheless, there are several interesting points this reader took away from the interviews as a whole. The first is that most of these historians came from humble origins and rose to prominence among Mormon scholars through perseverance and hard work. The second is how small the world of Mormon scholarship really is. And the third point is that, for almost all of these scholars, their research into early Mormonism reinforced and strengthened their testimonies of both Joseph Smith and the gospel.

A number of these historians grew up in rural and small town environments. James Allen, for example, lived for a time in Star Valley, Wyoming, and then spent his teen years in Logan (37). Kenneth Godfrey grew up on a small farm in northern Utah (234), and Dean Jessee grew up in Springville where he “learned the fine arts” of gardening, milking cows, hauling hay, irrigating, digging ditches, shoveling manure, and other necessary farm activities (278). Stanley Kimball was born and spent his first fourteen years in Farmington (309), while Robert Matthews was from Evanston, Wyoming, and grew up doing farm work and construction (384). Charles Peterson was from Snowflake, Arizona (450), and Laurel Thatcher Ullrich grew up in Sugar City, Idaho, where her father farmed (532).

Most of those who were born and raised in larger cities like Salt Lake City; Los Angeles and Oakland, California; and Portland, Oregon also experienced humble, sometimes difficult beginnings. Most noted in their interviews being born in and experiencing both the difficulties of the Great Depression and the lean years of World War II where, whether on the home front or on the battlefield, they learned about sacrifice and service. Richard Anderson spent his World War II military service in the southeast United States (76) and LaMar Berrett served in the Battle of the Bulge and then fought his way across Germany into Czechoslovakia (128–29). Milton Backman enlisted in the Maritime Service, but World War II ended before he could actually serve. Instead, he served a year and a half in the Korean War (106–7).

The world of Mormon scholarship is relatively small, and it is not surprising these various historians knew each other. Nor is it surprising that Leonard Arrington impacted the careers of almost all of these sixteen scholars. What was surprising to this reader, however, was how many other connections to important Mormon scholars existed in the group.

Thomas Alexander, for example, considered George Ellsworth to be an early mentor (9). So did James Allen, who also considered
Eugene Campbell an early mentor (38–9). Both Ellsworth and Leonard Arrington taught at Utah State University. LaMar Berrett was influenced by both Gustive O. Larsen and Richard Poll (131), and Larson also had a great influence on Kenneth Godfrey (247). Godfrey also studied under Milton V. Backman; in fact, it was Backman who encouraged Godfrey to research and write about Nauvoo (249). Backman, Campbell, Larson, and Poll all taught at Brigham Young University.

Carol Madsen’s graduate committee included Davis Bitton and Brigham Madsen (359-360), both of whom taught at the University of Utah. Hugh Nibley was both a mentor and good friend to Richard Anderson (82). Max Parkin became interested in history because of T. Edgar Lyon (414). Parkin also took classes from Richard Anderson, Milton Backman, Richard Bushman, Truman Madsen and Hugh Nibley (416). Charles Peterson became interested in history because of Richard Poll (459), but was greatly influenced by LeRoy Hafen (463). Laurel Thatcher Ullrich was influenced by Lowell Bennion and his writings, but also considered both Richard and Claudia Bushman to be close friends and mentors (546, 540).

Ullrich was not alone in citing fellow Latter-day Saint scholars as close friends, colleagues, and mentors. Throughout their careers, almost all of the sixteen scholars found opportunities to associate and collaborate with each other. LaMar Berrett marveled about his own career: “… to think that I worked with some of the giants in scholarship at BYU is incredible to me” (136). It was, no doubt, a sentiment some of the others held.

But what was most significant to this reader were the comments by these historians that their study of Joseph Smith and the early history of the Church reinforced and strengthened their faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of these individuals had the opportunity to use their impressive knowledge and skills on the Joseph Smith Papers project. Through their research, they gained an appreciation for Joseph Smith, the man and the prophet.

Milton Backman described Joseph Smith the man as unpolished and not well educated but who, as a prophet, “dictated the Book of Mormon and unfolded remarkable revelations” (113). Richard Bushman remarked, “No one book, no one biographer, can encompass a figure as complex as Joseph Smith” (187). He then explained how an idealized version of Joseph Smith would be vulnerable to unrealistic expectations, but more in-depth research into the prophet had helped Latter-day Saints
understand that “a flaw in Joseph Smith doesn’t shake our foundation. We are ready for a more realistic Joseph” (188).

Max Parkin also studied Joseph Smith with a scholarly, open approach. He explained, “I gained a resolve to be forthright and encouraging with any student who might have his or her own issues with our religious heritage. I would also try to avoid building spiritual traps for students, as we teachers sometimes do, carelessly teaching things that later have to be untaught” (420–21). Parkin described his own initial crisis of faith as a result of reading Fawn Brodie’s No Man Knows My History, but explained that doing his own research had allowed him to come “out of the struggle with a greater understanding of Joseph Smith and with tougher spiritual convictions” (420).

He was not alone. LaMar Berrett announced, “My testimony is built on a study of the Prophet Joseph Smith. I’m a believer …” (144). Dean Jessee admitted that during his long career in church history, his interest in Joseph Smith “has been paramount,” and the more he saw of the original sources from Joseph Smith, “the more convinced I am of his veracity” (303). Richard Anderson stated that his “confidence that Joseph Smith was a true and truthful prophet” came in part from his extensive research, and he believes that “Joseph is a credible witness, fully supported in his testimony of core Restoration events by other credible witnesses” (102).

Perhaps Larry Porter put it best when he said, “For an LDS historian, there is an added increment if you are a believer, and that is that the Spirit can confirm things of personal import relative to the establishment of the gospel” (528). That is something LDS members, historians or not, can take away from this book.

Conversations with Mormon Historians is an important book for anyone interested in Restoration history and historiography. One hopes that in the future there will be another volume or two containing interviews with Mormon historians from later generations, particularly those who fell just outside the Silent Generation — Jill Mulvay Derr and Richard L. Jensen, for examples — who could add their insights and testimonies to a fascinating and important subject for all Latter-day Saints.

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