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Abstract: “Think not,” said the Savior at Matthew 10:34, “that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.” And this has in fact been the case — too often literally, but certainly figuratively. In the Old Testament, the Lord accurately foretold the situation that we commonly see: “I will take you one of a city,” he explained, “and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion” (Jeremiah 3:14). Unfortunately, those who aren’t so “taken” are often not entirely happy with the beliefs and practices of those who are. “Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth?” Jesus told his audience at Luke 12:51–52. “I tell you, Nay; but rather division.” But is Jesus not the Prince of Peace? Has he not also commanded us “That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39)? Jude 1:3 tells us that we “should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” but we are also told not to be contentious in carrying out that assignment. Doing both simultaneously can be an extraordinarily great challenge. But it is the Lord’s challenge to us.

Barring an unforeseen disaster, I’ll be back by the time you read or hear this introductory essay. (In fact, sadly, I’ll probably already be gone again to someplace else — thus illustrating one of my mother’s favorite principles: “There’s no rest for the wicked.”) At the moment, though, I’m writing it while sitting in Jerusalem. I’m sitting not far from the “green line” that essentially divides the eastern and predominantly Arab part of the city from its western and almost entirely Jewish section.

Originally, the name Jerusalem — which, in Hebrew, is Yerushaláyim — probably comes from a root ʼāry (“to found,” or “to lay a cornerstone”) and Shalem, which was the personal name of the Canaanite god of “twilight” or “dusk” in the Bronze Age. But, since the Hebrew word ʼār is the equivalent of English city, and since Shalem comes from the same
root (s-l-m) as that standing behind the Hebrew and Arabic words for “peace” (respectively, *shalom* and *salaam*), *Jerusalem* has often, and not incorrectly, been interpreted as “City of Peace.”

And, indeed, that is exactly what Jerusalem should be. Far too often, though, it hasn’t been. According to a commonly accepted reckoning, the city has been attacked 52 times, besieged 23 times, captured or recaptured 44 times, and altogether destroyed twice. Moreover, even today, although the city has been under the unified political control of Israel since the Israelis took East Jerusalem in the Six Day War of June 1967, it remains divided. Even its name suggests division: The ending -áyım is a Hebrew dual, which may simply indicate that Yerushaláyım originally sat on two distinct hills — the area is extremely hilly¹ — but which also seems sadly prophetic.

When I visit here, I never fail to remember an experience from the first of my many stays in Jerusalem. It occurred back when I lived in the city as a student from January to June of 1978.

One day, I was sitting alone in the traditional Garden of Gethsemane, just north of the beautiful Roman Catholic Church of All Nations. I was looking across the Kidron Valley — the King James Bible’s “brook Cedron” (at, for example, John 18:1, but “the brook Kidron” at 2 Samuel 15:23) — toward the ancient Temple Mount and the beautiful late-seventh-century Muslim Dome of the Rock. It is one of the greatest views in the world. Suddenly, my attention was caught by a convoy of long-bed military trucks that were slowly climbing up the Derekh Ha’ophel or Al-Akma road, carrying a number of large Israeli armored tanks. (These were either the last generation of tanks before the famous Israeli *Merkava* or, perhaps, the very earliest examples of that fearsomely effective weapon, which officially entered service in 1979.)

Suddenly, it hit me very powerfully that those tanks, ascending the hill on which the Temple of Jerusalem once stood and within a few hundred yards (at most) of the place in which Jesus the Christ had voluntarily undertaken his redeeming sacrifice on our behalf, symbolized what a mess we mortals have made of things here on this earth. They vividly illustrated how desperately we need the Savior, his gospel, and his atonement. Whatever your politics, whatever you think about the Arab-Israeli conflict or about the merits of Zionism or the

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¹. John Menzie Macfarlane (1833–1892), the Scottish-born Latter-day Saint choir director, civic leader, and southern Utah pioneer who wrote the popular Christmas carol “Far, Far Away on Judea’s Plains” (*Hymns*, 212), had obviously visited neither Jerusalem nor Judea more generally.
grievances of the Palestinians, we have plainly not behaved as we should. And not merely in the Middle East, though the Middle East illustrates my point with exceptional clarity. In our premortal state, we knew each other as brothers and sisters, children of our common heavenly Parents. They did not send us here, we did not come to earth, to hate and oppress and injure and kill each other.

As I’m writing, though, the headlines are dominated by yet another in our seemingly endless series of cruel and brutal wars. Innocent people are dying in Ukraine. And some of those innocents, I have no doubt, are members of the invading army. Everyone involved is a child of God.

As I reflect upon such things, I cannot help but think of Moses 7, which, to my mind, surely ranks among the most powerful chapters in all of ancient or modern scripture. I begin with the part of the vision of Enoch in which

he beheld Satan; and he [Satan] had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced. (Moses 7:26)

That is a horrifying image — a chilling glimpse of a genuinely sadistic and arguably deranged personality. It is not unlike C. S. Lewis’s depiction of “the Unman,” a fictional, extraterrestrial version of the devil in *Perelandra*, the second volume of his famous “space trilogy,” who takes insane delight in the sheer pointless infliction of pain and suffering.

But the most remarkable passage of Moses 7 is yet to come. In it, we see Enoch stunned at witnessing God’s tears, and we ourselves are, or we should be, stunned at how such vulnerability co-exists with God’s holiness and his inconceivably great power:

And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?

And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?

And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still; and yet thou art there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever;
And thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations, from all eternity to all eternity; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end; how is it thou canst weep?

The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency;

And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood;

And the fire of mine indignation is kindled against them; and in my hot displeasure will I send in the floods upon them, for my fierce anger is kindled against them.

Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and Endless and Eternal is my name, also.

Wherefore, I can stretch forth mine hands and hold all the creations which I have made; and mine eye can pierce them also, and among all the workmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren.

But behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer? (Moses 7:28–37)

But suffer they — and we — surely do. The Hebrew biblical prophet Joel provides a memorable summation of much of human history. Or perhaps one should more accurately describe it as “inhuman history”:

A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them. (Joel 2:3)

Commentators have disagreed about whether the prophet is describing a locust plague, a Babylonian invasion, or apocalyptic events of the last days. In any case, his words accurately depict what is happening in Ukraine as I write, in Mariupol and Kharkiv and other locations, and what has happened far too many times to count throughout history and around the world.

Contemplating such matters reveals the acute urgency of the claims of the gospel. Although they are too often treated as merely matters for online debate and repartee, they far transcend such triviality.

I’ve long been very fond of the excellent second-tier English poet A. E. Housman (1859–1936), who, along with writing such works as “To an athlete dying young,” from A Shropshire Lad, was a prominent classicist at the University of Cambridge. The melancholy mood of many of his poems speaks to me, for some curious reason. I’ve even made a minor pilgrimage to his grave.

Housman was an atheist, and sometimes a hostile one. But he had moments of deep yearning. One of his poems in particular, entitled “Easter Hymn,” poignantly captures those feelings of longing for a belief that, in the end, he simply couldn’t muster. It expresses wonderfully well part of the Christian hope that is invested in the Easter season and, more particularly, in the event that Easter commemorates. But it speaks, too, to the awful situation in which we find ourselves, and in which we have far, far too often found ourselves:

If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,
You sleep, and know not you are dead in vain,
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and bright
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night
The hate you died to quench and could but fan,
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.

But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled by,
At the right hand of majesty on high
You sit, and sitting so remember yet
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,
Your cross and passion and the life you gave,
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.\(^3\)

Another passage of scripture that has come to loom large in my mind as I’ve grown older and as I’ve seen the wrecks that we as individuals and societies make occurs in the twenty-ninth chapter of the book of Alma. I will confess that, for a surprisingly long time, I actually tended to avoid these two verses, probably because of their setting in a musical piece that, at least when I was in my teens and early twenties, seemed to me to have been overused to the point of triteness and cliché. I no longer feel that way, though. Quite to the contrary, I feel sharply the imperative need for preaching the gospel, not to advance my “team” in some sort of competition but to minimize the kind of suffering that I’ve observed too frequently over my lifetime:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!

Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. (Alma 29:1–2)\(^4\)

And when I think of “crying repentance unto every people,” I sincerely mean “unto every people.” The point is not merely to convert others, important though that is, but to convert ourselves, as well. For, as the great Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously reflected in his classic historical account of the crimes of Soviet Communism, *The Gulag Archipelago*,

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were

\(^3\) A. E. Housman, “Easter Hymn,” in *More Poems* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1936). This poem, and others, were published posthumously in *More Poems* by Houseman’s brother, Laurence Housman.

\(^4\) For some brief thoughts on literary technique in this passage, see Daniel C. Peterson, “The Book of Mormon was very carefully written,” *Deseret News* (20 June 2013); https://www.deseret.com/2013/6/20/20521358/the-book-of-mormon-was-very-carefully-written.
necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.\(^5\)

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either — but right through every human heart — and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains … an unuprooted small corner of evil.\(^6\)

The problem isn’t just The Other. The problem can and, to some extent, inevitably does exist among us, too. The Book of Mormon is very instructive here — and not surprisingly, because, as President Ezra Taft Benson reminded us, “it was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book; neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us.”\(^7\)

And the Book of Mormon clearly tells us that contention and pride can afflict members of the Church as well as nonmembers. Early in the first century before Christ, for example,

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.

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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 4:8–10)

The Book of Mormon gives us an account of the Nephites prior to the advent of Christ, not an account of the apostate Lamanites. According to its record, “Satan … did go about spreading rumors and contentions upon all the face of the land, that he might harden the hearts of the people against that which was good” (Helaman 16:22).

On the eve of Christ’s crucifixion in the Old World, the Book of Mormon focuses upon the Nephites, not the Lamanites, when it relates how contention and mutual hatred completely destroyed organized, orderly, civil community:

Now behold, I will show unto you that they did not establish a king over the land; but in this same year, yea, the thirtieth year, they did destroy upon the judgment-seat, yea, did murder the chief judge of the land.

And the people were divided one against another; and they did separate one from another into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends; and thus they did destroy the government of the land.

And every tribe did appoint a chief or a leader over them; and thus they became tribes and leaders of tribes.

Now behold, there was no man among them save he had much family and many kindreds and friends; therefore their tribes became exceedingly great.

Now all this was done, and there were no wars as yet among them; and all this iniquity had come upon the people because they did yield themselves unto the power of Satan.

And the regulations of the government were destroyed, because of the secret combination of the friends and kindreds of those who murdered the prophets.

And they did cause a great contention in the land, insomuch that the more righteous part of the people had nearly all become wicked; yea, there were but few righteous men among them.
And thus six years had not passed away since the more part of the people had turned from their righteousness, like the dog to his vomit, or like the sow to her wallowing in the mire. (3 Nephi 7:1–8)

Surely, apart from its witness to the divinity and redeeming mission of the Savior Jesus Christ, one of the principal messages of the Book of Mormon is its strong counsel against strife and contention, which is not only implicit in its accounts of the bloody wars of the Jaredites, Nephites, and Lamanites, but fully explicit in numerous verses of the text:

And again, the Lord God hath commanded that men should not murder; that they should not lie; that they should not steal; that they should not take the name of the Lord their God in vain; that they should not envy; that they should not have malice; that they should not contend one with another; that they should not commit whoredoms; and that they should do none of these things; for whoso doeth them shall perish. For none of these iniquities come of the Lord. (2 Nephi 26:32–33a)

And he [Alma the Younger] commanded them that there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another. And thus he commanded them to preach. And thus they became the children of God. (Mosiah 18:21–22)

Thus did Alma teach his people, that every man should love his neighbor as himself, that there should be no contention among them. (Mosiah 23:15)

Among the very first words spoken by the risen Christ to the Nephites who had assembled at the temple in the land of Bountiful after the catastrophic destruction described in 3 Nephi 8 were these:

For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another;

8. For another illustration of the disastrous consequences of pride within the Church, see Helaman 3:33–34, 36; 4:1.
but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away.
(3 Nephi 11:29–30)

The Restoration itself began in a divine response to the prayer of a young boy in the spring of 1820. It was a prayer that, at least in part, sought deliverance from the religious confusion and contention that surrounded him there in the “burned-over district” of central and western New York. The religious revivals and socio-political reform movements emerging out of the “Second Great Awakening” that swept the area, said some, seemed to set the area ablaze with spiritual fervor. But they also caused fierce contention that was disturbing to a rural farm boy in his early teens, especially because they divided even his own family:

For, notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great zeal manifested by the respective clergy, who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling, in order to have everybody converted, as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased; yet when the converts began to file off, some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued — priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions. (Joseph Smith — History 1:6)

Even before the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, no later than April 1829 and possibly as early as 1828, the Lord declared to Joseph Smith that it was his intent to “establish my gospel, that there may not be so much contention; yea, Satan doth stir up the hearts of the people to contention concerning the points of my doctrine” (D&C 10:63). And, in a revelation given through Brigham Young at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, the Saints were counseled to “cease to contend one with another; cease to speak evil one of another” (D&C 136:23).

The author of Proverbs notes that “only by pride cometh contention” (Proverbs 13:10), which is to say that our fights stem from our pride. “Behold,” the prophet Mormon wrote to his son Moroni near the conclusion of Nephite history, “the pride of this nation, or the people of the Nephites, hath proven their destruction” (Moroni 8:27). “Beware of pride,” the Lord warned the young restored Church on 2 January 1831, “lest ye become as the Nephites of old” (D&C 38:39).

On 11 September 1831, when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was still less than a year and a half old, the Lord again admonished its membership in a revelation given through Joseph Smith to the elders of the Church, at Kirtland, Ohio:

My disciples, in days of old, sought occasion against one another and forgave not one another in their hearts; and for this evil they were afflicted and sorely chastened.

Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin.

I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men. (D&C 64:8–10)

We live in a time of often fierce divisions, over politics, over lifestyles, over responses to a pandemic, even over gender identities and preferred pronouns. These are frequently difficult matters, important matters, and positions on them are not uncommonly held and advocated with passion. Of course they merit discussion and debate. Sometimes, though, they sow division, even within the Church and among the Saints. And this should not be.

On 12 November 2021, President Dallin H. Oaks delivered a notable lecture at the University of Virginia in which, as he put it, he spoke both “as a religious person who has served in government at both federal and
state levels and now as a leader in the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” “I am,” he said,

distressed at the way we are handling the national issues that divide us. We have always had to work through serious political conflicts, but today too many approach that task as if their preferred outcome must entirely prevail over all others, even in our pluralistic society. We need to work for a better way — a way to resolve differences without compromising core values. We need to live together in peace and mutual respect, within our defined constitutional rights.10

President Oaks was plainly speaking as an American to an American audience in an American legal and political context. But the factionalism that currently afflicts the United States of America isn’t limited to one country, and the gospel’s condemnation of rancor and contention applies to Latter-day Saints (and others) everywhere, and not only to political disputes.

In a revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet at Kirtland, Ohio, between 27 December 1832 and 3 January 1833 that he himself described as an “‘olive leaf’ … plucked from the Tree of Paradise, the Lord’s message of peace to us,” the Lord tells us how we are to comport ourselves, even in disagreement: “Above all things, clothe yourselves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace” (D&C 88:125). “Blessed are the peacemakers,” said Jesus both as a mortal to the Jews and as a resurrected immortal to the Nephites, “for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9; 3 Nephi 12:9).

How should we go about doing this? In particular, how should we go about being peacemakers in the specific context here of advocating, commending, and defending the claims of the Restoration? Elder Neil L. Andersen, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, offers some helpful counsel:

How does a peacemaker calm and cool the fiery darts? Certainly not by shrinking before those who disparage us. Rather, we remain confident in our faith, sharing our beliefs with conviction but always void of anger or malice.

Recently, after seeing a strongly worded opinion piece that was critical of the Church, Reverend Amos C. Brown, a national civil rights leader and pastor of the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco, responded:

“I respect the experience and perspective of the individual who wrote those words. Granted, I don’t see what he sees.”

“I count it one of my life’s greatest joys to know these leaders [of the Church], including President Russell M. Nelson. They are, in my estimation, the embodiment of the best leadership our country has to offer.”

He then added: “We can gripe about the way things were. We can refuse to acknowledge all the good going on now …. But these approaches will not heal our national divisions …. As Jesus taught, we don’t eradicate evil with more evil. We love generously and live mercifully, even toward those we think to be our enemies.”

Reverend Brown is a peacemaker. He calmly and respectfully cooled the fiery darts. Peacemakers are not passive; they are persuasive in the Savior’s way.11

“None of us,” said President Russell M. Nelson at the April 2022 general conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, can control nations or the actions of others or even members of our own families. But we can control ourselves. My call … is to end conflicts that are raging in your heart, your home, and your life …. It can be painfully difficult to let go of anger that feels so justified. It can seem impossible to forgive those whose destructive actions have hurt the innocent. And yet, the Savior admonished us to “forgive all men.”

We are followers of the Prince of Peace. Now more than ever, we need the peace only He can bring …. I know what I’m suggesting is not easy … I plead with you to do all you can to end personal conflicts that are currently raging in your hearts and in your lives.12

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Here at the Interpreter Foundation, we seek to comment upon, advocate, defend, and commend the scriptures, doctrines, and claims of the Restoration. We do so strongly, and with commitment. Sometimes even (or so we imagine!) with wit. We don’t back down from what we’re convinced is true, good, and beautiful. But we also try to do what we do honestly, calmly, and with charity. Without cruelty or anger or malice. We would have little claim to be disciples of the Savior if we didn’t make a serious effort to behave as he has asked us to behave.

I’m deeply grateful for the authors, reviewers, donors, designers, source checkers, copy editors, and other volunteers who make the work of the Interpreter Foundation in general, including this publication, possible. Here, I particularly want to thank the authors who have contributed to this volume, along with Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, the managing or production editors for the Journal. As all of the officers of the Interpreter Foundation do, they donate their time, their talents, and their labor; they receive no financial compensation. Without them, though, there would be no Interpreter, and without others like them the Interpreter Foundation as a whole could not function. I’m amazed at what we’ve accomplished together over the ten years of our existence thus far, and I look forward to even greater things yet to come.

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Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: Several of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s earliest revelations, beginning with Moroni’s appearance in 1823, quote the prophecy of Malachi 3:1 with the Lord “suddenly com[ing] to his temple” as “messenger of the covenant.” Malachi 3:1 and its quoted iterations in 3 Nephi 24:1; Doctrine and Covenants 36:8; 42:36; 133:2 not only impressed upon Joseph and early Church members the urgency of building a temple to which the Lord could come, but also presented him as the messenger of the Father’s restored covenant. Malachi’s prophecy concords with the restored portion of the “fulness of the record of John” and its “messenger” Christology in D&C 93:8 in which Jesus Christ is both “the messenger of salvation” (the “Word”) and the Message (also “the Word”). The ontological kinship of God the Father with Jesus, angels (literally messengers), and humankind in Joseph’s early revelations lays the groundwork for the doctrine of humankind’s coeternity with God (D&C 93:29), and the notion that through “worship” one can “come unto the Father in [Jesus’s] name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19; cf. D&C 88:29). D&C 88 specifies missionary work and ritual washing of the feet as a means of becoming, through the atonement of Jesus Christ, “clean from the blood of this generation” (D&C 88:75, 85, 138). Such ritual washings continued as a part of the endowment that was revealed to Joseph Smith during the Nauvoo period. Missionary work itself constitutes a form of worship, and temple worship today continues to revolve around missionary work for the living (the endowment) and for the dead (ordinances). The endowment, like the visions in which prophets were given special missionary commissions,
situates us ritually in the divine council, teaches us about the great Messenger of salvation, and empowers us to participate in his great mission of saving souls.

On May 6, 1833, a portion of the “the fulness of the record of John” was restored through the prophet Joseph Smith (cf. D&C 93:18). In this restored fragment, John bore witness that he saw the premortal Christ:

And he bore record, saying: I saw his glory, that he was in the beginning, before the world was; therefore, in the beginning the Word was, for he was the Word, even the messenger of salvation. (D&C 93:7–8)

John’s language combines the concept of a preexistent, divine, personified “Word” (Greek logos), as a development on the idea of a preexistent, divine, personified wisdom or intelligence (see, e.g., Proverbs 8:22–31; cf. Abraham 3:19–28), with the concept of a divine Messenger invested with a fullness of divine authority. John’s description of Jesus Christ with the appositive “even the messenger of salvation” recalls Malachi’s prophecy of the coming of the Lord to his temple and the appositive “even messenger of the covenant” from the 5th century BCE:

Behold, I will send my messenger [malʾākî], and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant [malʾak habbērit], whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:1; 3 Nephi 24:1)

In this article, I will argue for a possible reading of D&C 93:8 and the concept of messenger there, as a part of which I will demonstrate the importance of the messenger prophecy of Malachi 3:1 in Joseph Smith’s early revelations. Within the interpretive framework of Malachi 3:1, D&C 93:8 presents Jesus Christ as both the Father’s “messenger” and his “message” (or “Word”). Relatively, D&C 93 restores the knowledge of a similar type of relationship between God and humankind: “Man [like Jesus] was also in the beginning with God” — that is, coeternal with God, because “Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). Thus, humankind has the capacity for eternal enlargement (see D&C 93:19). Joseph Smith’s realization of these truths had important implications for the early missionary work
of the Church — the elders’ preaching of an expanding gospel as “the word” — and the emerging concept of worship and temple among the early saints as connected with receiving the Father’s fulness.

This discussion will proceed in four parts. First, I will discuss the importance of Malachi 3:1 in Joseph Smith’s early revelations, including the meanings of Hebrew malʾāk and Greek angelos and how the reiteration of the concept of the divine “messenger … suddenly com[ing] to [his] temple” in Joseph’s revelations reinforced the urgency of building a temple. Second, I will explain the christological significance of Jesus Christ as the Messenger. Then, third, I will look at Jesus Christ as the Message. Fourth, I will explain how Latter-day Saint temple ritual and worship began as a means of preparing the early elders to proclaim the gospel message (as messengers, Abraham’s “seed”) and thus become “clean from the blood of this [wicked] generation” (D&C 88:75, 85, 138). I hope that this approach will help us more fully appreciate the Lord’s explanation for giving the fragment of “the fulness of the record of John” in D&C 93: “I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19).

1. “I Will Suddenly Come to My Temple”: The Importance of Malachi 3:1 in Joseph Smith’s Early Revelations

In 3 Nephi 24–25, Jesus quotes Malachi 3–4 to the Lamanites and Nephites at the temple in Bountiful. Because this prophecy postdated Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, it was not included among the prophecies on the plates of brass and was thus not available to the Nephites and Lamanites. Nevertheless, Jesus’s quotation of Malachi 3:1 in 3 Nephi 24:1 helps us to understand how he interpreted this prophecy and offers a potential hermeneutical guide to its later quotations.

1. See Abraham 2:9–11.
2. Jesus acknowledges this following his quotation of Malachi 3–4 (3 Nephi 24–25), when he describes this text as one of several “scriptures which ye had not with you” (3 Nephi 26:2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malachi 3:1</th>
<th>3 Nephi 24:1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behold, I will send my messenger [\textit{mal ʾākî}], and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord [\textit{hā ʾādôn}], whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant [\textit{mal ak habbĕrît}], whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.</td>
<td>Thus said the Father unto Malachi [\textit{mal ʾākî}]— Behold, I will send my messenger [\textit{mal ʾākî}], and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord [\textit{hā ʾādôn}] whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant [\textit{mal ak habbĕrît}], whom ye delight in; behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Jesus’s quotation of this text places the prophetic words of Malachi 3–4 in the mouth God the Father. With the Father speaking to Malachi, “my messenger” (\textit{mal ʾākî} in the second instance) constitutes a wordplay on the name of the prophet Malachi, but the mention of this sent messenger can hardly have reference to the prophet Malachi himself, but must refer to another messenger as a forerunner to the coming “Lord.” The phrase “messenger of the covenant” \textit{mal ak habbĕrît} also plays on the name Malachi (like the priest as the “messenger of the Lord of Hosts,” \textit{mal ak yhwh ʾēbāʾôt} in Malachi 2:7), but it has no reference to the prophet Malachi himself and seems distinct from the prophetic “my messenger” who is sent to prepare the way. The messenger of the covenant in whom Israel delights who “shall come” is best identified as \textit{hā ʾādôn} — the Lord whom Israel seeks.

In Malachi 3:1, the KJV translators used the word “even” rather than “and” to translate the Hebrew conjunction \textit{û-} (\textit{waw}-) to emphasize what they saw as an appositional relationship between the “the Lord whom ye seek” and “the messenger of the covenant.” The Book of Mormon English translation also retains the word “even” here. Regarding the Malachi 3:1 text and translating the \textit{û-} or \textit{waw} as introducing an appositive, Mignon R. Jacobs writes:

Concerning the clause \textit{yea, the messenger of the covenant whom you desire}, the \textit{waw} in the formulation introduces the appositive that further identifies the Lord (\textit{hā ʾādôn}) as the “messenger of the covenant” (\textit{mal ak habbĕrît}). While the \textit{waw} may be the simple conjunction introducing the third figure — the messenger/angel of the covenant — the presence of a third figure seems unlikely in this context. By identifying the “messenger of the covenant” with Yahweh, one identifies the being as divine rather than human. The enforcer of the
covenant in whom the people delight is Yahweh, who will execute justice through judgment.\textsuperscript{3}

The fact that “the Lord whom ye seek” and “the messenger of the covenant” are both the subject of the verb \textit{come} (Hebrew \textit{bôʾ}) heavily implies that they are the same individual. The question posed in Malachi 3:2 (3 Nephi 24:2), “who shall abide the day of his \textit{coming}?”, further suggests that we are dealing with the coming of a Lord also identified as a messenger. In other words, “the images of Mal[achi] 3:2, usually associated with Yahweh, refer to the effects of the day of Yahweh.”\textsuperscript{4}

It should be further noted that the resonance of the descriptions “the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple” and “the messenger of the covenant … he shall come” would have been particularly powerful for the audience present at the temple in Bountiful who were witnessing the literal fulfillment of those words. In quoting this text, Jesus Christ unmistakably identifies himself as “the Lord whom ye seek” and “the messenger of the covenant” who would “come.”

We find the prophecy of Malachi 3–4 thoroughly intertwined with Joseph Smith’s early recorded revelations. Importantly, Joseph Smith stated that Moroni quoted “a part of the third chapter of Malachi” to him four times on the evening of September 21 and the morning of September 22, 1823.\textsuperscript{5} Moroni’s citation of this prophecy in the context of eschatological restoration and other Old Testament (and Abrahamic Covenant) prophecies “about to be fulfilled”\textsuperscript{6} suggests that the “part” of Malachi 3 to which Joseph here alludes may have been, or included, Malachi 3:1–4 and thus, the prophecy of the “messenger of the covenant … suddenly com[ing]to his temple” (Malachi 3:1).

In 1829, during his translation of the plates of Mormon, Joseph encountered a version of Malachi 3–4 representing what Jesus quoted to the Lamanites and Nephites gathered to the temple in Bountiful, as noted above. Mormon took care to preserve and include this prophecy as the last in a sequence of important Old Testament prophecies Jesus quoted on that occasion (see 3 Nephi 24–25). In his visible, angel-like\textsuperscript{7} descent

\textsuperscript{3} Mignon R. Jacobs, \textit{The Books of Haggai and Malachi} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 275.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Joseph Smith—History 1:36; see also vv. 45–49.
\textsuperscript{6} Cf. Joseph Smith—History 1:40.
\textsuperscript{7} 3 Nephi 11:8: “And it came to pass, as they understood they cast their eyes up again towards heaven; and behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them;
from heaven recorded in 3 Nephi 11:8, his subsequent reorganization of the Church, and the reestablishment of the Father’s covenant, Jesus acted in his capacity as the Father’s “messenger of the covenant.” The Lord whom they sought had “suddenly come to his temple” as messenger of the covenant. This prophecy in its temple context in the Book of Mormon offered Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and their earliest associates some notion of the need for a latter-day temple with a view to the latter-day, pre-Millennial fulfillment of Malachi 3–4.

The earliest explicit quotation of Malachi 3:1 in the canonized revelations that became the D&C also constitutes the first explicit mention of a “temple” in these same revelations. A December 9, 1830 revelation directed to Edward Partridge when he came with Sidney Rigdon to meet the Prophet Joseph Smith, concluded with the Lord’s abrupt statement, “I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God; wherefore, gird up your loins and I will suddenly come to my temple. Even so. Amen” (D&C 36:8; emphasis in all scriptural citations is mine). The promise, “I will suddenly come to my temple,” represents a direct quotation from Malachi 3:1: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.” In speaking the promise in the first person, the Savior identifies himself as “the messenger of the covenant” and emphasizes his imminent “coming” to a “temple.”

The revelation to Edward Partridge (D&C 36), whose calling as Bishop would directly pertain to the financing of a temple, came almost contemporaneously with the revelation of the Vision of Enoch to the prophet Joseph Smith. In that vision the Lord promised, “righteousness and truth will I cause to sweep the earth as with a flood, to gather out mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, unto a place which I shall prepare, an Holy City, that my people may gird up their loins, and be looking forth for the time of my coming; for there shall be my tabernacle, and it shall be called Zion, a New Jerusalem” (Moses 7:62). The building of the temple would be vital to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and the establishment of latter-day Zion.

Two months after the revelation to Edward Partridge, on February 9 and 23, 1831, the Lord gave his “law” (D&C 42:2) to the Church through the Prophet Joseph Smith as previously promised and the eyes of the whole multitude were turned upon him, and they durst not open their mouths, even one to another, and wist not what it meant, for they thought it was an angel that had appeared unto them.”
on January 2, 1831 and recorded in D&C 38:8. This “law” included the principle of consecration, intended to help the saints achieve the conditions of Enoch’s Zion described in Moses 7:18. “[P]roperties in the hands of the church, or any individuals of it, more than is necessary for their support” were to be consecrated to the bishop (Edward Partridge)\(^8\) “to administer to those who have not, from time to time, that every man who has need may be amply supplied and receive according to his wants” (D&C 42:33). The Lord also instituted this consecration “for the purpose of purchasing lands for the public benefit of the church, and building houses of worship, and building up of the New Jerusalem which is hereafter to be revealed that that my covenant people may be gathered in one in that day when I shall come to my temple” (D&C 42:36). Here again, the Lord reiterated the immediacy of his “coming” and laid out the “Zion” conditions that would need to prevail among the saints at that time, including the existence of a temple accepted as “his.”

Still less than a year after receiving D&C 36:8,\(^9\) the Prophet Joseph Smith received a similarly-worded promise at a “time [when] there were many things which the elders desired to know relative to preaching the Gospel to the inhabitants of the earth, and concerning the gathering.”\(^10\) The revelation again quoted Malachi 3:1, “The Lord who shall suddenly come to his temple; the Lord who shall come down upon the world with a curse to judgment; yea, upon all the nations that forget God, and upon all the ungodly among you” (D&C 133:2). Again, in using the language of Malachi 3:1, the Lord reemphasized his imminent “coming” as messenger of the covenant of the Father (cf. 3 Nephi 21:4; Moroni 10:33, i.e., the Abrahamic Covenant) and that he would “suddenly come” to a temple that he claimed as “his.” The intended effect of the revelation upon the implied audience would have been renewed urgency for the building of a temple to which the Lord as messenger of the covenant would suddenly come.

From a theological and christological perspective, Malachi 3:1 and its quotation in Joseph Smith’s early revelations is important for several reasons. Like Psalm 110:1 (“The Lord said unto my Lord …”), Malachi mentions two Lords, one of whom is “sent” as a “messenger” and “suddenly come[s] to his temple.” The Hebrew word for “messenger” in Malachi 3:1 is *mal’āk* (*mal’āk*), clearly an echo of the name of the

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9. Joseph received the revelation contained in D&C 133 on November 3, 1831, slightly less than eleven months after he received D&C 36 (December 9, 1830).
prophet Malachi. Like the Greek word \textit{angelos}, \textit{mal āk} originally meant “messenger” but came to have the more developed sense of “angel” as describing a class of (heavenly) beings. Malachi 3:1 prophesies the sending of two messengers. First, the prophecy mentions “my messenger [\textit{mal ākī}] … [who] shall prepare the way before me,” clearly a reference to a prophet or angel or both (like the eschatological coming of Elijah the prophet promised in Malachi 4:5–6). Second, it mentions “the Lord whom ye seek,” who is specially designated “the messenger of the covenant” (\textit{mal āk habbērît}).

The Kirtland Temple was finally dedicated on March 27, 1836, as recorded in D&C 109. In his dedicatory prayer, the Prophet Joseph Smith besought the Lord “to accept of this house, the workmanship of the hands of us, thy servants, which thou didst command us to build” (D&C 109:4). The Prophet further pled, “O hear, O hear, O hear us, O Lord! And answer these petitions, and accept the dedication of this house unto thee, the work of our hands, which we have built unto thy name” (D&C 109:78).

On April 3rd, 1836, one week after the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the “messenger of the covenant” — the Lord himself — “suddenly came to his temple” in the most literal sense, appearing as a glorified resurrected personage “standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit,” which had the appearance of “a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber,” as if it were the \textit{kappōret} (i.e., atonement-lid) on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies in the ancient Israelite tabernacle/temple. This event invites comparison to the “paved work of a sapphire stone … as it were the body of heaven in his clearness” upon which the Lord stood when he appeared to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel on a temple-like mountain in Exodus 24:1–11. As Jehovah, the same God who appeared to Moses, Aaron, et. al, he declared in the newly-built temple: “I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father.

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Behold, your sins are forgiven you; you are clean before me; therefore, lift up your heads and rejoice. Let the hearts of your brethren rejoice, and let the hearts of all my people rejoice, who have, with their might, built this house to my name. For behold, I have accepted this house, and my name shall be here; and I will manifest myself to my people in mercy in this house” (D&C 110:4–7). The messenger of the covenant claimed the temple as “his” and the prophecy of Malachi 3:1 stood fulfilled anew (see D&C 110:1–10). The “dispensation of the Gospel of Abraham” was committed to Joseph and Oliver at this time through an “Elias” with the promise “that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed” (D&C 110:12), anticipating the complete eschatological fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

2. Jesus Christ as Messenger: The Messenger of the Covenant as the Messenger of Salvation

Having made a case for Yahweh (Jehovah) as the Lord (hāʾādōn) and the messenger of the covenant in Malachi 3:1, and having established the significance of the language of Malachi 3:1 in Joseph Smith’s early revelations with the image of the messenger of the covenant “suddenly com[ing] to his temple,” we proceed to a discussion of the “messenger of the covenant” as the “messenger of salvation” in the restored prologue of “the fulness of the record of John” (D&C 93:19).

The concept of the Lord as Messenger or Angel has roots in the Hebrew Bible. In his blessing on Joseph’s sons, Jacob invokes God as a redeeming Messenger or Angel:

And he [Jacob] blessed Joseph, and said, God [hāʾēlōhîm, literally the God], before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God [hāʾēlōhîm] which fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel [hammalʾāk] which redeemed [haggōʾēl] me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. (Genesis 48:15–16)

In this blessing, the Hebrew noun malʾāk (“messenger,” “angel”) is used as an appositional description of the “God, before whom my fathers … did walk, the God which fed me…” Jacob’s blessing echoes his vow at Bethel following his theophany there: “And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my
father’s house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God” (Genesis 28:20–21). Jacob’s God and redeeming Angel appear to be none other than the Lord himself. The participial Hebrew term rendered “which redeemed” is identical with the term redeemer (gōʾēl), which is also an active participle derived from the verb gāʾal. Regarding this term, Jennifer C. Lane writes:

The best translation of gūʾēl is “kinsman redeemer.” The kind of redemption that is described by gāʾal and done by the gōʾēl is not generic. It could not be done by anyone for anyone. It is based on familial relationship. The gōʾēl was the oldest male member of an extended family who had the familial obligation to restore that which had become unbalanced.15

The Lord himself was Abraham’s, Isaac’s, and Jacob’s redeemer because of a family relationship confirmed by covenant. Lane continues,

The gōʾēl redeemed family members who had become enslaved for whatever reason. Maybe they had been captured. Maybe they had sold themselves or had been sold into slavery. The gōʾēl was there to make things right and to bring family members back to their rightful place.16

In acting as Jacob’s kinsman redeemer (i.e., haggōʾēl), he was acting in a covenant, familial capacity. In other words, he was acting as “messenger of the covenant.”

The function of the theophanic Angel or Messenger that accompanied Israel in the wilderness is similarly covenantal in nature. God promised to send his Angel or Messenger to Israel in the wilderness to “keep [them] in the way” just as the Lord, as Jacob’s redeeming angel, kept Jacob “in the way”:

Behold, I send an Angel [malʾāk, other ancient witnesses: “my angel,” “my messenger”] before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him. But if thou shalt indeed obey his voice, and do all that I speak; then I will be an enemy unto thine enemies, and an adversary unto thine adversaries. For mine Angel [malʾākī] shall go before

16. Ibid.
thee, and bring thee in unto the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: and I will cut them off. (Exodus 23:20–23)

The divinity of the Angel/Messenger is suggested by the statement “my name is in him” (šĕmî bĕqirbô, literally “my name is within him”). In other words, he had full authority to exercise divine prerogatives. As Paul noted, Jesus received the divine “name that is above every other name” (Philippians 2:9). Matthew records that Jesus told his disciples after the resurrection: “All power [exousia = authority] is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18). Jesus Christ, like the Angel/Messenger in Exodus 23:20–23, exercises divine prerogatives with all divine authority and thus shares an identity with God as “God.” John 1:1 articulates this same concept with the Word being “with God” (Greek pros ton theon) and being what God is: “Divine was the Word” (theos èn ho logos, translation mine).

The Angel/Messenger’s “bring[ing] Israel in” to the nations occupying the land of promise and “cut[ting]” those nations “off” is in direct fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant and the promise that Abraham’s descendants would inherit that land. Isaiah refers back to this Angel/Messenger and his covenant function as kinsman redeemer in the statement, “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence [ûmal ak pânâw] saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old” (Isaiah 63:9; cf. Abraham 1:15–16). John’s description of Jesus Christ as “messenger of salvation” in D&C 93:8 should be understood within the framework of the foregoing. Moreover, D&C 93:9 clarifies through an additional appositive that Christ as messenger of salvation was also “the light and the redeemer of the world.”

A comparison of the three scriptural versions of the beginning of the Johannine prologue (John 1:1) helps us appreciate the nuances of how

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17. In Philippians 2:5–11 Paul teaches the following in what has been described as the Kenotic Hymn, a christological text that may preexist Paul’s letter: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery [i.e., something to be snatched] to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth: And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
revelation helped the Prophet Joseph Smith grow in his understanding of this prologue and what it meant in christological terms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John 1:1 (KJV)</th>
<th>JST John 1:1 (Jan/Feb 1832)</th>
<th>D&amp;C 93:8, 29 (May 6, 1833)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.</td>
<td>In the beginning was the gospel preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God.</td>
<td>Therefore, in the beginning the Word was, for he was the Word, even the messenger of salvation. (v. 8) Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. (v. 29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the great doctrinal contributions of John 1:1 in the canonical text from a christological perspective is its assertion that Jesus Christ preexisted with divine status — he was *theos*/theon — and in the Father's immediate presence (“with God,” *pros ton theon*). This picture accords with that of the two divine beings in Psalm 110:1 and Malachi 3:1.

As Jennifer C. Lane and Keith H. Lane have explained it, “the Gospel of John sets out a clear preexistence Christology, beginning by referencing Genesis 1 and the Creation.” They connect this prologue to Isaiah 40, an important divine council text from the Hebrew Bible, with members of that council in dialogue with one another. It is probably no coincidence that the Malachi 3:1 prophecy quotes from Isaiah 40:3 (“Prepare ye the way of the Lord”).

Just as there are multiple members of the divine council present in Genesis 1–11 and in Isaiah 40 (among other places), and two divine beings in Psalm 110:1 and Malachi 3:1, there are two Gods in John 1:1 — God the Father and the Word that was also *theos*. Craig J. Ostler writes: “Within this revelation of the D&C, the Savior confirmed that He manifested Himself as ‘the Father because he [the Father] gave me of his fulness’ (D&C 93:4). As a premortal spirit, Jesus was commissioned as the ‘messenger of salvation — the light and the Redeemer of the World’ (D&C 93:8). That is, He was given a fulness of the Father and authorized

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19. Ibid.

to represent Him in all things pertaining to the plan of salvation.” And here we do well to note that Jesus’s own given name denotes “Jehovah saves” or “Jehovah is salvation,” a meaning reflected in the title Messenger of salvation. That is precisely who Jehovah, as Jesus, was (and is).

Just as the divine designation Lord (hāʾādōn) is augmented by the appositive description “even the messenger of the covenant” in Malachi 3:1 and 3 Nephi 24:1, the divine designation Word is augmented by the appositive description “even the messenger of salvation.” Christ’s role as “messenger of the covenant” of exaltation (i.e., the Abrahamic Covenant, whose promises he would perform to the utmost) and the “messenger of salvation” (i.e., the Father’s plan of salvation, which he continues to carry into full effect) required his receiving a “fulness” of the Father. Similarly, our “coming unto the Father to receive of his fullness,” since we too were “also in the beginning with God,” requires our becoming “messengers” like Abraham (his seed, Abraham 2:9–11) and other prophets, as follows.

One of the most important results of the revelation that Jesus in the beginning “was the Word, even the messenger of salvation” (D&C 93:8), that “Man was also in the beginning with God,” and that “Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29), is that the postbiblical, traditionally assumed ontological difference — the difference in nature, being, or species — between God and Christ, angels/messengers, and humankind collapses. The revelation helps us to better see what Joseph Smith was attempting to convey in the questions and answers recorded in the “Sample of pure Language”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>What is the name of God in pure Language</th>
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<tr>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Awmen.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>The meaning of the pure word A[w]men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>It is the being which made all things in all its parts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>What is the name of the Son of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>The Son Awmen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>What is the Son Awmen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>It is the greatest of all the parts of Awmen which is the Godhead the first born.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q What is man.
A This signifies Sons Awmen. the human family the children of men the greatest parts of Awmen Sons the Son Awmen
Q What are Angels called in pure language.
A Awmen Angls-men
Q What are the meaning of these words.
A Awmen’s Ser◊◊◊ts Ministerring servants Sanctified who are sent forth from heaven to minister for or to Sons Awmen the greatest part of Awmen Son. the greatest part of Awmen Son. Sons Awmen Son Awmen Awmen

From this we learn that God, angels, and the human family are all one species (cf. especially Paul’s use of Greek genos [“family,” kind,” “race”] in his quotation of Aratus’ Phaenomena 5 in Acts 17:28: “For we are also his offspring [genos]).” Originally, messenger/angel (Hebrew malʾāḵ and Greek angelos) constituted a designation of function rather than an ontologically distinct category or species. The later concept only emerged in the postbiblical period (i.e., after the 4th century BCE). In other words, messenger/angel described the role a being fulfills, rather than what a being is. Christ and humankind are angels or messengers as they are sent forth by the Father to fulfill missions in premortality, mortality, and postmortality.

3. Jesus Christ as the “Message”

Having explicated the christological presentation of Jesus in D&C 93:8 as the Father’s Messenger of salvation (the “Word”), it now becomes necessary to explore his inseparable role as the Message of salvation (also the “Word”). When we ponder the most basic sense of “word” as “a communication whereby the mind finds expression,” we can more


24. Ibid., 599.
fully appreciate the breadth and depth of what God the Father is trying
to communicate to the human family in and through Jesus Christ and
thus the significance of the latter’s roles as Creator, Savior, Redeemer,
Exemplar, and so forth.

Considered together, D&C 93:8 and JST John 1:1 present a picture
of Jesus Christ as both the Messenger and the Message in premortality:
“Therefore, in the beginning the Word was, for he was the Word, even
the messenger of salvation” (D&C 93:8); “In the beginning was the gospel
preached through the Son. And the gospel was the word, and the word
was with the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was of God”
(JST John 1:1). As Latter-day Saints today, we tend to underappreciate
the implications of both D&C 93:8 and JST John 1:1. From these texts we
learn that “the gospel” as a message of salvation was “preached” in the
premortal world (“in the beginning”). JST John 1:1 already implies what
D&C 93:29 later makes more explicit. If “in the beginning” — meaning,
before the creation of the world — “the gospel” was “preached through the
Son,” premortal humankind must have been the recipients of preaching
there much as they are here (see D&C 138:56). We are more accustomed to
thinking and speaking of a “plan of salvation,”25 “plan of redemption,”26
“plan of happiness,”27 “merciful plan of the great creator,”28 “the plan
of our God,”29 “the great plan of mercy,”30 or some variation thereon.
However, viewing “the gospel” as a formulated message — “word” or
a kērygma, “an official announcement or proclamation”31 that Jesus and
others who followed him preached in the premortal world — expands
our view. We can then appreciate that the “preaching” that Adam,
Seth, Enos, Lamech, Enoch, Noah, and others carried out as “preachers
of righteousness” (Moses 6:23); the missionary work of Abraham
(=Abraham 1:5; 2:15; 3:14–15); the prophesying of Isaiah, Lehi, Nephi, and
their successors; the teaching of the gospel by the New Testament saints,
the saints early in this dispensation, and the labors of missionaries today
all represent a continuation of that premortal preaching, with Jesus
himself and his doctrine as the essential message (cf. Moses 6:48–68; see
also 3 Nephi 27:13–22; D&C 76:40–42). President Joseph F. Smith saw

25. See, e.g., Jarom 1:2; Alma 24:14; 42:5; Moses 6:62.
26. See, e.g., Jacob 6:8; Alma 12:25–26, 30, 32–33; 17:6; 18:39; 22:13; 29:2; 34:16,
27. See, e.g., Alma 42:8, 16.
31. BDAG, 543.
concerning the “choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times to take part in laying the foundations of the great latter-day work” who were “among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God” that, “Even before they were born, they, with many others, received their first lessons in the world of spirits and were prepared to come forth in the due time of the Lord to labor in his vineyard for the salvation of the souls of men” (D&C 138:53, 55–56). What constituted those first lessons? President Smith’s statement that it involved preparation for the work of salvation, strongly indicates that the Messenger of salvation taught these first lessons, and that they included the message of salvation, the “gospel … preached through the Son,” from the very beginning (JST John 1:1).

Elsewhere, John saw in vision that the logos (Christ, see Revelation 19:13) was the Message — the “word of … testimony” of the faithful (Revelation 12:11). The temporal horizon for the events described in Revelation 12:11 is ambiguous, but it can be seen as the same as that of Revelation 12:7–9; John 1:1; JST John 1:1 and D&C 93:8, namely, the councils held in the premortal existence. In the premortal existence, the faithful adherents to the preaching of the Son defeated Satan through Jesus Christ’s forthcoming atoning sacrifice and the message revolving around that atonement: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Revelation 12:11). Those who hearkened unto the preaching of the Son of God — the Word proclaiming the word — themselves became preachers of the Word. The faithful followers of the Son overcome him in the same way here in mortality: through the power of his atonement and through testimonies proclaimed through consistent righteous choices, or, “choosing to repent and work righteousness rather than to perish” (Alma 13:10).

Just as the premortal war in heaven continues here on earth, and just as we (Jesus and all humankind) came from that realm to this one, so too the gospel message was sent into the world: “And even so I have sent mine everlasting covenant into the world, to be a light to the world, and to be a standard for my people, and for the Gentiles to seek to it, and to be a messenger before my face to prepare the way before me” (D&C 45:9).

32. Jesus as “the Word of God” in Revelation 19:13 in connection with the “word of … testimony” of the faithful in Revelation 12:11 constitutes part of a running theme involving the “word of God” for which the faithful suffer persecution and for which John himself is suffering persecution. See further Revelation 1:2, 9; 3:10; 20:4.
These words came in a March 7, 1831 revelation through the Prophet Joseph Smith to the saints amid the “many false reports … and foolish stories [that] were published … and circulated … to prevent people from investigating the work, or embracing the faith.” This description in the D&C combines Johannine language with that of Malachi 3:1 (via Mark 1:2; Matthew 11:10; Luke 7:27), Isaiah 11:10, and 49:22. It is no small detail that this revelation personifies the gospel in words which would all be used to describe Jesus Christ himself. He is the Message. He alone can bring to pass every promise in the covenant of the Father, or, the Abrahamic covenant.

In sum, D&C 93:8 and JST John 1:1 offer us an etiology for missionary work with a temporal horizon stretching even further back than the etiology for the organized preaching of the gospel that began as a divine “decree” (Moses 5:15). At the time when organized evil (secret combinations) began to take root, angels or messengers were sent from the presence of the Father to preach the gospel (“And thus the Gospel began to be preached, from the beginning, being declared by holy angels sent forth from the presence of God, and by his own voice, and by the gift of the Holy Ghost,” Moses 5:58). This followed the premortal pattern, when missionary work began with the divine Messenger of salvation — the Word — preaching the gospel in the premortal world (“in the beginning”). We might, then, define missionary work as follows: missionary work consists of divinely sent messengers preaching the Father’s message of salvation, so that all “may come unto the Father in [Jesus’s] name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19), like Abraham and Sarah (see D&C 132:29). This picture considerably helps our understanding of the interrelationship between missionary work and early temple ritual as it emerged among the early saints, first in Kirtland, then later in Nauvoo.

To sum up, the preaching of the gospel here in mortality stands on a continuum. God the Father had the gospel “preached through the Son,” the Messenger of salvation. The first lessons learned in the world of spirits included the message of salvation as part of the preparation for those who would preach salvation in mortality, i.e., the children of God did not simply learn the gospel and eternal truth through observation, Christ taught them! “The noble and great ones,”33 in turn taught others, and continue to do so in mortality. The systematic preaching of the gospel in this world was organized to help offset the influence of secret

combinations (organized evil, see Moses 5:58), following the pattern established in the premortal world.

President Joseph F. Smith also saw that “the great latter-day work” of salvation, for which the saints were prepared in premortality, “includ[ed] the building of the temples and the performance of ordinances therein for the redemption of the dead” (D&C 138:54). He also “beheld that the faithful elders of this dispensation, when they depart from mortal life, continue their labors in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and redemption, through the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God, among those who are in darkness and under the bondage of sin in the great world of the spirits of the dead” and further, that “The dead who repent will be redeemed, through obedience to the ordinances of the house of God” (D&C 138:57–58). As we will note below, the latter-day temple endowment, which teaches the saints regarding their premortal identity and prepares them to preach the gospel in mortality and in postmortality, began as a means of preparing the elders to preach the gospel and to become clean from the sins of the world. For Latter-day Saints today, the temple emerges as the great bridge that spans the preaching of the gospel in premortality, mortality, and postmortality. And yet it did not arrive all at once in a sudden burst of revelation.

4. “Messengers” Becoming Like the “Message”:
The Interrelationship Between Missionary Work and Early Temple Ritual

In a document dated October 17, 1830, Oliver Cowdery asserted that he had been “commanded of God” to go forth as a missionary “unto the Lamanites” and “to rear up a pillar as a witness where the Temple of God shall be built, in the glorious New-Jerusalem.” The setting up of pillars as witnesses constituted an important part of concluding covenants and even temple worship in ancient times. For example, the patriarch Jacob, after he had seen the Lord standing above a “ladder” — or rather,

35. Ibid., 204.
a “stepped ramp” or “flight of steps” (Hebrew *sullām*) — that reached to heaven, along with the angels that ascended and descended thereon, and had received the Abrahamic Covenant for himself, “was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God [Hebrew *bēt ʾēlōhîm* = “house of God”], and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). The narrative then records that “Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar [Hebrew *maṣṣēbā*], and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel [bêt-ʾēl = House of El/God]” (Genesis 28:17–19; cf. 31:13, 45). Through this ritual act, Jacob acknowledged that he had entered into the Abrahamic Covenant and that the place was a temple — literally a “house of God” (Hebrew *bēt ʾēlōhîm*, Bethel).

Genesis 35:9–15 describes a similar experience. Oliver Cowdery’s declaration, coupled with the ritual act of setting up a pillar at an intended missionary destination among the Lamanites, suggests that the interrelated concepts of gathering, missionary work, covenant, temple, and worship existed in the minds of the prophet Joseph Smith and his closest associates even earlier than appears in the canonized revelations of the D&C. The Book of Mormon itself, translated the previous year, had powerfully suggested the importance of the temple as a place of gathering and ritual.

Jeffrey M. Bradshaw has adduced evidence that Joseph Smith knew a great deal about the temple and its ordinances very early on.

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In the same December 9, 1830 revelation, which explicitly mentioned “temple” for the first time, the Lord commissioned Edward Partridge as a messenger to “preach the everlasting gospel among the Nation”\(^{41}\) (Nation has been changed to “nations” in the canonical text D&C 36:5). With the mention of the Lord coming to his “temple” in D&C 42:36, the Lord foretold, “And behold, it shall come to pass that my servants shall be sent forth to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south” as messengers (D&C 42:63). Similarly, D&C 133, which promises the Lord’s “coming” to his “temple,” describes the Lord “sending forth” the elders of the Church to all the “nations” and “foreign lands” of the earth (D&C 133:7–8), and the “fulness of his gospel, his everlasting covenant, reasoning in plainness and simplicity” (D&C 133:57, cf. vv. 17, 36, 71–72). These examples suggest that that the concept of temple, the Abrahamic Covenant, and missionary work were intertwined from the beginning of the restored Church.

I jump ahead now to the end of 1832 and beginning of 1833. Without question, D&C 88, which the prophet Joseph Smith received on December 27–28, 1832 and January 3, 1833 constitutes one of the most important canonized revelations describing the purpose of the latter-day temple as a place of education or divine tutoring and the concept of the temple as sacred ritual space. To more fully appreciate the unique revelatory contributions of D&C 93, one must understand the function of the temple, laid down in D&C 88, as a divine school and ritual space: a place for preparing messengers.

The early elders were to receive intelligence, wisdom, and truth in the temple such as would accomplish vertical and horizontal at-one-ment: becoming “one” with the Father, with Jesus himself, and with each other. In his recorded intercessory prayers, Jesus prayed that his disciples would become “one” in this way (see especially John 17:11, 21–23; 3 Nephi 19:23, 29). As the Lord explained in this temple revelation:

> For intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light; mercy hath compassion on mercy and

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D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: The Interpreter Foundation, 2016), 1–123.

claimeth her own; justice continueth its course and claimeth its own; judgment goeth before the face of him who sitteth upon the throne and governeth and executeth all things. (D&C 88:40)

It remains just as essential for Latter-day Saints today to grow in these divine virtues and cultivate oneness with God and each other as it was for those first recipients of the revelation. As the Lord admonished the saints in January 1831, just as revelations on the temple were beginning to unfold,42 “be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27).

Like the Lord, the early saints in the restored Church and saints today, were and are to serve as messengers of the Abrahamic covenant, “sanctified and sent into the world” (John 10:36). Ultimately, Jesus Christ himself is the Message (see, e.g., 1 Corinthians 2:2; Titus 1:9). D&C 88, probably more than any other text, helps us understand how and why preaching the gospel and thus having one’s “garments … clean from the blood of this generation” (D&C 88:75, 85, 138) through Jesus’s atonement constitutes such an important aspect of worship. In this revelation, which also holds forth the promise of being “quickened by a portion of the celestial glory” and “receiv[ing] a fulness” (D&C 88:29), Jesus Christ commissions the elders called to serve missions to gather, organize, prepare, and sanctify themselves:

And I give unto you, who are the first laborers in this last kingdom, a commandment that you assemble yourselves together, and organize yourselves, and prepare yourselves, and sanctify yourselves; yea, purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and your feet before me, that I may make you clean;

That I may testify unto your Father, and your God, and my God, that you are clean from the blood of this wicked generation; that I may fulfil this promise, this great and last promise, which I have made unto you, when I will. (D&C 88:74–75)

In sanctifying themselves, the elders (and saints today) emulate the Lord Jesus Christ and become more like him. Jesus also prayed in his intercessory prayer: “As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:18–19).

42. Cf. again D&C 36:8.
In D&C 88:74–5, the Lord enjoins a specific form of self-sanctification through Christ’s atonement. The commandment to “purify your hearts, and cleanse your hands and feet before me” fulfilled the ethical and ritual purity requirements for entry into the Jerusalem temple according to Psalm 24:3–4. Thus the Lord himself could then “make [them] clean” and “testify” as a council witness (i.e., “one who could offer testimony in a legal setting”) in the heavenly council to God the Father: “you are clean from the blood of this wicked generation.” Subsequent verses make clear that this would involve the ritual washing of the feet (see D&C 88:138–140 and below). This washing of feet, of course, would serve as the basis for the ritual washings that later comprised part of the fuller endowment revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith and first administered in Nauvoo.

The revelation in D&C 88 further links the issue of ritual and ethical purity through Christ’s atonement directly to preaching of the gospel message and missionary work:

> Therefore, tarry ye, and labor diligently, that you may be perfected in your ministry to go forth among the Gentiles for the last time, as many as the mouth of the Lord shall name, to bind up the law and seal up the testimony, and to prepare the saints for the hour of judgment which is to come;

> That their souls may escape the wrath of God, the desolation of abomination which awaits the wicked, both in this world and in the world to come. Verily, I say unto you, let those who are not the first elders continue in the vineyard until the mouth of the Lord shall call them, for their time is not yet come; their garments are not clean from the blood of this generation. (D&C 88:84–85)

The momentous ethical obligation to deliver the message of the gospel rested upon the “first laborers in [the] last kingdom.” The Lord put it another way in the same revelation: “Behold, I sent you out to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been


warned to warn his neighbor” (D&C 88:81). In a real sense, the Lord was sending out these early missionaries, like the prophets of old, as “council witnesses.” When they preached the gospel, the wicked “are left without excuse, and their sins are upon their own heads” (D&C 88:82). A failure to discharge this duty meant that missionaries still bore some culpability for the sins of those they might otherwise have helped. The effect of the faithful discharge of missionary responsibilities is summed up succinctly by Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s statement on how they were freed from “the blood of [their] brethren”: through Ammon and his brothers, the Lord “imparted his word [i.e., Christ as the Message] unto us and has made us clean thereby” (Alma 24:15). The missionary efforts of Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni and those who went with them represent marvelous individual and collective acts of consecration and worship (see Alma 27), which produced the same in the Lamanites that believed the preaching of Ammon, Aaron, et al.

The ritual washing of feet apparently indicated that a missionary had faithfully discharged this duty. In D&C 88:138–139 the Lord commanded regarding membership in “the School of the Prophets,” which met in the upper room of the Newel K. Whitney store: “And ye shall not receive any among you into this school save he is clean from the blood of this generation; and he shall be received by the ordinance of the washing of feet, for unto this end was the ordinance of the washing of feet instituted.” The final verse of the revelation directly ties the Kirtland practice back to the Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples; it was done “according to the pattern given in the thirteenth chapter of John’s testimony concerning me” (D&C 88:141). The washing described in John 13 was also anticipatory in nature. The gospel of John records Jesus imploring the Father during the intercessory prayer, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth” (John 17:17–19). Those first apostles had been washed and pronounced clean (“ye are clean,” John 13:10), but would still need to stand as special witnesses to the world.

In a revelation given years later on July 23, 1837, addressed first to quorum president Thomas B. Marsh and then to the entire quorum of the twelve, the Lord reiterated the charge given to missionaries in D&C 88: “But purify your hearts before me; and then go ye into all the world, and preach my gospel unto every creature who has not received it” (D&C 112:28). They were to constitute “special witnesses of the name
of Christ in all the world” (D&C 107:23, see also D&C 107:26) — very much like “council witnesses” equipped to bear testimony on earth and in the heavenly council — messengers bearing the Message (Christ) throughout the world, emulating the master whom they worship in the very act of bearing testimony. The Lord further reiterated and warned,

For verily I say unto you, the keys of the dispensation, which ye have received, have come down from the fathers, and last of all, being sent down from heaven unto you. Verily I say unto you, behold how great is your calling. Cleanse your hearts and your garments, lest the blood of this generation be required at your hands. (D&C 112:32–33)

Joseph’s time in Liberty Jail (December 1, 1838–April 6, 1839) appears to have focused and amplified his thought in terms of the temple and ordinance work for the dead (i.e., those who had been in a “prison” of their own). While still in Liberty Jail, Joseph’s language becomes even clearer regarding not only the existence of a divine council, but a plurality of gods. While yet in Liberty Jail, he mentions “the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before this was” (D&C 121:32), having already possibly translated Abraham 3 and Abraham’s vision of the premortal heavenly council (vv. 22–28). He would expand extensively upon that concept during the Nauvoo period, from May 1839 until his death on June 27, 1844. The endowment would concomitantly expand during this time.

When a fuller form of the endowment was introduced by the prophet Joseph Smith in Nauvoo during May 1842, the ritual expression of divine council theophanies became even clearer. The elders were divinely commissioned and sent forth to preach as authorized — angelicized or divinized — messengers, like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Lehi when they received their prophetic commissions in the divine council (see Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1:1–3:14; 1 Nephi 1:6–15).

Commenting on the function of the endowment, William Hamblin has proposed the following: “[W]e should understand the LDS Endowment as a ritual and dramatic participation in the sôd/divine

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45. See, e.g., 1 Peter 3:18–19; 4:6; Moses 7:38, 57.
48. Cf. also Nephi’s vision 1 Nephi 11–14; cf. 2 Nephi 31:13–14, 32:2.
council of God, through which God reveals to the covenanter his sôd/secret plan of salvation — the hidden meaning and purpose of creation and the cosmos.”49 Thus, for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the divine council becomes the ritual setting for the covenants they enter into that make them heirs of the Abrahamic covenant with all of its blessings. Jesus Christ is the messenger of this new and everlasting covenant and “the messenger of the salvation” that the Abrahamic Covenant offers. Indeed, one receives salvation, perfection, and fulness in making this covenant available to others.

Hamblin further remarks, “When we consider the Endowment drama in this way — remembering that in Isaiah the meeting place of the sôd of YHWH is in the temple (Isa. 6:1) — the Endowment fits broadly in the biblical tradition of ritually observing or participating in ‘the council/sôd of YHWH’ described in these biblical texts.”50 In the setting of the divine council, Isaiah received atoning cleansing at the hand of a seraph representing the Lord himself (“thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged [têkuppâr, literally atoned]”) and became like the Lord (“Here am I; send me”), ready to go forth as a messenger of salvation.

As Latter-day Saints today, when we receive the endowment for ourselves or for the dead, we emulate and become more like the Savior when we preach as he preached and live as he lived. In so doing, we worship the Father, in the name of Jesus, in spirit and truth, and we come to better know and identify with them (cf. D&C 93:19) as we labor in their work of saving souls. To this day, we often receive this endowment as we prepare to serve missions — with the name of the Messenger put upon us, with Jesus as the Message — one of the most concentrated periods of consecration and worship that many Latter-day Saints ever experience in the course of their mortal lives.

Considering the foregoing connections, including the christological picture given in D&C 93:8 presenting Jesus as the divine “messenger of salvation” (the “Word”) and the Message of salvation (the “Word”) and humankind as coeternal (D&C 93:29) with the potential to “receive of [the Father’s] fulness,” we can better appreciate the Lord’s words in D&C 84. Steven C. Harper explains that this section “could be described as a revelation on temple ordinances, covenants, the gathering of Israel, missionary work, the law of consecration, and the imminent coming

50. Ibid.
of the Savior ‘to reign with my people.’”51 He declared and promised in language that expands upon Malachi 3:1:

Behold, I send you out to reprove the world of all their unrighteous deeds, and to teach them of a judgment which is to come. And whoso receiveth you, there I will be also, for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up. (D&C 84:87–88)

In other words, the Lord promises to go before our “face” as the Father’s “messenger of the covenant” and “messenger of salvation” as we go forth, sent forth as his messengers of the Abrahamic covenant (Abraham 2:9–11). This is a precious promise that Latter-day Saints today should daily strive to claim with the zeal of our forebearers, and in so doing become “clean from the blood of this generation” (D&C 88:75, 85, 138).

**Conclusion**

Several of Joseph Smith’s earliest revelations, beginning with Moroni’s appearance in 1823, quote Malachi 3:1, which foretells the Lord “suddenly com[ing] to his temple” as “messenger of the covenant.” Thus, Malachi 3:1 and its quoted iterations in 3 Nephi 24:1; D&C 36:8; 42:36; 133:2 not only impressed upon Joseph and the early saints the urgent need to build a temple to which the Lord could come but presented him as the messenger of the Father’s restored covenant, i.e., the New and Everlasting Covenant, or the Abrahamic Covenant.

This presentation perfectly accorded with the picture given in the restored portion of the “fulness of the record of John” and its “messenger” christology in D&C 93:8. This christology envisions Jesus Christ as both “the messenger of salvation” (the “Word”) and the message (also “the Word”). Joseph’s early revelations also describe the ontological kinship of God the Father with Jesus, angels (literally, messengers), and humankind, laying the groundwork for the doctrine of humankind’s coeternity with God (D&C 93:29) and the notion that through “worship” one can “come unto the Father in my name and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19; cf. D&C 88:29) like Abraham and Sarah (see D&C 132:29).

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D&C 88, one of the most important revelations on the temple, specifies missionary work and ritual washing of the feet as a means of becoming, through the atonement of Jesus Christ, “clean from the blood of this generation” (D&C 88:75, 85, 138). These ritual washings continued as a part of the endowment that was revealed to and through the prophet Joseph Smith during the Nauvoo period. The foregoing recommends missionary work — of which Jesus Christ himself and Abraham are supernal exemplars — as one of the most important ways in which one can worship. Temple worship today continues to revolve around missionary work for the living (the endowment) and for the dead (ordinances). The endowment, like the visions in which prophets were given special missionary commissions (e.g., Isaiah, Ezekiel, Lehi, and Nephi), situates us ritually in the divine council, teaches us with rich symbolism about the great Messenger of salvation, and empowers us to participate in his great mission of saving souls.

What does it all add up to? Jesus Christ, the Messenger of salvation and the Messenger of the covenant embodies everything we have the hope and capacity to become. He has shown us “how to worship” and “what [we] worship” and how “to come unto the Father in [his] name and receive of [the Father’s] fulness.” We are of one species with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and angels, and all are coeternal in nature. Jesus marked the path for all God’s children in coming to earth and “fulfill[ing] all righteousness” in mortality (Matthew 3:15; 2 Nephi 31:5–6), including undergoing baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost and the holy priesthood, preaching the gospel, enduring to the end, and receiving exaltation, or what Nephi called the doctrine of the Christ. Jesus rose triumphant from the tomb, having conquered death and hell, with a resurrected body, having become “perfect” even as the Father (Matthew 5:48; Luke 16:33; 3 Nephi 12:48), and having enabled humankind to follow him into that perfection (see, e.g., Hebrews 2:10–11). That is the Message, “the Word,” the gospel, or glad tidings (see also 3 Nephi 27:13–17; D&C 76:40–43). We become “clean from the blood of this generation” and thus become “pure even as he is pure” (Moroni 7:48; see also 1 John 3:3), and eventually perfect. When we emulate Jesus Christ as the Messenger of salvation, we engage in the truest form of worship. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it, “the ultimate form of adoration of Him is emulation!”

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Abstract: A favorite scripture of many faithful saints is Alma 7 where it describes how the Savior came to Earth to understand, in the flesh, not only human sin, but human suffering. He did this in order to succor and heal us. Despite its obvious appeal, two points may seem curious to some readers. First, the doctrinal power of verses 11–13, which form a chiasm, has as its apex not the “mercy in succoring us,” as might be expected, but the “in the flesh” detail. Why? Upon closer examination, it appears that, in addition to performing the Atonement, Christ needed a mortal experience in order to add a complete experiential knowledge to his omniscient cognitive knowledge. That could only be obtained, in its fulness, “according to the flesh,” hence the emphasis in the chiasm. A second possible curiosity is that Alma ends his beautiful teaching with his brief testimony, which lends an air of closure. Then, the topic appears to change completely and seemingly inexplicably to a discussion of repentance and baptism. Again, why? Closer examination reveals that the next two verses (14–15) form a second chiasm. If the first chiasm can be viewed as a statement of what Christ offers us, the second may be viewed as what we offer Christ. He runs to us in 7:11–13; we run to him in 7:14–15. When viewed together, the two chiasms form a two-way covenantal relationship, which Alma promises will result in our eternal salvation.

One of the masterpieces within the Book of Mormon is surely the one-chapter gem of Alma 7. Alma, himself, proclaims his description of the mission of Christ to be “one thing which is of more importance than they all” (Alma 7:7). Grant Hardy points out that, “in Gideon, Alma is … straightforward, with some of the clearest prophecies in the Book of Mormon of Jesus’ life.” Truly, the explication of Christ’s
mission and the way to access the gift of his healing power are priceless messages to the people of Gideon, to the Church, and to the world.

**Background and Overview for the Discourse of Alma 7**

The back story for the power-discourse of Alma is that he had been serving in Zarahemla as the chief judge over the land. He then made the decision to transfer his considerable political, military, administrative, and prosecutorial power of the judgment seat to “a wise man” (Alma 4:16–17). However, he retained his position as high priest over the church so that he could concentrate on preaching “in pure testimony” (Alma 4:19). Alma began that preaching in his own capital city where, after much labor, he enjoyed success in bringing the faithful of the city back to the fold and establishing “the order of the church in the city of Zarahemla” (Alma 6:4). Fueled by that success, Alma then traveled to the recently built “city of Gideon” (Alma 6:7).

Alma chapter 7 is wholly self-contained. It begins with Alma explaining that he had been too occupied with administration to come earlier, and he begins his preaching in Gideon by saying, “This is the first time that I have spoken unto you by the words of my mouth,” i.e., in-person (Alma 7:1). Alma then spends the next six verses in an inspired introduction — expressing his trust that the people of Gideon were not “in a state of so much unbelief as were your brethren,” the people of Zarahemla; that they were less materially-focused; and that they did “not worship idols but that [they did] worship the true and the living God” (Alma 7:6).

Alma opens the formal part of the sermon with a description of the need for the people to “prepare the way of the Lord” because “the Son of God cometh” (Alma 7:9). He then extends several prophecies about the birth of the Savior to the virgin, Mary, who would “bring forth … the Son of God” (Alma 7:10).

It is the next three verses (Alma 7:11–13), which present the comforting concept of a merciful God who runs to succor us, that have provided such incredible comfort to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Latter-day Saints. On a personal note, I remember being taught a very different view when I was 10 or 11 and a member of a different church. I was taught that Christ was tempted … but resisted. He suffered … but overcame. Those temptations allowed him to obtain the moral standing and authority to judge us and then to condemn us for failing to resist our own temptations and for giving in to our own suffering. I remember the teacher of that church basing that interpretation on Hebrews 4:15:
“[Jesus] was tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” It seemed as if I were being taught that Jesus was saying: “I resisted that same temptation, and I didn’t sin. It was easy! Why couldn’t you have resisted, too? Why did you sin?”

Imagine my joy, a few years later, when I learned of the corrective knowledge of the Restoration and specifically these verses in Alma 7:11–13. I learned that the true purpose of Christ’s condescension (1 Nephi 11:16, 26) and his mission was not to condemn us at all. It was to empathically understand us, reassuringly comfort us, and completely succor us “with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2; 2 Nephi 25:13). It was as if Christ’s true purpose was suddenly clarified for me. He was really saying something like, “I faced that same temptation; it was terrible! Here, let me wipe your tears and put my arm around you to comfort and console you. Don’t despair; together, we will get through this. Lean on me — I’ll help you. I’ll lift you. I’ll carry you.” The discovery of that difference was life changing. Alma 7 has remained one of my favorite sermons ever since.

Fiona and Terryl Givens have expressed God’s motivation to elevate us in these words: “Our Heavenly Parents created us for our glory, not for theirs, and Christ orients his entire divine activity around the grand project of bringing us to where he is. How can we not adore such a one?”

The Multidimensional Messages of Verses 11–13

The three verses of Alma 7:11–13 most clearly present this glorious message of empathic understanding and complete healing. And that is how Alma’s lesson is almost universally taught in the restored Church. The key element of these verses is appropriately taught and learned with an emphasis on the comfort and succor they offer. The word succor comes from the Latin succurrere, meaning “run to the help of,” and this element of running to help is often rightly stressed in lessons, in writing, and in sermons that focus on his tremendous and loving willingness to take upon his own back our pains and infirmities and to heal us from our pains.

In writing about the condescension of Christ, Gerald Lund drew a comparison with the father of the Prodigal Son.

“But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20; emphasis added). It was not required that the son come all the way back. The father was watching and went out to meet him while he was yet a long way off.
Writing about running to us to heal us even though we are “a long way off,” Elder Holland wrote that the “Atonement brings an additional kind of rebirth. … With his mighty arm around us and lifting us, we face life more joyfully even as we face death more triumphantly.”

Usually less emphasized, at least using these specific three verses, is the Resurrection itself, i.e., that he would die and take back his body, thus bursting the bands (or bonds) of death so that we, too, may rise again to be with him. That point is strongly made in other scriptural verses and its importance cannot be overly stressed, but it is not the main emphasis in Alma 7. Instead, the emphasis of these three verses is almost always focused on the succoring and the healing aspect. The knowledge of the ability of Christ to comfort and succor has been a priceless gift of these few verses for almost 200 years. It leaps off the page in the traditional chapter and verse format. But that is not all. When examined in parallelistic format, these words turn out to form an elegant and powerful ancient chiasm. That chiasm, when examined, seems to switch the emphasis of Alma 7:11–13 from the why of the great sacrifice to the how.

Before explaining this, let me remind the reader that not all chiasms can pass muster as “intentional,” i.e., real, chiasms rather than “inadvertent,” i.e., false. In the case of Alma 7:11–13, there seems to be no question and no debate about its authenticity as a parallelistic unit, so let us examine it in detail. Note that the structure below is not mine alone. It was also identified in at least two other studies, those of Alan C. Miner and of Donald Parry. These same verses are also presented as a chiasm on the Book of Mormon Central website. The verses are outlined below:

(7:11) A₁ And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; B₁ and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

(7:12) C₁ And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; D₁ and he will take upon him their infirmities, E₁ that his bowels may be filled with mercy, F₁ according to the flesh, F₂ that he may know according to the flesh E₂ how to succor his people D₂ according to their infirmities.
Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me.

One change that I have made differs from how Donald Parry presented this chiasm and agrees with Book of Mormon Central. Admittedly, the phrase “Now the Spirit knoweth all things” (C₂) is something of an outlier and it is not clear where it fits. Parry presented this phrase as a part of D₂. But putting “according to their infirmities” together with “Now the Spirit knoweth all things” doesn’t seem to fit, logically. It might even suggest that the spirit knows about the infirmities, which seems to be the exact opposite of the overall message of the chiasm: the spirit doesn’t know about the infirmities, the flesh does. That’s why the comfort of Jesus is explicitly based on, because of, “according to,” or in the flesh. Placing the phrase in C₂, which is how it is presented in Book of Mormon Central, suggests that, while Christ had spirit knowledge, “nevertheless” he needed to suffer in the flesh for some reason. Spirit knowledge was not enough; he needed flesh in order to take upon him death (C₁) and to experience human suffering (C₂) “according to the flesh.” This is the third time that the phrase “according to the flesh” is used, so it is clearly critically important. As mentioned above, it moves from the why of the sacrifice to provide the how, thus explaining the placement of the connecting word “nevertheless.” Even though “the Spirit knoweth all things” cognitively, that was not enough; Christ needed knowledge that could only come from the experience “according to the flesh.” That small modification is critically important as we will see.

Viewing the three verses of 7:11–13 in chiastic format appears to provide two important insights that may come as surprises to some readers. The first and biggest surprise concerns the apex or climax at the center of the chiasm. Neal Rappleye has provided a literature review of various scholars who have developed rules or sets of criteria for evaluating the validity of proposed chiasms. The majority of these scholars specifically identified the apex of any chiasm as the most important part. It is the apex that serves as the “climax,” “crescendo,” or “turning point” of the entire parallelistic unit. Everything hinges on that turning point. The scriptural insight or lesson of the first part of a chiasm has built up to that apex and then will be repeated in inverse order as it steps down from that apex. Often, that apex is a single concept or idea; other times
it is a concept or idea that is twinned, most likely for emphasis. In either case, the apex represents the point of the chiasm—both the structural point and the conceptual point.

As John Welch noted in Rappleye’s article, the “central section [of any chiasm] should be marked and highly accentuated.” In the same article, Craig Blomberg stated, “The center is the climax and should be a significant passage worthy of that position.” John Breck called the apex the “thematic center.” The various scholars differed in the certainty of the elements—from calling the elements merely “constraints,” to “requirements,” and even, “laws”—but all agree on the importance of the apex. “A climax or turning point should be found at the center.”

So, what is the “thematic center” or “significant climax” or “turning point” of verses 11–13? As mentioned earlier, most sermons, lessons, and published commentaries rightly stress the healing and comforting power that comes from knowing that Christ fully and completely understands mortal sin, pain, and infirmity. This has been of great significance to me and to millions of others. Therefore, the obvious expectation is that this emphasis of healing our wounds should also be the apex, climax, thematic center, and turning point of the verses when viewed as a chiasm.

But it is not.

The twinned-apex of the chiasm emphasizes, instead, Christ’s own learning: “That he may know according to the flesh” (the F steps). This is repeated twice, presumably for emphasis. That his “bowels are filled with mercy” and that he wants to run to us (succor us) is paired in the next, and lower, E steps. This seems significant. Why would this be the case? What is Alma saying to us? What does he want us to learn from this? These are the fundamental questions that I will address in this first section of the paper.

One of the primary reasons for our travel through the “land of darkness and the shadow of death” (Job 12:20–21) is so that we can directly experience the challenges of mortality and then learn to exercise our agency: “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). We are told that is the very purpose of life: “True happiness comes from the personal, spiritual growth that rises out of the fires of mortal experience. … Trials, then, are a fundamental part of the plan of life. … Mortality would be a testing period during which we could learn how well we would use our agency when away from our Father’s presence.”
Cognitive and Experiential Knowledge: What is the Difference?

I suggest that there is a major distinction between cognitive learning and experiential learning. To be sure, we are to gain cognitive knowledge during our mortal journey. We are admonished in D&C 90:15 to “set in order the churches, and study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people.” The Book of Mormon endorses cognitive learning when it tells us that “to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29). In D&C 88:118, we are told, “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” Why? Because “whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:18–19).

Modern apostles have concurred. President Henry B. Eyring noted that “you are interested in education, not just for mortal life but for eternal life. When you see that reality clearly with spiritual light, you will put spiritual learning first and yet not slight the secular learning. In fact, you will work harder at your secular learning than you would without that spiritual vision. … Our education must never stop. If it ends at the door of the classroom on graduation day, we will fail.” President Russell M. Nelson has admonished, “Your mind is precious! It is sacred. Therefore, the education of one’s mind is also sacred. Indeed, education is a religious responsibility. … Our Creator expects His children everywhere to gain an education as a personal endeavor.” That is all primarily cognitive knowledge, and it is a blessing from God. It might be noted that the acquisition of deep cognitive knowledge has historically been, and still is, an extremely rare privilege in the world and few have the opportunity to receive it in any depth. That may be why the “word of wisdom” and the “word of knowledge” are separate and distinct spiritual gifts (D&C 46:17–18) and “all have not every gift” (D&C 46:11).

Even more important than the primary learning from the “Tree of Knowledge” (Moses 3:9) is to gain experiential knowledge. Far from being a rare privilege, that particular type of knowledge is poured out in often frustrating abundance upon every human being without exception because of their mortal experiences. As Robert Millet has explained, this knowledge will be thrust upon us by the nature of the world into which we are born:
We do not believe, as did John Calvin, that men and women are, by virtue of the Fall, depraved creatures. We do not believe, as did Martin Luther, that men and women are so inclined to evil that they do not have even the capacity to choose good on their own. We do not believe, as does much of the Christian world, that because of the Fall little children are subject to an “original sin.” … [However] to say that we do not inherit an original sin through the Fall is not to say that we do not inherit a fallen nature and thus the capacity to sin. Fallenness and mortality are inherited. They come to us as a natural consequence of the second estate.25

An analogy that may highlight this important distinction between cognitive and experiential learning comes from the field of medicine. Let’s suppose that a world-renowned male gynecologist and obstetrician had delivered thousands of babies under all conditions and faced dozens of fetal emergencies. Let’s further suppose that he had presented hundreds of professional papers, published scholarly articles and books, taught interns, and knew more about birth than any woman ever knew. Still his vast understanding would be restricted to intellectual, academic, and fact-based knowledge. There is one thing he would not know. He would lack experiential knowledge. He would not know, nor would he ever know, what it is like to actually feel deep labor pains, to struggle against the irresistible urge to push, and to feel numbing exhaustion swept away in the joy of holding a life that came out of his very body. That is a taste of the difference between cognitive versus experiential knowledge.

A second illustration comes from the ongoing tension that currently exists in the field of alcohol and drug counseling. Those who approach addiction treatment from a background of book reading, classwork, and on-the-job training — i.e., cognitive knowledge — are looked at with discounting suspicion and distrust by those who approach addiction treatment out of their own personal struggles with alcohol and/or drugs and their hard-won recovery — experiential knowledge. One side claims, “You can’t know depth from a book,” while the other retorts, “You cannot know breadth based only on your own unique recovery.”

One might ask, then, “Which type of knowledge is best?” That is not a helpful question. They are two entirely different ways of knowing. Ideally, both are required in the travail of child-bearing or for the difficult challenges of alleviating suffering in fighting demon addictions. In our own lives, both kinds of knowledge are required. Whatever cognitive
knowledge we had in our pre-existent state (and it sounds as if we had a lot) was blocked by the veil and must be regained — at least the part that is relevant for each person’s highly individualized mortal journey. But much more important is the experiential knowledge that we did not possess in the premortal state. It is in this mortal existence that we learn to master our appetites such as control over temptations and bodily desires. We cannot learn this in the Spirit World for the simple reason that we did not have physical bodies. Thus, Alma teaches that “this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors” (Alma 34:32). By contrast, while some cognitive learning is idiosyncratically important in our mortal life, it is the next life that we may most easily acquire the majority of factual, informational type of knowledge, knowledge that is hard to acquire now — cognitive learning. Why is it hard to acquire now? First, it is said, although not necessarily correct, that we only use 10 percent or so of our brains. Imagine if we could use 100 percent. Second, even if the first point is questionable, Hugh Nibley convincingly advances that idea that humans are limited to thinking only uni-lineally, while God thinks multi-lineally. He writes:

> Once we can see the possibilities that lie in being able to see more than one thing at a time (and in theory the experts tell us there is no reason why we should not), the universe takes on new dimensions. … Quite peculiar to the genius of Mormonism is the doctrine of a God who could preoccupy himself with countless numbers of things.

Now, consider Jesus Christ. If it was so necessary for us to gain experiential knowledge, what about our friend, Savior, and Elder Brother? Let me be clear: There is no question that Christ, a full member of the Godhead, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Creator of all things that were created, was already fully omniscient. To believe less is to deny the full divinity of God the Son. “Believe in God,” Mosiah tells us. “Believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man does not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend” (Mosiah 4:9). Or, as Nephi exclaimed, “O how great the holiness of our God! For he knoweth all things and there is not anything save he knows it” (2 Nephi 9:20). And, as Alma exults, “my God … has all wisdom and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things” (Alma 26:35). But is that cognitive comprehension, or experiential comprehension?
It seems to me that we are talking here about cognitive knowledge and not experiential or existential knowledge. As far as has been revealed, the Son of God had not yet navigated through any kind of mortal journey. We might say, he had not yet experienced a mortal experience. Basing his conclusion on several scriptures, including D&C 93:11–14, one teacher expressed,

Of course Jesus was a God and a member of the Godhead before He was born into mortality, but perhaps we can say that He had not yet fully developed all the attributes of Godhood. … Apparently, Jesus’s completion of the Atonement gave him needed experience. … Thus, our Savior gained perfect empathy.

We know, in addition, that Jesus did not yet have a mortal body for it was his spiritual body that was shown to the brother of Jared. In Christ’s own words: “Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; … and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh” (Ether 3:16). But he also apparently needed the experiential knowledge that appears to come only in, through, and from a truly mortal experience in the flesh.

Jesus Christ taught this same lesson when he compared the need for Joseph Smith to gain tangible and painful experience with his own tangible and painful condescension.

Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he? (D&C 122:7–8.).

The implication is that our own mortal experience must, at least in some small degree, mirror Christ’s own descent below all. In other words, his temptations and suffering, like his baptism, were undertaken at least in part, “to fulfill all righteousness” and required a mortal experience “according to the flesh” (Alma 7:11–13). This point was powerfully made by Neal Maxwell when he observed:

Later, in Gethsemane, the suffering Jesus began to be “sore amazed” (Mark 14:33), or, in the Greek, “awestruck” and “astonished.” Imagine, Jehovah, the Creator of this and other worlds, “astonished”? Jesus knew cognitively what He must do, but not experientially. He had never personally known the exquisite and exacting process of an atonement before. Thus, when the agony came in its fulness, it was so much,
much worse than even He with his unique intellect had ever imagined! 32

**How Did Christ Achieve Full Experiential Knowledge?**

Referring to Christ’s experiential learning as outlined in Alma 7:11–13, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland wrote:

Christ walked the path every mortal is called to walk so that he would know how to succor and strengthen us in our most difficult times. He knows the deepest and most personal burdens we carry. He knows the most public and poignant pains we bear. He descended below all such grief in order that he might lift us above it. There is no anguish or sorrow or sadness in life that he has not suffered on our behalf and borne away upon his own valiant and compassionate shoulders.33

Tad R. Callister expressed it this way:

No mortal can cry out, “He does not understand my plight, for my trials are unique.” There is nothing outside the scope of the Savior’s experience. … The Savior knows, understands, and feels every human condition, every human woe, and every human loss. … There is no hurt he cannot soothe, rejection he cannot assuage, loneliness he cannot console.34

The prophet and head of the Church, Russell M. Nelson, has recently taught:

In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Savior took upon Himself *every* pain, *every* sin, and *all* of the anguish and suffering *ever* experienced by you and me and by everyone who has ever lived or will ever live.35

Similarly, the apostle Paul stated that “[Jesus] was in all points tempted like as we are” (Hebrews 4:15).

The question is how inclusive is “every” and how many is “all points”? Over the course of the history of this world, humans have faced millions, possibly billions, of unique temptations, afflictions, adversities, and idiosyncratic experiences on just our own Earth. Did Christ vicariously experience all of them? That is, of course, unimaginable to mortal understanding. On the other hand, so is the core doctrinal principle that Christ suffered the penalty for *every* sin ever committed, or that will be committed, both in this world and in other worlds.36 Both of these concepts may be among the unknowables of the Atonement.
Like Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night and was told he had to be born again, we may be left to marvel as he did, “How can these things be?” (John 3:7–9). The correct answer to the question, “How was this accomplished?” is that we simply do not know. In Nephi’s great vision, he is asked, “Knowest thou the condescension of God?” (In other words, “Do you understand why God the Son had to become mortal, according to the flesh?”) We are left to admit, as did Nephi, “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17).

On the other hand, the questions still bear consideration. As Russell M. Nelson has taught, “The more we know about the Savior’s ministry and mission — the more we understand His doctrine and what he did for us.” It seems at least worth trying to attain some degree of understanding of what Tad Callister calls “the intensity of his offering.”

If “every” (from President Nelson’s earlier quote) literally means every, and if Paul’s “all points” literally means all, then we are left to marvel at some mechanism of divinity that we cannot understand. If so, that would be a miracle. That would be fine, since “with men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27; also, Luke 1:37).

However, if it is a miracle, we can still attempt to understand it. One aid to understanding any miracle is knowing that God does not violate natural law. Brigham Young taught:

Yet I will say with regard to miracles, there is no such thing save to the ignorant — that is, there never was a result wrought out by God or by any of His creatures without there being a cause for it. There may be results, the cause of which we do not see or understand, and what we call miracles are no more than this — they are the results or effects of causes hidden from our understandings.

James E. Talmage suggested the same idea when he wrote:

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.

What, then, could be the “laws of nature” in play? What could help us understand the apparent totality of the experiential knowledge that Christ obtained — according to the flesh? Could the “every” and “all
“points” actually be every and all major *categories* of mortal experience? It is at least possible that *categories* of experience provided him with the comprehensive experiential knowledge through some kind of divine transfer of learning. In other words, the knowledge of a category of experiences could subsume all similar sub-experiences that fell within that category.

As one simple and simplistic example, Jesus was never tempted to disobey modern laws of the land and to speed on the freeway or run a red light in the wee, silent hours of the early morning. Such conditions did not exist in the meridian of time. However, he may have been encouraged, at least by some of his followers, to disobey the laws of Rome. One of those laws compelled Jews to carry a Roman’s soldier’s pack, which included heavy armor, one mile. How did Jesus respond to the question about violating this law? According to the KJV he shocked everyone (as he often did) by teaching: “go with him twain.” That response addressed the *category* of not submitting to temptations to disobey law. Similarly, Matthew 5:40–41 has him teaching, “And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also,” thus teaching the category of returning love for legal challenges.

As another example, Jesus was obviously never tempted to avoid U.S. Federal taxes by exaggerating a withholding on an annual IRS tax return. However, he was tempted by the Jewish chief priests and scribes to avoid Roman taxes. When asked, “Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar, or no?” he replied, “Why tempt ye me?” Then he taught the principle — the category — “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar’s” (Luke 20:23–25).

This possible explanation of there being *categories* of experience, which transferred over to give Christ perfect experiential knowledge, rather than him experiencing every specific human event has an analogy to the temptations of Jesus in the desert. We sometimes overlook that crucial part of his suffering, but to do so is a grave mistake. His three temptations in the desert were the first time, that we know of, where he faced major adversity. Satan would not have tempted him unless he had the possibility of succumbing. Elder Bruce R. McConkie pointed out just how bad those temptations were when he wrote:

> Our Lord’s temptations were real and a part of his necessary trials and tests... We know he was called upon to choose the right in the *hardest and most difficult* situations ever imposed upon mortals. ... His temptations were *over and above* those of any other person.
This corresponds to Mosiah’s teaching: “And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death” (Mosiah 3:7). Thus, his own physical cravings for food and water after fasting in the desert 40 days and 40 nights (Matthew 4:2–3) may have been every bit as intense and urgent as the cravings of any drug or sexual addict. Although he never snorted cocaine or injected heroin, he faced the category of carnal cravings when he denied his body food and water for those 40 days. We cannot even imagine such a fast. If the 40 days were literal, and not just symbolic, it would have killed any mortal man.45 “No morsel of food entered his mouth, no drop of water wet his parched lips or dripped down his throat,” writes Elder McConkie. “His body cried out for food.”46 Thus, he had far more than just “book learning” about physical cravings. That is why he could truly be a “wonderful counsellor” 47 to those suffering from addictions as well as to everyone else. Surely his being a wonderful counselor is a major emphasis of the passage being discussed in this paper. Alma’s words are “that he may know … how to succor [i.e., know how to counsel] his people” and be a “wonderful counselor” to them (Alma 7:11–13 and Isaiah 9:6).

The idea of categories of temptations was, in fact, taught by David O. McKay over a hundred years ago. In a Conference Report, he taught that the three categories of temptation that Jesus overcame in the desert (he called them, “three forms”) encompassed the majority of specific human temptations:

Now, nearly every temptation that comes to you and me comes in one of those forms. Classify them, and you will find that under one of those three nearly every given temptation that makes you and me spotted [by the evils of the world], ever so little maybe, comes to us as: (1) a temptation of the appetite; (2) a yielding to the pride and fashion and vanity of those alienated from the things of God; or (3) a gratifying of the passion, or a desire for the riches of the world, or power among men. Now, when do temptations come? Why, they come to us in our social gatherings, they come to us at our weddings, they come to us in our politics, they come to us in our business relations, on the farm, in the mercantile establishment, in our dealings in all the affairs of life.48

Of at least equal relevance is that the specific wording in Alma 7:11 seems to bear out this idea of categories. Verse 11 does not say that Christ experienced every specific temptation; rather it says that he experienced
“temptations of every kind.” The word *kind* is important. It occurs in the Book of Mormon 40 times, almost exclusively within the phrase “of every kind.” Similarly, in the Old Testament the word *kind* generally translated from the Hebrew *min* occurs 31 times, almost exclusively in the phrases “after its kind” or “according to its kind.” *Min* occurs primarily in the creation story, the flood account, and in lists of clean and unclean animals. According to one authoritative website:

*Min* does refer to various kinds of living creatures without a predisposition as to how large a category is intended. Only context can tell us that. [However] … this confirms the general category of a “form” or “kind.” … The Hebrew term *min* carries a sense of all types of divisions between plants and animals, not necessarily in the taxonomies of modern scientific divisions.49

Although it can be problematic to apply modern meanings to scriptures written thousands of years ago, a reasonable understanding can often be gained by looking at the context for the usage of each word. Table 1 contains nine examples of the word *kind* in the Book of Mormon and *min* in the Old Testament and Pearl of Great Price. All of them appear to suggest broad categories rather than every specific instance within a category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Nephi 8:1</td>
<td>Lehi and family take seeds “of every kind,” grain “of every kind,” and fruit “of every kind”</td>
<td>Could the travelers transport all possible varieties of seed, grain, and fruit or did they take samples from several categories?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosiah 8:8</td>
<td>Ammon and his party stumble across bones of Jaredites and ruins of buildings “of every kind”</td>
<td>Did Ammon find ruins of every possible building or ruins of a large variety of types of buildings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 7:11</td>
<td>Christ was prophesied to suffer pains and afflictions and temptations “of every kind”</td>
<td>This is the question posed in this article. Did Jesus suffer all conceivable afflictions and temptations — or categories of them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma 36:27</td>
<td>Alma tells his son that he was “supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions”</td>
<td>Whether Christ experienced every conceivable trial or not, Alma could not have; hence he talks about kinds and “all manner of,” meaning categories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Let’s return to the analogy of the obstetrician. As a mortal man, Jesus Christ did not carry and give birth to a child any more than any other man has — or could. However, he experienced the same categories of the experience from which he could have obtained transferred experiential knowledge. His physical pain in Gethsemane and on the cross was more intense than any mother’s labor pains have ever been or could ever be. His agony was so severe that it caused him to literally “tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore” (D&C 19:18). He cognitively understood childbirth long before the birth of any mortal child; he experientially understood childbirth when he experienced that category and degree of pain “according to the flesh.”

Given that Christ condescended to have a healthy mortal body and a full mortal experience, one proverbial elephant in the room is whether his experiences of mortal life included the categories of marriage, marital intimacy, and parenthood. Those three major aspects of life represent a huge array of motivation, joy, longing, passion, hurt, and even abuse. They have been a major force in the lives of essentially every human being, man and woman throughout the history of the world. An obvious
question is whether these three categories (marriage, marital intimacy, and parenthood) were also parts of Christ’s mortal experience. Note that the Church takes no official position on a marriage for Jesus although people’s speculations on this question have intensified with recent books and movies addressing this possibility. There is compelling evidence and logic in favor of marriage and parenthood but there is also compelling evidence and logic opposing the idea that he married and bore offspring. A review of almost 200 years of statements and writings by prominent Church leaders and others addressing these questions was published in 2021 in BYU Studies Quarterly. The author, Christopher James Blythe, writes that “belief in a married Christ prospered in the early decades of the Church with little controversy among members, until leaders in the early twentieth century discouraged its public discussion while never disparaging the concept.” However, since the questions are sensitive and sacred, and the Church has taken no official position, we will not discuss these questions further, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. However, we might close this thought by adding one relevant and important point offered by Terryl Givens. He noted, “The powers associated with procreation, and the marital institution that Mormons see as instituted before the fall, together endow sexuality with an uncompromised status as holy, divine, and in some sense, eternal.”

Whether Jesus was married or not, suffice it to say that Christ’s mortal life included, in some way, every category of experience, allowing him to obtain an intense experiential understanding of all human life, probably by some kind of transfer experience. For example, Jesus Christ never had his appendix surgically removed. He never went blind. He never experienced a broken bone. He never suffered the cognitive decline and the loss of dignity of old age. Nor did he ever lose a loved one to a drunk driver. So, can he really understand our unique mortal experiences? Yes, he can — either: 1) because of some divine ability of which we are unaware or 2) because he experienced every category of experience — according to the flesh. Exactly why that experiential learning was absolutely necessary and how it was accomplished is a matter of conjecture; that it was absolutely necessary is a matter of scripture.

So far, the distinction between cognitive and experiential knowledge seems solid and important. The real test, though, is whether the text of the Book of Mormon — the actual wording in the chiasm of Alma 7:11–13 — supports this difference. It seems so, because of one brief phrase that is easily glossed over or obscured by the overall message of the chiasm. It
occurs in step C₂ where we are told, “Now the Spirit knoweth all things.” What Spirit? It couldn’t be the Holy Ghost in this context. Alma is talking about the birth and mission of Jehovah as Jesus — one member of the Godhood. There is no logical reason to mention, so suddenly and so briefly, an attribute of a second member of the Godhead. In any case, even if the phrase did refer to the Holy Ghost, which seems unlikely, that changes little. The unembodied Holy Ghost did not have experiential knowledge either. He did not have an experience “in the flesh” because he has not (yet) taken on flesh.

If the phrase, the Spirit knoweth all things, is a general statement about all premortal spirits, the phrase is obviously not true and not correct. While we don’t know much about premortal spirits, it is a tenet of our faith that premortal spirits have not yet had a mortal experience and have not yet had an opportunity to learn experientially. They will learn experientially, through learning agency in this mortal world, and also learn cognitively — which learning continues on into the next life. Our premortal spirits certainly did not know all things.

If the phrase “the Spirit knoweth all things” refers to the as-yet unembodied Spirit of Jesus Christ, that would be partially correct. It would be a true and correct statement of, at the least, his omniscience in cognition, understanding, and knowledge. Jehovah did know all things cognitively while he was in his premortal spirit form. Step C₂ continues with a caveat, “nevertheless...” Nevertheless, what? “Nevertheless, the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh.” This is the third time that the phrase “according to the flesh” is stated. It is an obvious reference to Christ’s mortality. This suggests, among other lessons, that there is something that occurs in a mortal and physical experience that modifies or adds, in some way, to the attribute that his spirit already knows “all things.” It seems likely that this refers to his adding experiential knowledge to his already perfect and complete cognitive knowledge.

This idea is further supported by the twinned apex in the F steps. There we find the dual reference to his mortal experience (“according to the flesh; according to the flesh”). However, step F₂ adds the additional phrase, “that he may know.” Again, this suggests that some type of knowing was connected to his condescending to become mortal and have a mortal experience. That would seem to indicate experiential knowledge — that “he may know according to the flesh” (7:12). This helps explain exactly why the all-important apex of this chiasm is the double phrase, “according to the flesh” (the F steps) and not the more intuitively expected mercy and succoring. That latter emphasis, which
is the one that captures the most attention, falls one step lower in the E steps. In sum, it may be that even though “the Spirit knoweth all things” cognitively (Alma 7:13), the temptations and the Atonement had to be physical, they had to be literal, and they had to be experiential — “according to the flesh” (7:12). “It was part of the eternal plan.”

Four Aspects of the Atonement

Both the fact of Christ’s taking on mortal flesh (F steps) and his ability to provide succor (E steps) go together. Similarly, they are connected to his sharing of infirmities (D steps), his dying for us (C'), his empathy (B steps), and his redemption (A²) and form one great whole. As Robert Millet put it, “the Atonement is the central act of human history, the pivotal point in all time, the doctrine of doctrines.” However, there may be value in separating out the four main elements or aspects of the Atonement. All of these four aspects are addressed, to a lesser or greater degree, in the chiasm of Alma 7:11–13. These four aspects include the Resurrection; his pain, suffering, and death (including his temptations); his healing and succoring of us; and a part of Christ’s own progression. I will talk about each of these in turn.

The first aspect of the Atonement, that Christ came back to life, is of supreme importance. It was Christ’s Resurrection that broke the bands of death for all mankind. Our mortal bodies, now subject to illness and death, will rise again and be made incorruptible. Although this aspect is likely the most important of the four, it is not the major focus of these particular verses (Alma 7:11–13). We must look elsewhere, to other scripture, for an emphasis on the Resurrection aspect itself.

The same is true for the second aspect: that Christ suffered to expiate our sins is similarly not the major focus of these verses. This is not to minimize his suffering. In fact, we might note that the suffering of Christ occurred not only in Gethsemane and on the cross, but throughout his life. In their appropriate zeal to venerate the pain and suffering of the Atonement, some authors gloss over the fact that Christ’s sacrifice occurred in at least three other settings as well:

1. During his beyond-human temptations in the desert.
2. Throughout his adult life and his ministry (“Lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death” — Mosiah 3:7).
3. At the horror of his scourging, flogging, and the indignity of the crown of thorns (“with his stripes we are healed” — Isaiah 53:5).  

In no way is the mention of these three other settings meant to minimize the events of the Atonement itself. To the contrary, I wish to expand our appreciation of the full scope of his condescension. And, in fact, the death of Jesus Christ is something that we are encouraged to reflect on when we symbolically pull back the burial shroud, break the emblem of his body into small pieces, and then symbolically partake of that body and his blood during the weekly sacrament ordinance. Thus, although we do not focus on the symbol of the cross, per se, we do focus on his physical death both in the sacrament and in the temple. Although a full description and analysis of the physical death of Jesus Christ goes far beyond the scope of this short article, several excellent articles have been written on the medical aspects of his death. His death on the cross has also been masterfully covered in numerous General Conference addresses. “More than 330 Church leaders have spoken of the Savior’s death more than 3,000 times!” Plus this essential event has been completely treated in many full-length books. Nevertheless, the focus of these verses is not on his unimaginable sacrifice to expiate our sins. Rather, the focus is on a third aspect of Christ’s condescension: his desire to understand, heal, and succor us in our pains, losses, and infirmities. Scriptural support for Jesus Christ’s urgent desire to understand the mortal experience is rare, even in Restoration scripture, but especially in Biblical scripture. Relying only on the Bible, one might well focus only on forgiveness of sin and the resurrection. However, Alma 7 gives us so much more. Elder Holland points out this same distinction when he writes that Christ’s grace is more expansive than a focus only on the expiation of sin:

Most Christians believe that, based upon repentance, the atonement of Christ will redeem humankind from the final consequences of sin and death [Aspect #2]. But only those who receive the restored gospel, including the Book of Mormon, know how thoroughly the Atonement heals and helps with so many more categories of disappointment and heartache here and now, in time as well as in eternity [Aspect #3].

Elder Holland teaches that this expansiveness comes particularly through the Book of Mormon:
Virtually all Christian churches teach some kind of doctrine regarding the atonement of Christ and the expiation of our sins that comes through it [Aspect #2]. But the Book of Mormon teaches that and much more. It teaches that Christ also provides relief of a more temporal sort, taking upon himself our mortal sicknesses and infirmities, our earthly trials and tribulations, our personal heartaches and loneliness and sorrows [Aspect #3] — all done in addition to taking upon himself the burden of our sins.64

Elder Boyd K. Packer made a similar point when he stressed:

For some reason, we think the Atonement of Christ applies only at the end of mortal life to redemption from the Fall, from spiritual death [Aspects #1 and #2]. It is much more than that. It is an ever-present power to call upon in everyday life. When we are racked or harrowed up or tormented by guilt or burdened with grief, He can heal us [Aspect #3].65

Alma 7:11–13 thus occupies a uniquely emphasized place as one of the doctrinal pillars of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As John Welch has pointed out:

Alma mentions pains, afflictions, and temptations of every kind. That is a stronger statement of the expansive reach of the Atonement than we can find anywhere else in scripture. … Alma is the only one in scripture who emphasizes this aspect of Christ’s sustaining power.66

In the words of Robert Millet, “Indeed, Jesus Christ is the Source of solace. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace.”67

There is still more. A fourth aspect of the Atonement suggests that there may have been certain benefits — for Jesus Christ — in his condescending from a state of divinity to accept a difficult lifetime of mortality “according to the flesh.” We approach a discussion of this fourth aspect with caution. Suggesting that there were also benefits for a divine being may seem counter-intuitive and even disrespectful. For thousands of years prior to Bethlehem, humans worshipped Christ as the premortal Jehovah. He was the creator, under the direction of the Father, of “worlds without number” (Moses 1:33). “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made which was made” (John 1:3).68 Christ condescended to come to Earth primarily as an incredible act of incomprehensible and unconditional love. It was performed for our benefit. We have not paid him, nor can we pay
him. We do not deserve, nor *can* we deserve, this priceless gift (see Mosiah 2:20–21). That is what is meant when it is said that the Atonement was a selfless act. President Boyd K. Packer used the term “Selfless and Sacred Sacrifice” in the title of a BYU devotional in 2015. Similarly, President Gordon B. Hinckley referred to the Atonement as a “totally selfless act,” and Elder Richard G. Scott called it the same thing in a Conference address in 2006. Comparing Christ’s actions to a solo rock climber, Elder Scott taught that “the Atonement was a *selfless act* of infinite, eternal consequence, arduously earned alone.”

The Atonement was truly “selfless” in the sense that Christ did not do it for reward, praise, or adoration; he did it so that we could “buy milk and honey, without money and without price” (2 Nephi 26:25). There is nothing we can do to earn our expiation. If there were, Christ’s Atonement would be a wage, not a free gift. “It is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). The Atonement is something that Christ provides “without money and without price” (Isaiah 55:1; 2 Nephi 9:50).

However, “selfless” does not mean that his condescension did not also advance his own work and his glory. He didn’t do it for gain, but he still gained. He benefited in at least three ways. First, taking upon himself flesh meant that he obtained a mortal, physical body, something that was essential to him as it is for all of us. Second, it allowed him to become “perfect” in the sense of complete. He did not initially have complete experiential knowledge to pair with his complete and perfect cognitive knowledge. Taking on the flesh allowed him to become complete and perfect in the experiential sense, too. Third, he was already perfect, in the sense of total righteousness and without blemish, but he had not yet completed his assigned mission. The full events of the Atonement were not yet complete. He had covenanted to certain actions that had not yet happened. The plan of salvation could not have been set in motion without that covenant. Without the covenant we would have remained spirits, and without the keeping of the covenant we would have been eternally lost, bereft of our physical bodies and the presence of God. The Atonement had not yet taken place. Russell M. Nelson, then an apostle, made that clear when he taught about the perfection of Jesus Christ:

In Matt. 5:48, the term *perfect* was [often] translated from the Greek *teleios*, which means “complete.” … Just prior to his crucifixion, he said that on “the third day I shall be perfected [Luke 13:32].” … Think of that! The sinless, errorless Lord — already perfect by our mortal standards — proclaimed his
own state of perfection yet to be in the future. His concluding words upon Calvary’s cross referred to the culmination of his assignment — to atone for all humankind. Then he said, “It is finished” [John 19:30; D&C 19:19]. Not surprisingly, the Greek word from which finished was derived is teleios. That Jesus attained eternal perfection following his resurrection is confirmed in the Book of Mormon. … [H]e said, “I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” [3 Nephi 12:48]. This time he listed himself along with his Father as a perfected personage. Previously he had not. … Paul taught “that they [our ancestors] without us should not be made perfect.” Again, in that verse, the Greek term from which perfect was translated was a form of teleios.  

To summarize, Christ was already perfect/complete in his absolute righteousness and his cognitive omniscience. He was not yet perfect/complete in three other ways:

1. He needed to become perfect/complete by gaining his flesh — i.e., a physical mortal body that was soon to become a perfected immortal body.
2. He needed to become perfect/complete by adding experiential knowledge to his omniscient cognitive knowledge (through his 33 years of mortal experiences, his Temptation in the desert, and through the agonizing hours from Gethsemane to Golgotha).
3. He needed to become perfect/complete by using that flesh to expiate the sins of mankind by dying to overcome universal death — in other words, by completing the Atonement — something that nobody else could do (“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” — John 14:6).

This theme of Christ’s perfection/completion is more than conjecture; it is scripture. In Paul’s powerful words:

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. (Hebrews 5:8)

That Christ also benefited, personally, from taking on human flesh and acquiring experiential knowledge, was taught in unmistakable words by Elder Bruce R. McConkie. He wrote that Christ’s taking on
flesh “gave him the *experiences he needed* to *work out* his own salvation.”\(^{76}\)

Expanding on that in another of his books, McConkie proclaimed:

> If the plan of salvation, ordained by the Father, was to enable all of his spirit children to advance and progress and become like him, then Jehovah also was subject to its terms and conditions. … Our Lord’s mortality was *essential to his own salvation*. The eternal exaltation of Christ himself — though he was a God and had power and intelligence like unto his Father — was dependent upon gaining a mortal body, overcoming the world by obedience, passing through the portals of death, and then coming forth in glorious immortality with a perfected celestial body. Christ came into the world to *work out his own salvation with fear and trembling* before the Father. There neither was, nor is, nor shall be any other way for anyone. To house a spirit body, even that of a God, in an eternal tabernacle like that of the Father, requires a mortal birth and a mortal death. Christ wrought his atonement, *first for himself and his own salvation*, then for the salvation of all those who believe on his name, and finally and in a lesser degree for all the sons of Adam.\(^{77}\)

Could Christ have accomplished any one of these four aspects of the Atonement in the absence of the others? For example, could he have suffered for our sins without ultimately dying on the cross and then being resurrected (aspect \#1)? Conceivably, perhaps. But what would have been the point if he suffered for our sins but didn’t die, which death makes it possible for us to also rise again and be with him? Could he have gained experiential knowledge without using that knowledge to heal, comfort, and succor anyone? Again, conceivably, yes, but to what end? That would have been merely adding experiential knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Such a thought denies the scope and universality of his unconditional and perfect love. No, the Atonement is very much “a package deal” (to borrow a phrase from Robert Millet).\(^{78}\) The four aspects work together into one synchronized whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Alma’s testimony is that the entirety of the Atonement was accomplished by and through the flesh. It was the flesh that faced temptations of *every kind* in the desert, adversity throughout his life, and agony in the final events of Gethsemane through Calvary (the A steps). He could take upon him “the pains and the sicknesses” and “the sins of his people” (the B steps) because of the flesh. Through his flesh, he died for us (the C steps). Because of his flesh, he was able to take upon him our infirmities (the D
That laid the foundation for him to be “filled with mercy” so that he would know how, through experiential knowledge via the flesh, to “succor his people” (the E steps). The twin-apex or the how, is “according to the flesh” (the F steps).

So far in this essay, we have talked about how Jesus Christ gained a complete knowledge of all human experience. We have discussed this in an either/or manner: did he experience every individual trial, temptation, adversity, affliction, and sin, or did he experience categories that subsumed more specific instances?

There is a third possibility. He could have done both. He might have lived 33 years of mortal life that allowed him to gain experiential knowledge by category (through experiencing the stages of infancy, childhood, and adulthood; his three temptations in the desert; the constant rejection by the Pharisees; and so on). Then, he could have vicariously taken upon himself every conceivable and individual human sin through some unknowable divine process in the approximately 24 hours that included his time in Gethsemane and on the cross. In 2005, Elder Merrill G. Bateman of the Seventy emphasized the individuality of his paying for sin when he stated:

For many years I thought of the Savior’s experience in the garden and on the cross as places where a large mass of sin was heaped upon Him. Through the words of Alma, Abinadi, Isaiah, and other prophets, however, my view has changed. Instead of an impersonal mass of sin, there was a long line of people, as Jesus felt “our infirmities” (Hebrews 5:15), “[bore] our griefs, … carried our sorrows … [and] was bruised for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:4–5). The Atonement was an intimate, personal experience in which Jesus came to know how to help each of us. 79

The idea that Jesus could have lived a mortal life, with its attendant types or categories of experiences, but then vicariously faced many billions of highly individualized sins in the 24 hours of the Atonement, is truly difficult to comprehend. Various authors and teachers have speculated on how a divine process might have allowed for “a long line of people.” These speculations have included such devices as the suspension of time, the recycling of time, Nibley’s multi-lineal thinking, or even parallel universes, but the fact is, we simply do not know.

At first glance, some statements seem to suggest that Christ’s experiential learning, in order to succor us, all took place during the brief hours of the Atonement. Elder Bateman’s statement could be read
that way. Similarly, Hilton writes that “we see from the prophet Enoch
that when we experience deep pain, we can find comfort at Calvary.”\textsuperscript{80}
He adds that “Christ’s Crucifixion was the answer to Enoch’s heartache.
It can be the answer to our heartache as well, no matter what type [of]
suffering we experience, be it mental, spiritual, emotional, or physical.”\textsuperscript{81}
In a related study, he writes, “Through the events of Gethsemane,
Calvary, and his Resurrection, Jesus Christ suffered our pains and sins.”\textsuperscript{82}
Similarly, Sister Jean B. Bingham, speaking in General Conference,
asserted, “In the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross of Calvary, He
felt all of our pains, afflictions, temptations, sicknesses, and infirmities,”\textsuperscript{83}
which sounds a lot like Alma 7.

I am not suggesting that any of these statements are incorrect.
However, it would be easy to misinterpret such statements as claiming
that the experiential knowledge talked about in Alma 7 was gained
during, and only during, the brief hours of the actual Atonement.
That would be a mistake. It does not seem to be what these writers and
speakers are saying.\textsuperscript{84} Rather, they seem to be asserting that, in taking
upon himself human sins to atone for them, Jesus greatly increased
his experiential knowledge of human suffering and pain as a byproduct of
atoning for their sins. It seems to me that the hours from Gethsemane
through the cross were fully involved with atoning primarily for human
sin. It was at these two times that Christ vicariously paid for all and every
individual sin as well as the collective sins of all mankind.

The enormity of that part of the sacrifice is staggering just by itself.
Paying the price of all individual sins for all mortals clearly would
have required some divine mechanism to accomplish. It is simply not
necessary to add that the totality of Christ’s experiential learning also
took place in this compressed time period. That misinterpretation defies
common sense. It also discounts the significance of the rest of Christ’s
life. It does not contradict anything any prophet has ever said or written
about the magnitude of Christ’s free gift in the Garden and on the cross
to say that a large portion of his coming to “know according to the flesh”
took place earlier, prior to the events of the actual Atonement — in other
words, during the entirety of his life. Bishop Richard C. Edgley put it
this way:

His condescension was manifest by who He was and the way
He lived. His condescension can be seen in almost every
recorded act of His 33 years of mortality. … The Savior lived
His teachings. He showed us the way. The God of this earth,
the Redeemer of the world, condescended to minister to the
humble, despised, despairing, hopeless, and helpless. His condescension was evidenced in His everyday living.\textsuperscript{85}

In addition, note that Christ’s atoning for human sin (one part of the mortal experience) and his experiential learning of human pains and infirmities (a second part of the mortal experience) are, at least to some degree, separate and distinct situations. These two situations are obviously related in that sin can cause pain and infirmity and can also be caused by pain and infirmity. Yet, they are also distinct states or conditions. This idea of a distinction between the two is even hinted at by the order in which they are presented in Alma 7. Verses 11 and 12 primarily focus on his succoring us in our pains and infirmities (with a brief mention of his conquering death via his resurrection). The taking upon him of all human sin and blotting out human transgressions are not mentioned until verse 13.

This fact also seems implied by Alma’s exact wording. Alma states that “he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations” (7:11). There was no going forth during and after Gethsemane. He was met at the edge of the Garden by armed soldiers (Jewish then Roman) who arrested him, tried him, flogged him, and nailed him to a cross. Exactly when he went forth can be debated, but we know that his temptations, which as I asserted earlier are not always emphasized, took place at the beginning of his formal ministry, some three years before the few event-filled hours of the Atonement. Similarly, the opening of Isaiah’s well-known prophecy of Christ’s mission seems to refer to his life prior to Gethsemane and the cross. The great prophet wrote:

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2–3)

The prophecy then goes on to clearly reference the Atonement, but it appears certain that Christ’s development of empathic understanding also took place incrementally during his entire life, and not just from the Garden to the Tomb. As the angel taught Nephi, the Son of God did not condescend to become an earthly king or even a fully-grown adult man; he condescended to become a helpless baby.\textsuperscript{86} That seems significant. Nephi added, “And I beheld that he went forth ministering unto the
people, in power and great glory; and the multitudes were gathered together to hear him; and I beheld that they cast him out from among them” (1 Nephi 11:28). Writer Gerald Lund adds:

As he went out among the people, he made no attempt to screen out the unwashed and the unworthy. His whole life was spent dealing and working with those who were what others would define as the dregs of society — lepers, the sick, the diseased, the halt, the maimed, prostitutes, publicans, sinners. He mixed freely among them … although when one considers who he was and where he came from, that alone was a remarkable condescension.⁸⁷

And all this was pre-Gethsemane. In fact, that seems to be the whole idea behind the doctrine that Jehovah condescended to experience a full, mortal life “according to the flesh” with its attendant mortal categories of experiences.

Those experiences, almost all of which occurred prior to the 24 hours of the Atonement, also play a major role in what various Church leaders and writers have described as an intimate and total understanding of individualized mortal experience. What is important to remember is that the magnificence and centrality of the events of the Atonement are not the only aspect of Christ’s life that we must worship. His 33 years of mortal life, including the extremely important temptations in the desert and his 3-year ministry — all prior to Gethsemane — were a central part of his experiential learning. They were not irrelevant.

The take-away is that exactly when Jesus Christ empathically learned to succor us in our pains and afflictions is less important than the fact that he did so. And that fact is dominant in the chiasm of Alma 7:11–13. The possible surprise with which we started this section of the paper is the question of why the apex of the chiasm is not the intuitively expected message of his “mercy in succoring us.” We have hopefully addressed this first surprise by demonstrating that the apex of the “according to the flesh” detail is fully justified and completely fitting. The flesh was not just essential to one of the four aspects of the Atonement; it was essential to all four. All of this — all four aspects of the Atonement — were accomplished in one way, and one way only: through Christ’s voluntary condescension of taking on mortality “according to the flesh.” That is why the twinned apex of the chiasm points to that condescension into flesh as the essential point, or climax. It turns out that there is nothing surprising at all about what lies at the twin-apex of this chiasm. It is fitting, complete, and perfect that the twinned apex emphasizes that
his ability to succor, lift, and heal was accomplished only through and “according to the flesh.”

The Covenantal Relationship in Alma 7:14–15

A second surprise at viewing Alma 7:11–13 in chiastic form may be how abruptly it appears to end, at least on an initial reading. After verse 13, the topic of Alma’s sermon seems to switch dramatically and inexplicably. Alma first talked about the birth and atoning mission of Christ and how his taking on flesh provided the ability to provide succor. Then, all of a sudden, Alma bore a nine-word testimony and started talking about what may appear to be an entirely new topic. Suddenly, we are hearing about repentance and baptism. Why?

Compounding this sense that we are on to other things is that, of the many talks, lessons, books, and discussions of verses 11–13, almost none include any mention of the next two verses. The first set of verses (Alma 7:11–13) is presented as powerful and doctrinally saturated, which it is — but also as a gem that is isolated and self-contained, which it is not. Although everything seems to stop at the end of verse 13, that does not appear to be Alma’s intent. Rather, there appears to be a relationship with verses 14 and 15 that needs to be examined.

Before discussing that relationship, let me point out that the next two verses (Alma 7:14–15) present a powerful gem in their own right. Very notably, these two verses also form a second chiasm. The second chiasm is of a similar size, has a similar twin-apex structure, and enjoys a similar confidence or chiasticity as the first chiasm. There is little question about the authenticity of this second chiasm as a parallelistic unit. Again, this chiasm is not mine alone. It was also recognized and identified as a chiasm by two different scholars in two different studies by Alan C. Miner and by Donald W. Parry.88

(7:14) A Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven;

B therefore come and be baptized unto repentance,

C that ye may be washed from your sins,

D that ye may have faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world,

D₂ who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness.

(7:15) C₂ Yea, I say unto you come and fear not, and lay aside every sin, which easily doth beset you, which doth bind you down to destruction,
B_2 \text{ yea, come and go forth, and show unto your God that ye are willing to repent of your sins}

A_2 \text{ and enter into a covenant with him to keep his commandments, and witness it unto him this day by going into the waters of baptism.}

In brief, step A_1 presents repentance and being born again, i.e., baptism, as the entrance into the kingdom of heaven. That is paired with step A_2, which describes entering a covenant of keeping commandments through the witnessing ordinance of baptism or, being born again. Moving up to step B_1 we read a second emphasis on coming and being baptized unto repentance. That is paired with B_2, which also lists coming forth as a demonstration of our willingness to repent. Moving up to step C_1, we read of being washed from sin. Then, in C_2, we are called upon to “lay aside every sin.” The apex, which is made up of the twin-D steps, pair the mission of the Lamb to take away every sin with the ability of Christ to save and cleanse from sin.

In sum, chiasm #2 is glorious and instructive in its own right. It is a call to action and brings to mind the choice that President Russell M. Nelson has clarified: “We can choose to be of Israel, or not. We can choose to let God prevail in our lives, or not. We can choose to let God be the most powerful influence in our lives, or not.”

But what are we to make from the position of Chiasm #2, which directly and immediately follows Chiasm #1 with no break or commentary by Alma? These are not a chapter apart or even a dozen verses apart; they stand together. Just what is the relationship, if any, between these two chiasms? That there must be some relationship between the two is almost required by their proximity. Again, almost none of the plethora of statements and commentaries related to Chiasm #1 make any reference to Chiasm #2, which follows immediately. One of two exceptions that I have found comes from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland who, based on the chapter and verse format, briefly alludes to a relationship. He merely notes that, “This doctrine [Alma 7:11–13] led Alma to invite his audience to lay claim to these blessings by being baptized unto repentance.” John Welch offers a similar comment: “Alma encourages these people to come and be baptized.” These are certainly true and correct observations, but they are limited and brief. And most commentators do not even mention a relationship, if they notice one.

It is my position that, as most scripture is layered, so there may be an even deeper layer here. A more profound relationship between Alma 7:11–13 and the following two verses seems to be powerfully
revealed when verses 14–15 are formatted with their parallelistic structure and considered as being in a relationship with verses 11–13. Then it becomes clear that these two chiasms stand as twin sentinels or gateways to eternal life.93

Chiasm #1 most heavily emphasizes the third aspect of Christ’s great Atonement: his healing and succoring through his experiential knowledge gained in the flesh. In other words, Chiasm #1 could be seen as one side of a holy and binding covenant. This chiasm appears to be what Christ offers to us. “His spirit heals; it refines; it comforts; it breathes new life into hopeless hearts. It ... transform[s] all that is ugly and vicious and worthless in life to something of supreme and glorious splendor ... to convert the ashes of mortality to the beauties of eternity.”94 That is what Christ offers to us: the succoring healing of understanding and comfort.

Chiasm #2, on the other hand, could be seen as representing the other side of a two-part contract. Those two verses describe what we then offer to Christ: a broken and willing heart as demonstrated through the covenant of baptism. That word “willing” is easy to gloss over, but its importance cannot be overstressed. Willingness to believe and willingness to act on that belief is, in fact, the only thing that we can offer to Christ. In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “The submission of one’s will is really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God’s altar. ... And when we submit to His will, then we’ve really given Him the one thing He asks of us.”95

As an important aside, Matthew Bowen, a scholar researching onomastic names in the Book of Mormon, has demonstrated that this concept of willingness has much greater significance than is normally recognized.96 In the latter part of the Book of Mormon, Helaman’s sons, Nephi and Lehi, devoted themselves to preaching and were quickly cast into prison with 300 others who were Lamanites or Nephite dissenters. They were soon “encircled about as if by fire ... [and] were overshadowed with a cloud of darkness” (Helaman 5:28). Seeing this, and hearing a voice, several prisoners cried out, “What do all these things mean?” One of the Nephite dissenters replied that they “must repent, and cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ” (Helaman 5:41). He and the others immediately did so and soon felt the unspeakable joy of the Holy Spirit (Helaman 5:44–45). The 300 were then called to “go forth” among their people and share “all the things which they had heard and seen.” Before long “the more part of the Lamanites were convinced.” A brief Edenic state was created, and the Lord began to pour out his Spirit. We
are told that this took place “because of their easiness and *willingness* to believe in his words” (Helaman 6:36). Bowen points out that the otherwise minor character, the Nephite dissenter who facilitated this change of heart, had his name specifically identified by Mormon. Why? The man’s name was Aminadab. This was a Semitic/Hebrew-origin name made up of *ʿammî* or “my people” plus *nādāb* or “willing.” Bowen concludes that Mormon’s word choice in 6:36 (the *willingness* of the people) and his using Aminadab’s name (meaning “my people are willing”) was a “deliberate” association to underscore the covenantal relationship in the account.97

Returning to Alma’s sermon, it is highly significant that Alma used all three terms, *willing*, *covenant*, and *baptism*, in a single verse (Alma 7:15). Note that, although the actual word *willing* is used only one time in Chiasm #2, the concept of willingness is implicit in *every level* of the chiasm. This is reminiscent of Mosiah’s profound words that we must, like a child, be “*willing* to submit to all things which the Lords seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19). In effect, Alma is telling us that we must be:

1. *willing* to “repent and be born again” — the A steps
2. *willing* to “come and be baptized” — the B steps
3. *willing* to “be washed from your [past] sins” and “lay aside future] sins” — the C steps
4. *willing* to “have faith on the Lamb of God” — the D steps

That, then, is the covenantal relationship:

- He will run to succor us with mercy (Chiasm #1)
- We must run to him with repentant and *willing* hearts (Chiasm #2).

The status of these two chiasms as independent units, but ones that are intimately related to each other, is further illustrated by the word choices that Alma uses. Notice that Chiasm #1 begins by using the third-person pronoun. Alma teaches that: “*he* will take upon him,” “*his* people,” “*their* infirmities,” and so on. This continues down to and including Alma 7:13: “take upon *him*,” “blot out *their* infirmities,” “*his* deliverance,” etc. (This also indicates that verse 13 is truly a part of the three-verse unit of Alma 7:11–13.) Then, in verse 14, the text switches to the second-person pronoun. Alma now preaches: “say unto *you*” “*ye* must repent,” “*ye* may be washed,” and the like. Again, this seems to indicate two separate and distinct, but closely related, units: Chiasm #1 is what *he* does; Chiasm #2 is what *you* — actually, we — do in return.
Additional evidence should not be needed, but there is one more piece that can be presented. That this two-way commitment is, in fact, a covenental relationship is proven by the very words of Alma himself. In Alma 7:15 he calls it exactly that, asking us to “enter into a covenant with him” (step A2). What better proof can there be than that? Why would Alma use the word covenant unless the two sides of the two-way agreement constituted a covenental relationship and the terms of that covenant were articulated somewhere? And they are. They are just harder to see in chapter-and-verse format because they are interrupted, if I may use that word, by Alma’s brief, nine-word testimony that is tagged on to the end of Alma 7:13: “and, behold, this is the testimony which is in me.” It certainly sounds like that is a conclusion, so we tend to stop reading or at least think that particular message is finished. But, no, it is at the end of verse 15 that the message concludes — not at the end of verse 13.

Then, in verse 16, Alma has an opportunity to provide a commentary on this covenental relationship. He begins by saying, “And whosoever doeth this....” Doeth what? Be baptized? Well, of course. But surely that is only part of it. It is only the second of the four “willingnesses” requested of us. Is he not really saying, “And whosoever doeth this,” meaning, entereth into this covenant? The covenant includes Christ’s side, consisting of his majestic gift so beautifully described in Chiasm #1. The four “willingnesses” — especially baptism — are our side of the two-way covenant.

But this is not all. Alma then issues a parallel statement addressed to “the same,” meaning the ones who enter into this covenant:

will remember that I say unto him (present tense),
yea, he will remember that I have said unto him (past tense)

But, say what? Said what? That Christ will add nothing less than “eternal life” (Alma 7:16). The repeat of the phrase “will remember” followed by the present tense “say” and the past tense “said” seems to be saying that this offer is not new; it is a renewal of a truth that has always existed. If we enter into this covenant and “keep the commandments of God from thenceforth” (Alma 7:16), we will be granted eternal life. This is an additional manifestation of the Abrahamic Covenant and the New and Everlasting Covenant: We choose Him to be our God through baptism and to serve only him; he will choose us to be his chosen people and pour blessing out upon us, most notably, eternal life.

Interestingly, there is no future tense mentioned — “I will say.” Perhaps this suggests that a time will come when that covenant opportunity will
no longer be available. That could be because an individual has had his or her opportunity and wasted it, an individual is “past feeling,”98 or the covenant is no longer available because of some future event such as the final judgment.

The word “remember” (significantly repeated twice) also brings to mind the sacrament ordinances. In the prayers for both the bread and the water, participants renew their covenant “in remembrance” of the body or blood of the Son and promise that they will “always remember him” (repeated twice in each blessing — Moroni 4:3, 5:2; D&C 20:77, 79). As an important addition, the covenantal wording of the blessing over the bread also shares with 7:15 the comforting concept of being “willing to take upon you the name of Christ.” Willingness is enough — there is no expectation of needing to have already fully taken on the name of Christ or being fully repentant. The essence is that we are willing. This similarity in wording of “remember” and “willing” is further evidence that we are looking at a covenantal relationship in the association of these two chiasms.

The Conference Aftermath in Alma 7:17–27

After Alma 7:16, Alma’s sermon is over. Although there are 10 verses remaining in the chapter, the main message has been delivered. That’s not to say that the last 10 verses are not important, because they are. But the core doctrine has been revealed; the invitation to the covenant has been issued, and it is time for closing comments.99 In saying this, note that Alma 7 is all we have of what was actually a longer sermon. We are explicitly told that Alma “taught the people of Gideon many things which cannot be written” and that he “established the order of the church” (Alma 8:1). How interesting and enlightening it would be to have more of what Alma shared with the people.

That Alma is now beginning the summation of his sermon is indicated by the first words of Alma 7:17: “And now my beloved brethren....” That sounds like a wrap-up, and Alma, indeed, closes down the meeting by saying that he knows, through inspiration — “the manifestation of the Spirit” (Alma 7:17) — that his audience in Gideon believes in the covenant he has just described. He adds that he expected as much (Alma 7:18) and knows that the people of Gideon are “in the paths of righteousness” (Alma 7:19).100 However, Alma drops in another point of doctrinal significance when he bears his testimony that, once a covenant has been delivered and accepted, God cannot break his side:
He cannot walk in crooked paths; neither doth he vary from that which he hath said; neither hath he a shadow of turning from the right to the left, or from that which is right to that which is wrong. (Alma 7:20)

On the face of it, Alma’s testimony about this truth is straightforward. It is interesting to note, however, that the word, right, has an additional symbolic meaning. The right hand is generally considered to be, symbolically, the “covenant” hand. Russell M. Nelson has noted that “the right hand suggests symbolic favor.” The right hand is the hand used in ordinances like baptism, sacrament, sustainings/oaths, and various temple rites. The importance of the right hand was scripturally demonstrated by the Master when he wrote:

He shall set his sheep on the right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. … Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25:33–34, 41)

At a symbolic level, then, Alma is saying that God doesn’t have the slightest hint or shadow of abandoning the covenant he has just offered — the “right” — by going to the left. Neither will he abandon the covenant — the “right” — and turn to that which is wrong (Alma 7:20). About covenants, Christ revealed to Joseph Smith that, “all those who receive the priesthood, receive this oath and covenant of my Father, which he cannot break, neither can it be moved” (D&C 84:40). We can count on Christ, the King, to honor 100% of his side of the covenant. The only question is our side. We can be assured that, if anyone is going to break the covenant, it will be on the human and mortal side. That is always the case, as is proven again and again throughout the pages of scripture.

“Many are called but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14; D&C 121:34).

Alma then continued: “And he doth not dwell in unholy temples; neither can filthiness or anything which is unclean be received into the kingdom of God” (Alma 7:21). God “cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.” If we abandon our side of the covenant and by so doing become filthy or unclean, God is no longer bound, and we no longer qualify for the blessing of that covenant. At that point, “he who is filthy shall remain in his filthiness” (Alma 7:21). For that reason, Alma warns, we must not enter into the covenant lightly. He wants to “awaken
you to a sense of your duty to God” to “walk blameless before him ... after the holy order of God” (Alma 7:22). The acceptance of our side of the covenantal relationship thus creates a sacred and serious obligation. By assuming that covenantal responsibility, we are expected to take on various virtues, which are listed in verses 23–24.106

At this point, Alma ends with what may well be viewed as the equivalent of a pre-Christ (and therefore, pre-apostles) “apostolic blessing.” He begins by blessing them that the Lord will “keep [their] garments spotless” (Alma 7:25). Notice that it is the Lord who makes and keeps our garments spotless, not us. He does that through the merits of the Atonement, conditional on our repentance. Having spotless garments by virtue of the Atonement, we may then sit down with the fathers of old (Alma 7:25) in the kingdom of heaven. He calls for the “peace of God” to rest upon them, their possessions, and their families (Alma 7:27). Alma then ends this magnificent sermon of our covenantal relationship with God and Christ with the terminal statement: “And thus I have spoken. Amen.”

Summary and Conclusions

Alma 7:11–13 is usually treated as a stand-alone and doctrinally-rich single unit. These comforting verses have offered hope and solace to millions of faithful truth-seekers for almost 200 years. Some readers recognize that they form a complete chiasm. Surprisingly, though, the mention of the welcome succoring of human suffering does not form the apex of the chiasm. As I have pointed out, the twin-apex in F is, instead, the fact that Christ accomplished all “according to the flesh.” That lifelong condescension constitutes the mechanism by which the succor comes. I have further demonstrated why this non-intuitive emphasis on the flesh is actually more appropriate and fitting than an emphasis on his succoring human pains and infirmities would have been.

Finally, I have also addressed a second possible surprise in Alma 7. Alma closed the first chiasm with the phrase “and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me.” This testimonial phrase has led some students of the Book of Mormon to the perception that the door shuts at that point and the sermon has concluded. Consequently, writers, teachers, and speakers have tended to treat Alma 7:11–13 as an independent unit.107 However, building upon their appreciation of the contribution of these verses, I have suggested that there is also great value in conceptualizing this chiasm as one side of an even larger unit. There is a second chiasm in Alma 7:14–15 which can be added to the chiasm of Alma 7:11–13, thereby
creating one even larger parallelistic structure. Taken together, the two chiasms can be viewed as two sides of a single two-way covenantal relationship. Chiasm #1 provides what Christ offers to us; Chiasm #2 provides what we can offer to Christ.

Elder Michael John U. Teh, a General Authority Seventy, shared in a General Conference address, “As I studied and pondered, I came to the stark realization that what I know about the Savior greatly outweighed how much I really know Him. ... Understanding that the Atonement of Jesus Christ applies to us personally and individually will help us know Him.” Recognizing the importance of Christ’s experiences “according to the flesh” and seeing the totality of all five verses as one comprehensive covenantal relationship (Alma 7:11–15) helps us do just that.

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Endnotes


2 It is certain that the chapter is self-contained for six reasons: First, the previous chapter closes with Mormon’s colophon that uses
the terminal phrase, “And thus it is written. Amen” (Alma 6:8). Second, the heading in the current edition of the Book of Mormon, translated by Joseph Smith and shown in the Printer’s Manuscript, introduces the next unit of text as a single chapter. Third, Chapter 7 begins with an opening salutation written in the first person (Alma 6 and 8 are in the third person): “Behold my beloved brethren...” Fourth, the conclusion of chapter 7 is: “And thus I have spoken. Amen” (Alma 7:27). Fifth, Chapter 8, written in the third person, then opens with the transitioning phrase “And now it came to pass that...” (Alma 8:1). Sixth, the same sentence of that new chapter tells the reader that “Alma returned from the land of Gideon, after having taught the people ... to rest himself from the labors which he had performed” (Alma 8:1). For those reasons, we can examine Chapter 7 as a stand-alone sermon.

3 This was many years ago and I was only a child at the time. My memory may be wrong and/or the teacher may have been mistaken in how she represented the doctrine of her particular church. I am in no way suggesting that all churches other than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teach of a punitive Christ. But the point is that I came away having internalized a somewhat Calvinistic perspective of a condemning Jesus.

4 This same lesson is briefly taught in other scriptures. It is Satan who is the “accuser” (Rev 12:10), not Jesus Christ. By contrast, the role of Christ is to be your “advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him” (D&C 45:3).


Dictionary/suffer. The 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon used this phrase, “suffer his people.” In the 1837 publication, while Joseph Smith was still alive and almost certainly involved in the decision, the phrase was changed to “succor his people.” It has remained so in all publications since. In a detailed discussion of this word, Royal Skousen expressed his opinion as follows: “The earliest reading (‘how to suffer his people according to their infirmities’) does not make much sense, especially in context. The most reasonable emendation is succor.” See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, pt. 3, *Mosiah 14-Alma 17* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2014), 1721; https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/atv/p3/; emphasis in original. Webster’s 1828 dictionary defines succor as, “Literally, to run to, or run to support; hence, to help or relieve when in difficulty, want or distress; to assist and deliver from suffering.” “Succor,” Webster’s Dictionary 1828, American Dictionary of the English Language, http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Succor. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, “To succor means to ‘run to.’ I testify that in my fears and in my infirmities the Savior has surely run to me.” Jeffrey R. Holland, “He Hath Filled the Hungry with Good Things,” *Ensign* 27, no. 11 (November 1997), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1997/11/he-hath-filled-the-hungry-with-good-things.


9 The scriptures call it the “bands of death,” but many writers, including President Gordon B. Hinckley, call it the “bonds of death.” See Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Victory over Death,” *Ensign* 15, no. 5 (May 1985), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1985/05/the-victory-over-death. The Book of Mormon refers to “bands” fourteen times with two of those usages being to “bands of death” (Alma 7:12 and Alma 11:42). (It also refers to “bands of iniquity” one time — Mosiah 23:12). However, it refers
to “bonds” nine times with no references to “bonds of death” (but five references to “bonds of iniquity” — Mosiah 23:13 and 7:29; Alma 41:11; Mormon 8:31; and Moroni 8:14). Are bands and bonds synonyms or is there a subtle nuance of meaning?

Interestingly, some of the many materials discussing Alma 7 cite only verses 11 and 12, leaving out verse 13, even though verse 13 seems to obviously be a part of this comforting triad. An example of seeing a message in 11–12 but skipping 13 can be seen in H. Clay Gorton, A New Witness for Christ: Chiastic Structures in the Book of Mormon (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1997), 187. Perhaps verse 13 is seen by some as a mere redundancy. It is not, as I will explain later in this paper. Another example is the Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 182–183, which discusses verses 11–12 as a single unit, excluding verse 13.

These terms were taken from Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Truth or Cherry Picking: A Statistical Approach to Chiastic Intentionality,” in Chiasmus: The State of the Art, ed. John Welch and Donald Parry (Provo, UT: BYU Studies and Book of Mormon Central, 2020), 311–17. See, also, Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?,” BYU Studies Quarterly 43, no. 2 (2004): 103–30. It is acknowledged that some enthusiastic and well-intentioned scholars have imagined Hebrew parallelisms where they do not exist. For that reason, a recent effort has been to determine whether a proposed chiastic unit possesses a sufficiently “high value of chiasticity” to be accepted as the intent of the original ancient writer. The term “chiasticity” was used by Donald W. Parry, Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), xii, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/61.


See “What Did Alma Reveal about the Savior’s Mission?,” KnoWhys, Book of Mormon Central, June 7, 2017,
Another problem with Parry’s positioning of the phrase along with “infirmities” is that it seems to make this important phrase of the “Spirit knoweth all things” into an unrelated after-thought. Further, it disrupts the symmetry of the D steps, which pair human infirmities.

See “What Did Alma Reveal,” Book of Mormon Central.


Ibid.

Ibid., 292.

Ibid., 293.

Ibid., 295.

Ibid., 301.


This concept is widely known and repeated but recent scholarship calls this into question (see, for example, Lana Burgess, “What Percentage of Our Brain Do We Use?,” Medical News Today, Red Ventures, February 27, 2018, https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/321060#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20survey%20from,brain%20is%20almost%20always%20active).
Hugh Nibley made this point very clearly in Hugh W. Nibley, “Zeal Without Knowledge” in Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 263.

Calling the divine Christ a brother has been debated in the Church. Some find it a logical extension of our shared relationship through having the same Heavenly Parents. They point to a few New Testament verses that hint at that relationship (for example, Romans 8:29, Hebrews 2:11, and Mark 3:34). The term brother has been increasingly used in General Conference and elsewhere. For example, Elder McConkie called him “…our Elder Brother in the spirit.” Bruce R. McConkie, The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 462. President Gordon B. Hinckley called him “our Elder Brother.” Gordon B. Hinckley, Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Gordon B. Hinckley (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 324. Similarly, Tad Callister writes, “Our Lord is a personal, loving, caring God who is our friend, our brother, our advocate, and our Savior.” Tad R. Callister, The Infinite Atonement (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 207. Terryl Givens writes, “Jesus is the firstborn in the world of spirits, and thus elder brother as well as savior to the human family.” Terryl L. Givens, Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 268. However, others find the term to be diminutive, even bordering on disrespectful. Joseph Smith never used the title and church leaders only began expressing that he was our “elder brother” slowly over the years. In a lecture dated February 17, 1989, Robert Matthews taught, “In the Book of Mormon, Christ is God. He is not simply a mortal, a great teacher, a Friend of Mankind. He is God. …he isn’t so much man’s brother, he is man’s God.” Robert Matthews, Some Thoughts on the Atonement (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989), 17. For a history of the use of this title, see Corbin Volluz, “Jesus Christ as Elder Brother,” BYU Studies Quarterly 45, no. 2 (2006): 141–58.

D&C 93:13–14 teaches that Jesus “received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace, until he received a fulness; And thus he was called the Son of God, because he received not of the fulness at the first.” The “first” can be read two ways: premortal
or early mortal. The first supports the argument, the second does not.


34 Callister, The Infinite Atonement, 209.


36 Callister, The Infinite Atonement, 83.


38 Callister, The Infinite Atonement, 140. Note that in attempting to understand, I am acutely aware of the danger pointed out by Truman Madsen, who wrote, “Any theology which teaches that there were some thing[s] he did not suffer is [a] falsification of his life. He knew them all.” I am absolutely not suggesting that there were conditions that Christ did not experience; I am only trying to understand the mechanism by which he may have accomplished this incomprehensible task. (Truman Madsen quoted in Callister, The Infinite Atonement, 209).


41 James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977), 220.


43 McConkie addresses an academic controversy among some Christians as to whether Christ, as a divine being, was peccable (able to sin) or impeccable (unable to sin) and debunks it, concluding that “Our Lord, as a mortal was subject to the same laws of trial and testing that govern all mortals.” (See McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, 405–406). Elder Howard W. Hunter agreed, teaching that “it is important to remember that Jesus was capable of sinning, that he could have succumbed, that the plan of life and salvation could have been foiled, but that he remained true. Had there been no possibility of his yielding to the enticement of Satan, there would have been no real test, no genuine victory in the result. If he had been stripped of the faculty to sin, he would have been stripped of his very agency.” See Howard W. Hunter, “The Temptations of Christ,” *Ensign* 6, no. 11 (November 1976), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1976/11/the-temptations-of-christ.


45 The number 40 is generally accepted as a symbolic number and is usually used in a metaphorical sense in scripture. It occurs around 150 times in the Bible alone. Alonzo Gaskill demonstrates that the number 40 “represents a period of trial, testing, probation, or mourning,” so its appropriateness as a description of a period of temptation for Christ is a perfect fit. See Alonzo L. Gaskill, *The Lost Language of Symbolism: An Essential Guide for Recognizing and Interpreting Symbols of the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 137. Though the number 40 is a symbolic number, it almost always corresponds either closely or exactly with its literal counterpart. For example, Christ’s mortal body lay in the tomb for
3 days (another symbolic number) and the number 40 would not be used for that description of time; the account would not read that he lay in the tomb 40 days. Thus, we can be confident that if Jesus’s fast in the desert was not exactly 40 days, it was at least significantly longer than a human could go without food or water.

46 McConkie, The Mortal Messiah, 411.

47 Ancient Hebrew had no punctuation. Although the translators of the King James version of Isaiah 9:6 placed a comma between the words “wonderful” and “counselor,” other versions correctly omit the comma. An examination of this verse shows that the term “wonderful counselor” was but one of a string of nouns accompanied by an adjective. He was a “mighty God,” an “everlasting Father, and a peaceful Prince (“Prince of Peace”) as well as a “wonderful counselor.” That he was wonderful is a given, but “wonderful” is not one of the names of Christ, it is one of his attributes, and it is an adjective. That errant comma was cemented in place by Handel’s famous 1741 oratorio, “Messiah,” which created an incorrect title for Christ in the minds of tens of millions of music lovers.


49 “The Meaning of min in the Hebrew Old Testament,” BioLogos, July 21, 2012, https://biologos.org/articles/the-meaning-of-min-in-the-hebrew-old-testament/. Note that the match with Alma 7:11 is not perfect since BioLogos points out that min, at least in the Old Testament, is “applied only to living creatures as described in the Bible. It is never applied to people, abstract concepts, or nonliving objects.” It is not clear if that is some kind of rule or merely an observation of usage. In Alma 7:11, of course, the reference is to a divine but temporarily mortal “person” of Christ and to the abstract concepts of afflictions and suffering.

50 Examples of these include Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code (New York: Doubleday, 2003), which was made into a popular movie, and Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson, The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text That Reveals Jesus’ Marriage to Mary the Magdalene (New York: Pegasus, 2014).
Christopher James Blythe, “Was Jesus Married?,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 75. Also see “Mormonism and the Question of Whether or Not Jesus Christ was Married,” FAIR Answers Wiki, Faithful Answers, Informed Response (FAIR), https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Jesus_Christ/ Was_Jesus_married.

Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 208, emphasis in original.

This was specifically proscribed by prophesy (see John 19:32–36).

Joseph Smith taught as much when he declared in the King Follett discourse, “You have got to learn how to be gods yourselves … by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one.” Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 346–47. Apostle B. H. Roberts stated, “There is a longer time — eternity — in which to arrive at the result; and … bring to pass the necessary development.” B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God: Volume 1 – Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1911), 459, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/evidence-divine-inspiration-joseph-smith-derived-prophet%20%99s-teaching-regard-extent-universe. Brigham Young presented similar ideas on several occasions: “There is an eternity of mystery to be unfolded to us; and when we have lived millions of years in the presence of God and angels … shall we then cease learning? No, or eternity ceases. There is no end.” Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 6 (Liverpool, England: Stationers’ Hall, reprinted 1966, orig. 1859): 344. He further taught: “When they have passed the veil, they will then understand that they have but just commenced to learn. … We had been but children thus far, babies just commencing to learn the things which pertain to the eternities of the Gods. We might ask, when shall we cease to learn? I will give you my opinion about it: never, never.” John A. Widtsoe, ed., *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 249.


Earlier, I stressed the seriousness of the Lord’s three temptations in the desert and opined that we sometimes overlook those
temptations in discussions of Christ’s suffering. Note that the chiasm in Alma 7:11–13 does not overlook that aspect; it is referenced in step A₁ (Alma 7:11).

58 For an intense but graphic description of the scourging, see William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” Journal of the American Medical Association 255, no. 11 (March 1986). They write that “pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock. … Therefore, even before the actual crucifixion, Jesus’ physical condition was at least serious and possibly critical.” Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, “Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” 1457–58.

59 As medical practitioners, Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer are qualified to determine that “the actual cause of Jesus’ death … may have been multifactorial and related primarily to hypovolemic shock, exhaustion asphyxia, and perhaps acute heart failure. … Thus, it remains unsettled whether Jesus died of cardiac rupture or of cardiorespiratory failure. … Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side … perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart.” Ibid., 1463. A different diagnosis was offered by Reid Litchfield, an LDS endocrinologist, who examined and refuted several competing theories and built a convincing case that death resulted from cardiac arrhythmia, specifically of ventricular fibrillation. W. Reid Litchfield, “The Search for the Physical Cause of Jesus Christ’s Death,” BYU Studies Quarterly 37, no. 4 (1997): 93–109. It was the opinion of Elder James Talmage that “the Lord Jesus died of a broken heart.” He added that the evidence pointed to “a physical rupture of the heart as the direct cause of death.” James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 668–69. It is important to note, though, that while these physical conditions may have been the physical mechanisms by which his mortal body died, none of them would have been sufficient to kill Jesus unless he had allowed it. He had power given to him to lay down his life — no man took it from him (John 10:18).

For an example of a lay-oriented and story-illustrated discussion, see Brad Wilcox, *The Continuous Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009). For a doctrinal-rich explanation, the modern classic is Callister, *The Infinite Atonement*. For a book that re-emphasizes the role of Golgotha or Calvary, see Hilton, *Considering the Cross*. For a book that focuses on Christ as a Healer, see Givens and Givens, *The Christ who Heals*.

A similar teaching to Alma 7:11–13 is briefly mentioned by the Apostle Paul when he writes, “For in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). In the same epistle, Paul adds, “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15, emphasis added).

Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant*, 113, emphasis added.

Ibid., 223, emphasis added.


John W. Welch, *John W. Welch Notes* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2020), 567–68. Alma may have known better than most just what it felt to be rescued from such things when he was “harrowed up” (plowed up and turned over) under the pains he endured (Alma 36:12).


See also Ephesians 3:9; Moses 2:1; Mosiah 3:8; Abraham 3:24; and others.


See also Isaiah 55:1 and James E. Faust, “The Supernal Gift of the Atonement,” *Ensign* 18, no. 11 (November 1988),
Susan Easton Black makes the point that “he is a living God, a God who possesses a body. … The reason God was seen in the form of a man is that he is a man. … References to God’s having body parts occur 283 times in the Book of Mormon.” Susan Easton Black, Finding Christ through the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 52.


An important caveat is that pre-mortal Christ (Jehovah) could have known how humankind felt through inspiration and revelation. This concept was taught by President Henry B. Eyring in a Conference address in 2009. He explained that “He knows, from experience, how to heal and help us. … He could have known how to succor us simply by revelation, but He chose to learn by His own personal experience.” Henry B. Eyring, “Adversity,” Ensign 39, no. 5 (May 2009), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2009/05/adversity. John Welch reiterated that point when he wrote that “Christ could have received this knowledge of suffering by revelation, because we know we can know things by the spirit. However, he chose to suffer. To me, this is the Savior going the second mile. Alma emphasized that Jesus would know all this, not only by the Spirit, but also ‘according to the flesh’ (7:12, 13). To make that choice, Jesus wanted to know exactly how it would feel, not just an impression of the spirit, what it would be like, and how we too, in a mortal state, would feel.” Welch, Notes, 569.

McConkie, The Mortal Messiah, 417, emphasis added.

Ibid., 454–56, emphasis added.

Millet, “Regeneration of Fallen Man,” 122.


Hilton, Considering the Cross, 82.

Ibid., 83, emphasis added.


In fact, Hilton points out, “The phrase ‘go forth’ suggests not a one-time event but a continual suffering throughout life.” Hilton, Considering the Cross, 81n18.


1 Nephi 11:16–17. Lund writes, “One could expect that all mankind would hail him; that kings, potentates, and rulers from every country would come to pay him homage; that they would bring him gifts of wealth, power, prestige, and national alliances. … But instead he was born in a tiny village in the hill country of Judea. Only shepherds, a few wise men, and an old man and woman at the temple were chosen to herald his birth. The only political ruler who did take note of the birth ordered him killed.” Lund, “Knowest Thou the Condescension,” 84–85.

Ibid., 85.

Miner, Step by Step, 4a:100 and Parry, Poetic Parallelisms, 241–42. H. Clay Gorton attempts to make a complete chiasm out of just verse 14 (see Gorton, A New Witness, 187).

Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” Ensign (November 2020), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/11/46nelson. This is the essence of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is the same as the New and Everlasting Covenant: We choose Him to be our God and to serve only him; he will choose us to be his chosen people and pour blessings out upon us.

For two simple examples of this rigid separation, see Claybaugh, “Come, Follow Me Alma 5–7” and Church of Jesus Christ, Book of Mormon Student Manual, 183.

Holland, Christ and the New Covenant, 113.

Welch, Notes,” 569. There may be other sources that discuss a relationship, but I am currently not aware of them.
That 7:11–15 comprised two chiastic parallelisms was also recognized by Donald Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms*, 241–42.


As a related point, no unlearned 24-year-old New York farm boy could possibly have guessed the association of Aminadab with the “willingness” in Helaman 6:36. In Hugh Nibley’s words, “the coincidences begin to pile up in a spectacular manner.” See “I Have a Question: What, Exactly, Is the Purpose and Significance of the Facsimiles in the Book of Abraham?,” *Ensign* 6, no. 3 (March 1976), https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1976/03/i-have-a-question/i-have-a-question.

1 Nephi 17:45; Ephesians 4:19; Moroni 9:20.

Alan Miner calls this section, “Alma’s Commendation and Final Charge to the Covenant People of Gideon.” Miner, *Step by Step*, 4a:100.


Russell M. Nelson, “Is It Necessary to Take the Sacrament with One’s Right Hand? Does It Really Make Any Difference Which Hand Is Used?,” *Ensign* 13, no. 3 (March 1983); churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1983/03/i-have-a-question/is-it-necessary-to-take-the-sacrament-with-ones-right-hand.
Note that the thoughts of the Lord not having a shadow of “turning from the right to the left” or “from that which is right to that which is wrong” was recognized as a parallel concept by Alan Miner (Miner, *Step by Step*, 4a:102). If correct, that implicitly associates “right” with “right” and “left” with “wrong.” The 1828 dictionary in use at the time of Joseph Smith offers one definition of “right” as, “In morals and religion, just; equitable; accordant to the standard of truth and justice or the will of God.” “Right,” Webster’s Dictionary 1828, American Dictionary of the English Language, http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Right.

Mankind’s breaking of sacred covenants permeates the scriptures from the Old Testament’s continual abandonment of God by the House of Israel, through the developing apostasy in the New Testament, to the pride cycle of the Book of Mormon. Many of the key Restoration figures also fell by the wayside and left the Church after abandoning their covenants. Perhaps that is best illustrated in the Doctrine and Covenants by the case of James Covel, who withdrew from his covenant after just one day. About Covel, the Lord revealed, “He broke my covenant, and it remaineth with me to do with him as seemeth me good. Amen” (D&C 40:3).

D&C 1:31; see also Alma 45:16.

Hugh Nibley emphasizes that the items in this list “aren’t acts [behaviors and works]; these are states of mind.” Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 2: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1993), 299.

See, for example, Claybaugh, “Come, Follow Me Alma 5–7,” and “What Did Alma Reveal,” Book of Mormon Central.

Our Faithful Lord: Passover to Easter

Rebecca Reynolds Lambert

Abstract: Studying the origins and traditions of Passover enriches our understanding of Easter. We can deepen our own worship and expand our ritual memory by an acquaintance with these traditions. Latter-day Saints possess unique understandings that further illuminate the constancy and plenitude of the Lord’s covenantal relationship with us.

As the calamitous strife of war and the terrifying distress of displaced peoples seeking refuge continue to swirl around our globe, we turn our thoughts and observance to the Prince of Peace. Easter season, and its ancient connection with the Passover, sits like a steadfast rocky island in the churning flow of time, reminding us of covenant promises made and fulfilled over millennia by our faithful God. We can rejoice that the dreadful day of Jesus Christ’s death was soon followed by the great and glorious day of his victory over mortality.

Christians may be tempted to give a patronizing nod to the thought that the Jews in the meridian of time did not understand the true nature of Christ’s kingdom. We sometimes hasten to point out that Christ’s was a spiritual not a worldly kingdom. And yet we may also suffer our own myopia regarding the significance of the Jewish traditions of this season. Such blindness impoverishes our understanding of Easter. As we read the scriptural account of the last week of Christ’s life, we see that Christ himself made specific and strict efforts to conform his life and actions to Jewish expectations as they had been formed by the ritual of the Passover feast. Our collective study of the Old Testament this year can open our own vision to the richness of Passover. Memory and memorial, multiple millennia of ritual reiterations, covenants made and fulfilled — all can magnify our Easter worship.

By the time of Jesus Christ, the Passover season combined two feasts: Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. The terror and urgency
of that original Passover night are hard to overestimate. Pressure between the Egyptians and Israelites had been intensifying dramatically. Moses’s return to Pharaoh’s court, perhaps initially welcomed by his fellow Israelites, was soon perceived as an additional cause of great suffering. Pharaoh twisted Moses’s request to go into the wilderness to worship as an excuse to impose new and unreasonable demands upon the “idle” Israelites who he sardonically pretended must have too much time on their hands. The officers of the people made an accusation against Moses and Aaron: “The Lord look upon you, and judge; because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us” (Exodus 5:21). Moses, feeling the brunt of their anger, took his dismay to the Lord, complaining, “For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he hath done evil to this people; neither hast thou delivered thy people at all” (Exodus 5:23).

The opening chapters of the Passover story begin here with the perception of a broken promise, an impossible request, and a divided and downtrodden people. The Lord encourages Moses, who proceeds in faith, but as for the people, they are just too overwhelmed; “they hearkened not unto Moses for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage” (Exodus 6:9). Despite their weakness, the Lord proceeds to call upon these timid and enslaved sufferers, even outlining their family organizations as his “armies” (Exodus 6:26, 7:4). While the Lord multiplies his signs and wonders, Pharaoh continues to refuse and finally threatens to kill Moses. The Israelite people, by choice or by circumstance, must be feeling the weight of that same displeasure. Interestingly, because of these same wonders, “Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s servants, and in the sight of the people” (Exodus 11:3). Perhaps Moses’s increasing popularity was behind Pharaoh’s frustrated final dictum that he would rather kill Moses than see him. Moses responded by unveiling the Lord’s ultimate curse that all the firstborn of Egypt, from the house of the Pharaoh to that of the miller’s maidservant, as well as of their beasts, should die. “But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel” (Exodus 11:7).

The “otherness” of the Israelites had meant continued subjugation, but now the Lord promises that their “otherness” will be their salvation, if they choose to obey him. He wants to divide them from the Egyptians, setting them apart as his holy people. As a sign of their covenant standing and willingness to follow the Lord, Moses instructs the children of Israel
to sacrifice lambs without blemish, with unbroken bones, one per home, and to paint the side posts and top posts of their doors with the lamb’s blood. This is a public declaration of loyalty that will be impossible to ignore. The Lord promises, “And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:13).

The Israelites were spared (passed over) because they followed the Lord’s commandment and performed the sacrifice of the lamb. Christians note that the required lamb was unblemished, the bones unbroken, and that “nothing of it remain[s] until the morning” (Exodus 12:10). These descriptions stand as testaments to the typology of this paschal lamb as the Lamb of God. Jesus Christ was also without sin, his bones unbroken, and his tomb empty on Resurrection morning.

But the Egyptians suffered:

And it came to pass, that at midnight the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead. (Exodus 12:29–30)

The Haggadah requires the telling of this story during the first part of the Passover Feast. The central element is the message of deliverance. Israel gained freedom from bitter bondage, oppression, and slavery (Exodus 1:11–14). Yet this is also the story of the creation of a political entity — the birth of the Israelite nation, their “armies,” their endowment of a Promised Land, all begin to unfold as the Lord defines his relationship to them as his chosen people and separates them from the Egyptians.

Finding his firstborn dead in the middle of the night, Pharaoh immediately calls for Moses and Aaron and says,

Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as ye have said. … And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said, We be all dead men. (Exodus 12:31, 33)

The expulsion of the Israelites is predicted in the Lord’s admonition to celebrate Passover “with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet,
and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat in haste” (Exodus 12:11). The Lord had already prepared his people to leave. The Feast of the Unleavened Bread celebrates the urgent flight from Egypt with the image of the Israelite refugee army leaving at such speed that they are unable to allow their bread to rise, and so they bake unleavened cakes along the way. “And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders” (Exodus 12:34).

The Exodus account shows us that the Feast of the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread were instituted before the actual event. The Lord explained what he wanted of his people and established the feast as a “memorial” to be kept through the generations to honor what he was about to do in delivering them and taking them to the Promised Land.

For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the Land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord.

And the blood shall be for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.

And this day shall be unto you a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever. (Exodus 12:12–14)

Instruction, tokens, and memorials are closely associated with the Lord’s covenants with his people and especially, anciently, with the Passover. The people accepted the Lord’s covenant by keeping the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. After describing the manner of the feasts, the Lord emphasizes that their yearly observance “shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the Lord’s law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:9).

By the time of Christ, the Passover feast had merged completely with the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and the Israelites were once again subject to a foreign power. Unsurprisingly, these celebrations of divine deliverance in the past became layered with Messianic significance and developed into a traditional time of political unrest. Passover was political and it was combustible. In the Mekhilta, the earliest commentary
on Exodus, we find the dictum of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah (c. 90 CE) that “In that night they were redeemed, and in that night they will be redeemed.”¹ A millennium later, the Exodus Rabbah proclaims, “Let this sign be in your hands: on the day when I wrought salvation for you, on that very night know that I will redeem you. Passover was the night of deliverance in the past and in the future.”² The ancient Passover poem, “Four Nights,” stated that the night of creation, the night of the covenant with Abraham, the night of deliverance from Egypt, and the night of the coming of the Messiah, were all to happen on Nisan 14/15, the Jewish calendar dating of Passover. The night of Passover is the ‘sign’ of the coming of the Messiah.³

Roman rulers were uneasy at this time of year as outsiders flocked to Jerusalem. The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote that it was at these feasts that seditions generally began, and consequently Roman soldiers were stationed on high alert.⁴ We see several such incidents close to Christ’s time. At Herod’s death in 4 CE, revolts were suppressed. In 6 CE Judas of Galilee, the father of zealotry, initiated his revolt on Passover. It was on or near Passover that Agrippa executed James the brother of John, perhaps fearing his influence (Acts 12:2–3). Pilate’s successor, Cumanus, killed over 20,000 Jews in putting down a Passover riot. Of course the devastating Roman seige of Jerusalem, in 65 CE, began during Passover week.⁵ Josephus tells us that 256,500 lambs were sacrificed at the temple. Each lamb was, by law, for a group of at least 10 people, but often as many as 20.⁶ Estimates of visitors to the city range from 500,000 to 2 million.⁷ The soldiers were on alert, messianic hopes permeated the festivals, and the jostling crowds were numerous. The emotional urgency of the expulsion from Egypt finds a ready parallel in the ferment of messianic anticipation in Jerusalem.

Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem at Passover to fulfill and transform the promises made to Moses and the children of Israel, and he was recognized by many as a Davidic king. Julie Smith’s richly perceptive and intriguing study of Mark argues that Mark depicted Christ’s being anointed for his death and for his kingship by the unnamed woman in Bethany.⁸ The story of this anointing varies somewhat in the different tellings, but its significance in Mark and in JST Mark is indisputable.⁹

Zechariah had prophesied that the Messiah would come on a donkey to shouts of acclamation: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass” (Zechariah 9:9).¹⁰ Christ accepted the mantle of the Davidic
kingship when he rode this colt into Jerusalem, the people thronging the way, throwing down their coats and branches in front of him and shouting: “Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest” (Mark 11:9–10). If we were Jews at the time of Christ and saturated in the Old Testament promises of the Messiah, we would have the ears to hear the wider echoes of the story we are given as the Passover events unfold. The people welcomed Christ with the words from Psalms 118, part of the Hallel sung again at the close of Passover. Joachim Jeremias cites numerous witnesses that the exegesis of these psalms in late Second-Temple Judaism “was predominately eschatological-Messianic.” Christ certainly identified himself with the messianic language of the rejected building stone becoming the keystone (Psalms 118:22). Jeremias argues persuasively that the undated Midrash exegesis of Psalms 118 goes back to the time of Jesus. It equates “the day which the Lord hath made” (Psalms 118:24) to the day of redemption. The Midrash continues in the following verses, depicting a beautiful antiphonal choir composed of the men inside Jerusalem welcoming the Messiah with the first half of each verse, and the men outside, descending from the Mount of Olives with the Messiah, responding with the second half of each verse. In the midrashic exegesis, the Jerusalemites and the pilgrims greet one another in exultant antiphonal chorus as they both unite in praise of God.

To refer to the house of David, and Christ as the son of David, was to express a political hope! The prophecy in Zechariah is embedded in a larger prophecy that the Lord will fight for Israel and turn back its oppressors: “He shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:10); “the Lord of hosts shall defend them; and they shall devour, and subdue with sling stones” (Zechariah 9:15). The people’s acceptance of Christ’s authority is demonstrated by throwing their coats before him. When Jehu, son of Jehosophat, was suddenly anointed king by Elisha’s messenger, the people spread out their coats to demonstrate their acceptance of his kingship (2 Kings 9:13). The Pharisees, on hearing the uproar from the temple, exclaimed, “Perceive ye how [we] prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him” (John 12:19).

During his final week, Christ was questioned by the Pharisees about his authority, by the Sadducees concerning resurrection, and by the Herodians about his political agenda. He confounded all three groups until they dared not ask him any more questions. All three concerns are
woven into Christ’s final days, but Christ himself was in Jerusalem with the intention of claiming and forever transforming the Passover.

There is disagreement about whether Christ celebrated the Last Supper on the actual day of Passover or the day before. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all call this a Passover meal. John seems to connect Passover to the time of Christ’s crucifixion itself, placing it at the time the lambs were being slain in the temple (John 19:14). The appeal of this interpretation is also obvious.

Although it is generally agreed that it is impossible to know which day is accurate, Matthew Colvin surveys the debate and makes a strong linguistic and narrative defense of the thesis that there is no difference between John and the synoptics Gospels on dating. He argues,

The correct translation of the phrase, put forth by Theodore Zahn in 1908, is “it was the preparation [day] in the [week-long] Passover [feast]” sc. the preparation day for the Sabbath, which is the denotation of παρασκευὴ when used substantively for this very day in all the synoptic gospels … and for Friday generally in other 2nd Temple Judaic Greek sources (e.g. Josephus, Antiquities, 16.6).

It may be more important to note that Christ himself, in Luke’s account, states, “With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). Christ could simply be calling this a Passover meal, or he could be saying he wanted to eat it early for reasons of his own. Either way, it seems we are clearly being encouraged to interpret the supper as a Passover. Perhaps this echoes the pattern of the original institution of Passover, where the Lord, whom we also understand to be Jesus Christ, instructed the Hebrews how to perform the Passover and explained his covenant before the event of the covenant, or the actual feast and flight. Christ explains the new covenant, and instructs them in the performance of the Passover now transformed into a new covenant ritual, before the event of the actual paschal sacrifice of the Lamb of God. For those who insist on a Wednesday supper, this reading could preserve all four Gospel account descriptions of the Last Supper as Christ’s Passover experience.

Knowing the traditional order of events and customs attunes us to the descriptions given by the early apostles. Because Passover was a familiar ritual, there would be much that would be implicitly understood to a contemporary. From a distance, we still see the threads of different themes: deliverance, bitter herbs, the unleavened bread, the passover lamb, as well as the mention of different customs such as the casual
mention of “cup after supper” (Luke 22:20), the reclining position, and the rented room. It is Rabban Gamaliel, a near contemporary of Christ, who teaches us how we should regard the Passover story:

In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt, for so it is written, ‘And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying, It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.’” (Exodus 13.8) (m. Pes. 10.5)

Gamalial’s dictum, still included in modern Haggadahs, points to the immediacy of the experience. This was a ritual that called for personal involvement, and which spanned past, present, and future in its symbolism. In a sense, ritual takes us, within time, to a place outside of time, where we can meet God and participate in events outside our personal experience. Messianic expectations permeated this feast. In the disciple’s minds, their own experience with Christ, his anointing, and triumphal entry surely weighed heavily as they prepared the room and the meal.

The Gospel of John elaborates the teachings of Christ during this supper, hinting at how Christ recast the traditional Passover. Was it during one of the blessings thanking God for the “fruit of the vine” when Christ explained how he is the true vine? With the exception of Luke’s later Gospel, the accounts seem to imply that the institution of the sacrament occurred near the end of the meal. Again, it is impossible to know, since the accounts differ, but perhaps Judas is gone by this time and doesn’t partake of the sacrament or the new covenant. Our scriptural tradition allows a larger context for the Passover story as we can link the prohibition against strangers participating in the Passover with Christ’s command to the Nephites not to let anyone partake unworthily. Jesus would have been mindful of this. John’s account states that Judas leaves immediately after dipping his bread in the bitter herbs. Surely there could be few things more bitter at this point than this discussion of betrayal among friends (John 13:18–27, 30). It would be reasonable to think it is after the meal, and just before the third of the four Passover cups, when Christ introduces the sacrament.

Mark’s description of the Passover meal has been considered as the most accurate and the closest to Aramaic sources. Mark doesn’t dwell on the entire meal or the extended teachings, but instead he brings to our attention to the bread ritual of the *afikomen* and the blessing over the third cup, the cup of redemption. He also mentions the singing of hymns, Christ’s refusal of the fourth cup, and the exhortation to watchfulness.
Our understanding of the Jewish traditions related to each of these, in turn, enhances our understanding of this crucial evening.

The *afikomen* ceremony spans the entire meal. As the acting host, Christ would have wrapped a piece of unleavened bread, or *matzoh*, and hidden it in a linen cloth prior to the telling of the Exodus story. After the meal, Christ would have taken it out, broken it, and passed it to all participants. This was a high-context act.

The bread represented the longed-for Redeemer, or “coming one.” The breaking and sharing of the bread brought the Messiah into the assembled company and united him with the Jewish people. As Christ lifts the cloth and says, “This is my body” he is announcing his Messianic role and locating his followers at a new point in the Passover story.

Paul draws on this understood messianic typology of the Passover bread ceremony. In his letter to the Corinthians he asks, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:16–17). Here we again see that the sharing of the bread represents Israel being gathered and unified by the redeeming Christ, and, in Paul’s language, becoming the body of Christ. This parallels Alma’s teaching that the baptismal covenants with Christ, which we renew in our sacramental observance, also encompass duties to each other which we fulfill “… as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and be called his people … and 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” (Mosiah 18:8–9).

Perhaps one of the most clear New Testament sources demonstrating the well-understood Messianic significance of the bread ceremony is the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus who unsuspectingly talked with Christ as he taught them, in true Passover style, expounding all the scriptures from Moses on, concerning himself. “And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight” (Luke 24:30–31, emphasis added). Despite the hours Christ spent with these disciples, he is only truly revealed as he shares the bread with them. Luke underlines this point in describing the disciples’ reunion with the apostles in Jerusalem, “they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread” (Luke 24:35, emphasis added).
Christ uses the ritual of the Passover to teach the disciples that the Law of Moses is fulfilled, that he has come, and that even as the *afikomen* was wrapped, his body will be wrapped in linen and hidden, or buried, until it shall be resurrected. Today we “hide” or cover our sacramental bread with a cloth; and as it is brought forth it represents the resurrection of Christ’s body and the promise to us that we too will rise again.

We too can come to know our Savior in “the breaking of the bread.” We too are brought out of Egypt, and out of our afflictions, we too make public witness that we are the Lord’s individually and as a people. We too look forward to the Messianic feast of the Second Coming, and we do it in resounding concert, united with everyone who has ever performed this rite. Our sacramental ritual brings us into a sacred time frame that ritually steps outside of our present time, encompassing past and future where we covenant, and renew covenant, to become one with Christ.

JST Mark 14 reiterates the importance of “remembrance” which is also witnessed by Luke and Paul. “Behold, this is for you to do in remembrance of my body; for as oft as ye do this ye will remember this hour that I was with you” (JST Mark 14:20). Remembrance is inextricable from the Passover theme. In Mark’s account, the supper is immediately preceded by the unnamed woman’s anointing of Christ and Christ’s declaration that this “shall be spoken of for a memorial of her” (Mark 14:9). The word “memorial” is “μνημόσυνον” (“mnēmosynon”) in Greek, the same word used in the Septuagint to refer to the ultimate memorial of the Passover (Exodus 12:14, 13:9), heavily underscoring the connection of this day’s events to the celebration of Passover.29

There is broad agreement with Jeremias’ argument that “in remembrance of me,” from the perspective of Second-Temple Judaism, can scarcely mean “that you may remember me,” but “most probably that God may remember me.” He glosses this to be understood that Christ’s people, through partaking of the bread and wine, continually hold Christ before God, daily imploring the “consummation in the *paraousia* [second coming].”30 Certainly there is an important element of God remembering Christ and us as we remember him. We understand that our own sacrament prayers today emphasize a covenant-based concept of remembrance, which I would argue is also very recognizable from the perspective of Second-Temple Judaism. We are asked to eat “in remembrance of the body of thy son” and then additionally to “always remember him” (Moroni 4:3). Christ himself parses this more fully for the Nephites: “And this shall ye do in remembrance of my body, which I have shown unto you. And it shall be a testimony unto the Father that
ye do always remember me. And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you” (3 Nephi 17:7). Christ twice reiterates (3 Nephi 17:10, 11) that by partaking in the ritual we are witnessing to God. Christ’s baptism was his memorial — the earlier Nephi taught that even Jesus Christ, through his baptism, “humbleth himself before the Father, and witnesses unto the Father that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments (2 Nephi 31:7). He then exhorts us:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, 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 — yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, 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)

The holy ordinance of the Sacrament remembers and renews our baptismal covenant. Just as Passover was instituted to remind Israel of their deliverance, our Sacrament commemorates weekly that we too choose to forsake all other gods and alliances, turning to the true Lord and, in faith, entering the waters of our own Red Sea. Miriam and Moses, surrounded by Israel, stood on the other side of that baptism, shouting praises and singing. We, too, sing praises and speak with the tongue of angels. We, like the Israelites who painted their door frames with lamb’s blood, covenant to be Christ’s people, to remember him, to obey him, and to be separated out from the “Egyptians.” We are marked by our participation and obedience to be “passed over” by the destructions visited upon Egypt. Our sacramental rituals, though events, are like the physical altars erected by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to memorialize covenants. Weekly, ritually, we build altars witnessing to the Lord and our fellow Saints our covenant to be one.

Mark also draws our attention to Christ’s use of the Cup of Redemption, or the cup after supper. In the Book of Jubilees (second century BCE) we see wine associated with the Passover celebration. The medieval Seder and modern usage links each of the four wine cups to God’s actions in Exodus:

Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,
and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:6–7, emphasis added)

Although the names are not completely fixed, common labels today for each cup are the Cup of Sanctification (“I will bring you out”), the Cup of Deliverance/plagues/judgement (I will deliver you/rid you of their bondage), the Cup of Redemption/Blessing (I will redeem you), and the Hallel Cup or Cup of Praise/Hope/Kingdom/Salvation/Restoration. Most likely at the time of Christ, the purpose of each cup was clear but they were probably not so formally named.

The Cup of Redemption — the third cup, or the cup after supper — is the most likely candidate for the cup that radically transforms the Passover into a new sacramental covenant. Andrew Skinner has pointed out that this cup is mixed with water, symbolizing the water and blood that will come forth from the crucified Christ.

When Christ takes the cup and says, “this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28), he takes the place of the lamb and points the meaning of the feast to himself and his sacrifice.

It is no longer the blood above the doors and on the side posts that matters — it is the blood of Jesus Christ that protects and saves us. Christ had fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah during his triumphal entry to Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week. Now, at the Last Supper, he recalls Zechariah’s prophecy again when he says, “As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water” (Zechariah 9:11).

The fourth cup introduces the theme of kingship and ultimate salvation in the promised land, or Kingdom of God. Daube pointed out that already in the third-century Mishnah, the rabbis, referring to even older rules, forbade drinking between the third and fourth cups. When Christ announces that he “will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God,” He is following this rule. This last cup, The Cup of Praise, is linked eschatologically to the kingdom of God and the strict prohibitions symbolize patient Israel awaiting the promised land. The fourth cup was then drunk with specific sung blessings which pointed to the theme of Kingship of Israel’s God. Colvin argues Christ abstained from drinking this cup, and also from the wine offered to him on the cross, “since he intended to
substitute the actual coming of the kingdom for the anticipatory ritual that pointed to it.” Christ’s use of the cup imagery to refer to his actual sacrifice resonates here. He asked the sons of Zebedee, “Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?” (Mark 10:38) and in Gethsemane he said “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me” (Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, Luke 22:42).

“And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives” (Mark 14:26). During the first century CE, the Hallel (Psalms 113–18) were sung while the priests sacrificed lambs in the temple and during the Passover meal. Mark’s simple statement that Christ and his apostles sang a hymn before departing invites us into their experience, into the very words that might have framed Christ’s thoughts as he departed to Gethsamene. When we read the moving Hallel, we consider how Christ might have felt, singing about “the cup of salvation.”

The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.

Then called I upon the name of the Lord; O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.

Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful.

The Lord preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me.

Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee.

For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling.

I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

...

What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?

I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

O Lord, truly I am thy servant; I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid: thou hast loosed my bonds.
I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people,

In the courts of the Lord’s house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem. Praise ye the Lord. (Psalms 116: 3–9, 12–19)

Despite the fact that the fourth cup had been drunk by the company, and the hymns sung, there is further evidence that Christ did not consider the feast over. This evidence is distinctively Talmudic, but Mark’s account strongly suggests the rules outlined in the later Talmud were operative. Christ admonishes his disciples to watch, yet they fall into a deeper and deeper sleep. David Daube comments:

R. Asha, at the beginning of the 5th cent., defines the meaning of “a doze,” which does not bring about the dissolution of the ḥaburah, as opposed to “a proper sleep,” which does. A man, he says, merely dozes “if, and when addressed, he replies but does not know how to answer sensibly.” This late comment is curiously reminiscent of Mark’s description of the state in which the disciples were when Jesus returned the second time: “neither wist they what to answer him.”

Christ’s remarks at subsequently finding them soundly asleep are probably better understood if translated literally: “you are sleeping the remainder and taking your rest.” In other words, you are no longer dozing, you are thoroughly asleep. Significantly it is at this point that the company actually breaks up.

The promise of freedom and deliverance that was anticipated in the Passover ritual was kept in the infinite and atoning sacrifice of our Savior. Christ’s passage through Gethsemane and Golgotha, through the atonement and the crucifixion, meant freedom and the establishment of a new kingdom, not only for the Jews oppressed by Imperial Rome, but also for all mankind in all places and throughout all time. As Alma says, the bands of death were broken and the chains of hell which encircle us about were loosed (see Alma 5:6–9). Death and sin were defeated. We know from modern revelation that this also extended to the spirits bound in prison (see D&C 138:16–18). Perhaps it is the spirit world that Zechariah’s prophecy also referenced: “… by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water” (Zechariah 9:11).
The cataclysmic events attending Christ’s death testify to the overturning of Satan’s reign. As darkness fills the earth, the veil of the temple is rent. The Greek word σχίζω (shizo) means to “split, divide, open,” or “rend.” It is also used by Mark to refer to the heavens opening at Christ’s baptism (Mark 1:10). As he is killed, the piercing of Christ’s body is physically replicated in the veil of the temple, for it too is torn open. Paul’s letter to the Hebrews equates the veil with the body of Christ:

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin.

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) (Hebrews 10:16–23, emphasis added)

It is through the open veil, or through the piercing of His body, that all are invited to approach God and enter the Holy of Holies. Previously this had been the domain of the High Priest alone, and only on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:2–34). In the time of Moses, when the children of Israel had seen that the Lord was waiting on the mountain, they feared and would not go up to him, but sent Moses as their representative. As Christ’s sacrifice establishes the new covenant, Christ himself is now our High Priest, our intercessor, and he invites all to come and see the face of the Lord. “For with a strong hand hath the Lord [Jesus Christ] brought thee out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:9).

Christ is our example in all things, and his ultimate sacrifice shows us how comprehensive is the sacrifice required to follow him and obtain his order. Andrew Skinner notes,

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper raised to a new height the level and intensity of individual commitment and interaction with God. … What the Savior said explicitly to the Nephites he said by inference to the apostles during the Last Supper: “And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood;
yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings. And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit.” (3 Nephi 9:19–20)39

Indeed, as Skinner, insightfully moving between the two accounts, explains, Christ modeled even this sacrifice for us in His death as he experienced a “crushed” or contrite spirit in Gethsemane, and a broken heart on the cross. Unlike under the Mosaic Law, where the House of Israel offered up the blood of an animal, we must give up our own sins.40

Taking into our bodies the bread and water, as a remembrance of Christ, witnesses our willingness to become one with Christ, and to be nourished by his sacrifice. Christ asks his followers to take up their crosses and follow him. We should expect that we who take upon us the name of Christ will be tried in all things. None of us will escape. However, the great support we have is the promise of a resurrection and freedom from sin. The way to the Holy of Holies has been opened. Christ, who is faithful, has redeemed us!

During that final Passover week, Christ did establish His kingdom and did fulfill the Passover covenant. The establishment of Christ’s kingdom continued in crescendo as he visited the spirit world and then the Nephites, as well as others of His lost sheep. The Book of Mormon and Joseph F. Smith’s vision of the spirit world (D&C 138) give us unique appreciation of the magnitude of Christ’s Passover victory. It stretched through all time, all places, all worlds. We revel in the joy of “Isaiah, who declared by prophecy that the Redeemer was anointed to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that were bound” (D&C 138:42). In the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead we see Isaiah rejoicing with prophets from Adam to Malachi as they receive the crucified Savior and accept new commissions from him. They had prophesied this day; they recognized it and awaited it. The tradition of a Passover deliverance adds poignancy to their knowledge that the “day” and “hour” was at hand. Joseph F. Smith reports,

I beheld that they were filled with joy and gladness, and were rejoicing together because the day of their deliverance was at hand. They were assembled awaiting the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their redemption from the bands of death. … While this vast multitude waited and conversed, rejoicing in the hour of their deliverance from the
chains of death, the Son of God appeared, declaring liberty to the captives who had been faithful. (D&C 138:15–16, 18)

As part of the fulfillment of Passover, the Nephites in the New World also received Jesus Christ among them, where he immediately taught them of baptism and the sacrament. When they marveled, he explained how he Himself provides the continuity between the Passover and the sacrament:

Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses. Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. (3 Nephi 15:4–5)

During his visit, we see an abundant fulfilling of covenant blessings as many of the Nephites’ righteous dead resurrected, and the people experienced angelic visitations and wonders.

The Jews did not merely await a Messiah to rid them of the Romans. Their messianic hopes then, like ours now, anticipated the Final Kingdom and the ultimate revelation of the King of Kings. If we can step into sacred time, considering ourselves as if we each came out of Egypt with Moses, then we see Passover is also our memorial. Passover proclaims that our Lord is faithful in His promise of our salvation. Understanding the Passover illuminates how our Easter celebrations and our sacrament services fulfill and comprehend multiple millennia of memorials that witness Christ’s deliverance and his faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant. Christ’s death and resurrection purchased our freedom. Christ’s blood bought our deliverance. Christ’s body, pierced for us, opened the way to the presence of God.

This is indeed liberty to the captives and freedom to them that are bound! Let us also rejoice, joining in this great day of Christian celebration, and let us bear with hope the trials we endure, keeping always in our remembrance the infinite victory of our Savior.

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Endnotes


4 Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 2.12.1

5 Colvin, The Lost Supper, 21.

6 Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 6.9.3.


9 In addition to her extensive analysis of Mark 14, Julie Smith points out that the JST adds a chiasm, further emphasizing this account of the unnamed woman. Perhaps there is also a memory here of the story of Jehu. It is an odd story. When Elisha sent one of the “children of the prophets” to anoint Jehu, the messenger appeared abruptly in the camp, poured the flask of oil on Jehu’s head, blessed him, and then fled. The words used for pour in 2 Kings and in Mark are related, though not identical, in the Septuagint account. What also resonates with Mark’s account is that after the anointing, Jehu’s followers call the prophet, obviously an outsider, a “madman,” and are dismayed at the anointing. But Jehu accepts it and subsequently they do as well, throwing down their coats for him, hailing him as a king.

10 Solomon rode a mule to express David’s acceptance of his accession to power. See 1 Kings 1:32–45.
The *Hallel* is the “praise” sung at Passover and several Jewish Feasts. It comprises Psalms 113–18. Psalms 113–14 are sung early in the feast. Psalms 115–18 would probably have been the last words Jesus sang with his disciples before they left for Gethsamane.


13 Ibid., 258.

14 For an extensive discussion see ibid., 258–59. Jeremias points out that as in the exegesis, the crowds at Jerusalem sing out their half-verse only. The second half of the verses (which would be sung by the disciples) is not put in the mouths of the Jerusalemites by the gospel writers. See Mark 11:9, Matthew 21:9, John 12:13.

15 Craig A. Evans and N.T. Wright, *Jesus the Final Days: What Really Happened* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Kindle location 122–34. Evans argues, “In the end, the Jewish authorities sought to kill Jesus not because he was a good man but because Jesus was perceived as a very serious political threat. His message of God’s rule threatened the status quo, which the ruling priests did not want overturned. Jesus entered Jerusalem as the anointed son of David, he assumed authority in the temple precincts as though possessed of messianic authority, he appealed to the purpose of the temple in a way that recalled Solomon’s dedication of the temple and in a way that implied him to be king; and he was in fact anointed by at least one follower, an anointing that in all probability was interpreted as having messianic significance. It is hardly surprising that an angry high priest would directly ask Jesus, Are you the Messiah, the Son of God? and that the Roman governor would place near the cross a placard that read, ‘This is Jesus, king of the Jews.’” The noise the Pharisees hear may also be a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:15.

16 Josephus (*Wars of the Jews*, 6.9.3) indicates that the “high priests … slay their sacrifices, from the ninth hour to the eleventh.” This corresponds to what we would understand as 3:00 to 5:00 p.m.


18 Colvin, *The Lost Supper*, 17.
In Chapter 6 (“The Ancient Seder and the Last Supper”) of Rosen and Rosen, Christ in The Passover, there is a possible comparison of the modern Seder to events in the Gospels:

THE KIDDUSH: After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” (Luke 22:17–18)

THE FIRST WASHING OF HANDS: He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist … and began to wash his disciples’ feet. (John 13:4–5) (This was followed by the bitter herbs dipped in salt water; table of food removed; second cup of wine poured; ritual questions asked and answered; table of food brought back; explanation of lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread; first part of Hallel; second cup taken; second washing of hands; one wafer of bread broken; and thanks over bread recited.)

BROKEN PIECES OF BREAD DIPPED IN BITTER HERBS AND CHAROSETH AND HANDED TO ALL: Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon … . “What you are about to do, do quickly,” Jesus told him. … As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. (John 13:26–27, 30) (The Paschal meal eaten; hands washed a third time; third cup poured.)

BLESSING AFTER MEALS: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” (1 Corinthians 11:23–24)

BLESSING OVER THIRD CUP (CUP OF REDEMPTION): In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (1 Corinthians 11:25) (Third cup taken; second part of Hallel recited; fourth cup poured and taken.)

CLOSING SONG OR HYMN: When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:30)

Quoted in Colvin, The Lost Supper, 78.
21 “And now behold, this is the commandment which I give unto you, that ye shall not suffer any one knowingly to partake of my flesh and blood unworthily, when ye shall minister it; For whoso eateth and drinketh my flesh and blood unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to his soul; therefore if ye know that a man is unworthy to eat and drink of my flesh and blood ye shall forbid him” (3 Nephi 18:28–29).

22 See Smith, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 777. Smith suggests that Christ’s description of the traitor may refer to Psalms 41:9: “Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.” This is darkly bittersweet as, if we continue reading, the next verse (Psalms 41:10) reads, “But thou, O Lord, be merciful unto me, and raise me up, that I may requite them.” Of course, Christ will be raised up, but on a cross, and he will also requite his enemies, not with vengeance but with mercy.


25 Deborah Bleicher Carmichael, “David Daube On the Eucharist and the Passover Seder,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13, no. 42 (1991): 49, https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X9101304203. This ritual was probably not universally practiced at the time of Christ. However, the great Roman and ancient law scholar, David Daube, having provided extensive philological and historical evidence, determined that the nature of ritual actions, and thus the internal evidence of the New Testament itself, was ultimately the best evidence for a messianic bread ritual. “Jesus could not at the same time have introduced both the general idea of eating a cake of unleavened bread as the Messiah and the specific identification of that cake with himself. This is just not how rites come into being. The ceremony — some ceremony — of eating a piece of unleavened bread as the Messiah, must have been practiced before; the new thing was the identification, the self-revelation…” (David Daube, *He That Cometh* [London: Diocesan Council, 1966], 12).

Robert Eisler first suggested that the rabbis had misidentified the term *aphikomen* when he traced to a Greek word *aphikomenos* meaning “the coming one” or “He who has come” (Carmichael,
“David Daube On the Eucharist and the Passover Seder,” 53). This is a well-attested messianic title in Second-Temple Judaism (Colvin, *The Lost Supper*, 64). We need merely think of John the Baptist sending his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the coming one or do we wait for another?” (Matthew 11:3). The Greek here is *erchomenos*, but the meaning translates the same. Undoubtedly, Eisler’s polarizing personality, and the dramatic academic jousting that ensued, led to his thesis being buried until it was given a firm foundation by Daube almost 40 years later in an address to the London Diocesan Council for Jewish-Christian Understanding (Carmichael, “David Daube On the Eucharist and the Passover Seder,” 47, 48). Jewish folk traditions of celebrating the Passover include practices such as using the afikomen to ward against the evil eye, gain power over floods and the sea, or represent the binding between spouses. Most interesting is the Djerban tradition of tying the afikomen to the shoulder of a family member who then visits relatives and neighbors to prophecy the coming of the Messiah. See Dov Noy and Joseph Tabory, “Afikomen,” s.v. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2006), 1:434. The Djerban Jews of Tunisia are one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. They trace their origins, through oral legend, at least back to the fall of the Temple at the time of the Babylonian captivity.


The term *afikomen* has been highly debated in Jewish and Christian sources. David Daube notes, “But for the theological and historical consequences that follow, it is hard to believe that this obvious, philologically easiest, *naheliegender*, derivation would have been overlooked in favor of the most far-fetched tortuous ones” (Carmichael, “David Daube On the Eucharist and the Passover Seder,” 53–54). Melito, one of the most prolific bishops, himself
of Jewish origin, uses the term *aphikomenos* to represent Christ as Messiah. Carmichael makes the connection between Daube’s arguments and the *aphikomenos* of Melito’s 130 ce *Peri Pascha*, which F. Cross called a “the closest thing we have to a Christian Haggadah” (Stuart G. Hall, “Melito in the Light of the Passover Haggadah,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 22, no. 1 [April 1971]: 29.). The *Peri Pascha* is also the most thoroughgoing exposition of Exodus typology in the early church. Stuart Hall has further strengthened the claim that Melito’s work is a Christian Haggadah in his form analysis. Tragically, Melito’s text was discovered too late for Robert Eisler to know it. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the century of debate on the topic of the *aphikomen*. For a fascinating, authoritative summary and compelling supporting arguments from both ancient Jewish and Christian sources, see Colvin, *The Lost Supper*.

27 Colvin, *The Lost Supper*, 56, notes there is a well-established tradition representing the people of Israel as bread. Hosea 7:8 speaks of Ephraim as “flatbread” and Psalms 14:4 and 53:4 refer to “workers of iniquity” “who devour my people as men eat bread.”

28 Colvin, *The Lost Supper*, 71, presents a highly interesting analysis of the personification of bread as flesh in Jewish tradition. Ibid., 111–18 analyzes John’s account of the feeding of the 5,000 and the Bread of Life discourse.

29 Julie Smith, who also points out the Septuagint’s echoes of Exodus, argues that the idea of a memorial in Mark is unique to the story of the anointing. That is certainly true of the language of our received text. However, the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of Mark 14:20–26 seems emphatically pointed at reiterating the idea of memory and memorial in Christ’s fourfold injunction to remember him through the sacramental ordinance, and his repeated emphasis to bear record of him to the world.


Colvin notes the connection to Isaiah’s suffering servant in Isaiah 53:12, and glosses Leviticus 17:11 to show that nephesh, which can mean “soul” or “life” is “in the blood.” Thus the wording confirms that Christ understood his mission in terms of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant (Colvin, *The Lost Supper*, 91).


Ibid., 89.


Ibid., Kindle location 499–506.

The date of Christ’s appearance to the Nephites has been understood as happening sometime in the year of his death. John Tvedtnes argues it was soon after his death rather than at the end of the year. (John A. Tvedtnes, “The Timing of Christ’s Appearance to the Nephites,” in *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* [Salt Lake City: Cornerstone Publishing, 1999], 251–69.) With this hypothesis in mind, there are interesting possible Passover echoes in the Nephite account. The three days of darkness “which can be felt,” accompanied by mourning and groaning over lost loved ones, compare to the days of darkness and sorrow which can be felt in Exodus 10:21–22 and 3 Nephi 8:21–23. Also suggestive, though hardly conclusive, is the expectation of the Nephites that Christ would be discussing the Law of Moses (3 Nephi 15:2–5). Finally, there is a nice pattern in the Lord’s words, “Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him” (3 Nephi 11:7) and the people’s response, “Hosanna, Blessed be the name of the Most High God!” (3 Nephi 11:17) which echoes the antiphonal chorus which greeted Christ’s entry to Jerusalem, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Psalms 118:26).
Putting Down the Priests: A Note on Royal Evaluations, (wĕ)hišbît, and Priestly Purges in 2 Kings 23:5 and Mosiah 11:5

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: The historian who wrote 2 Kings 23:5 and Mormon, who wrote Mosiah 11:5, used identical expressions to describe King Josiah’s and King Noah’s purges of the priests previously ordained and installed by their fathers. These purges came to define their respective kingships. The biblical writer used this language to positively evaluate Josiah’s kingship (“And he put down [wĕhišbît] the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained”), whereas Mormon levies a negative evaluation against Noah (“For he put down [cf. Hebrew (wĕ)hišbît] all the priests that had been consecrated by his father”). Mormon employs additional “Deuteronomistic” language in evaluating Mosiah, Noah, and other dynastic Book of Mormon leaders, suggesting that the evident contrast between King Noah and King Josiah is deliberately made.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are most familiar with the Hebrew root š-b-t in its nominal form, “Sabbath.” The verbal form of this root, šābat, means to “cease, stop,” or more precisely as John H. Walton states, “it refers to the completion of a certain activity with which one has been occupied,” as when God came to the end of his creative activity on the seventh day in Genesis 2:2–3. This verb in its causative (Hiphil) stem literally means “to cause to cease” — that is, “to put an end to, bring to conclusion,” or “to remove, put away” including in the sense of to “put down” (KJV), purge, or depose an individual from a position.

It is in this last sense that the Deuteronomistic author of 2 Kings uses a causative form of š-b-t in detailing King Josiah’s reformation of the
priesthood in Judah as part of his sweeping cultic reform program: “And he put down [wēhiśbit] the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places” (2 Kings 23:5; emphasis in all scriptural citations is mine). In this short note, I propose that Mormon (perhaps following his source) uses the same (or a very similar) idiom in Mosiah 11:5 in precisely the sense that the Deuteronomistic writer uses it in 2 Kings 23:5 where he uses it to describe the ousting of priests ordained, sanctioned, and supported by the ascendant king’s predecessor. Although a seemingly small historiographic and narratological feature of Mormon’s presentation of King Noah’s reign, Mormon’s description of King Noah’s purge using the same key verb and similar terminology as the Deuteronomistic description of King Josiah’s reform appears to draw a deliberate comparison and contrast.  

Mormon presents Noah as a negative reflection of other Nephite kings (e.g., Mosiah I, Benjamin, and Mosiah II) but also as a striking contrast to Josiah, whom the author of 2 Kings 23 lauds, “And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him” (2 Kings 23:25).

In the cases of both Josiah’s and Noah’s accessions we see the political and organizational phenomenon of “clearing the deck” or “sweeping the room,” which commonly occurs when a new leader comes to power and deposes his predecessor’s advisors and middle managers. Although proceeding from evidently very different moral centers, King Josiah and King Noah both removed their respective fathers’ priests in order to install priests that would be loyal to them and the programs they intended to pursue, rather than to their deceased fathers whose ways they did not intend to follow.

“He Put Down the Idolatrous Priests”:
King Josiah’s Cult Reform

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Lehi and Nephi, uses the causative form of š-b-t in its most basic semantic sense when he prophesied that the Lord would destroy Egyptian cult images in Memphis: “Thus saith the Lord God; I will also destroy the idols, and I will cause their images to cease [wēhiśbîtî] out of Noph [Memphis]; and there shall be no more a prince of the land of Egypt: and I will put a fear in the land of Egypt” (Ezekiel 30:13). Evidence from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible attests the use of the same verb with people as the object, where it has the sense of “remove, put away” (e.g., Amos 8:4; Psalms 8:2 [MT 3]). In one of these
passages, this verb describes the removal, putting away — i.e., putting down or purging of priests by a king.

The Deuteronomistic writer who recounted Josiah’s reign and reform used a verb form from the same root and stem to describe the latter’s removal of priests, whom Amon, Josiah’s father, and Manasseh, Josiah’s grandfather, had appointed: “And he put down [wēhišbit] the idolatrous priests [ʾet-hakkēmārîm], whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven” (2 Kings 23:5).

The KJV’s inclusion of the qualifying adjective “idolatrous” here appears to be drawn from the ritual activities of the kēmārîm described later in the verse. From an etymological perspective, nothing in the Hebrew word translated “idolatrous priests” in the KJV — kōmer — itself suggests that it denoted the performance of idolatrous rites, though it later acquired such a connotation.7 In Aramaic, the cognate noun kūmrā constituted the main word for “priest.”8 Attested only three times in the Hebrew Bible, the evidence regarding the meaning of kōmer is scant. Hosea indicates that the kōmer-priest existed in the northern kingdom of Israel during the 8th century BCE: “The inhabitants of Samaria shall fear because of the calves of Beth-aven: for the people thereof shall mourn over it, and the priests thereof [ûkēmārâw or ûkēmārāyw] that rejoiced on it, for the glory thereof, because it is departed from it” (Hosea 10:5). Although the worship involving the calf images at Dan and Bethel (the latter dysphemized9 as Beth-aven, “house of disaster/deception/nothingness/sorcery”)10 was regarded as illicit, it would have constituted a form of the worship of Jehovah (cf. Exodus 32:4, 8).11 Those kēmārîm who had been “ordained to burn incense in the high places of Judah” would have been burning incense to Jehovah, the national God. In fact, Zephaniah, whose prophetic ministry ran contemporaneously with King Josiah’s reign and reform, condemns both the kēmārîm and kōhānim at once for their cultic practices: “I will also stretch out mine hand upon Judah, and upon all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off the remnant of Baal from this place, and the name of the Chemarims with the priests” (Zephaniah 1:4). Stephen Ricks and John Tvedtnes have suggested that “the term kōmer was simply used to denote a priest who was not of the tribe of Levi, while kōhēn in all cases refers to a Levitical priest.”12 While they overstate the case that kōhēn exclusively refers to a Levitical priest (cf. Melchizedek,13 Poti-pherah,14 Jethro,15 etc.), they are
probably correct that kōmer did not originally constitute a pejorative term.

Whatever the precise meaning and referent of kōmer/kēmārîm, we can firmly conclude that this term represented a type of priest, that Josiah had the royal authority to either ordain or remove such priests, and that the Deuteronomistic writer who detailed Josiah’s “put[ting] down,” “suppression,” or “purging” (wēhîšbît) considered it laudable. To some it might seem a small detail that the Book of Mormon also describes a purge of priests by a new king upon his ascension to the throne. However, Mormon’s use of the identical (or nearly identical) idiom to describe that purge, together with his use of the same formulaic language found in the Deuteronomistic royal evaluations of the kings of Israel and Judah, strongly suggests that Mormon was attempting to compare and contrast King Noah, not only to earlier Nephite kings, but to King Josiah in particular.

“For He Put Down All the Priests That Had Been Consecrated by His Father”: King Noah’s Purge

When Mormon narrates the ascension of Mosiah II to the throne in Zarahemla, he employs a formula Deuteronomistic writers and later chroniclers frequently used in ancient Israel for evaluating kings and their kingships: “And it came to pass that king Mosiah did walk in the ways of the Lord, and did observe his judgments and his statutes, and did keep his commandments in all things whatsoever he commanded him” (Mosiah 6:6). As a formula, “walked in the way[s] of X”/“did not walk in the way[s] of X” (wayyēlek bĕderek X/ [lō] hālak bĕderek X) occurs in variations in passages such as 1 Kings 15:26, 34; 16:2, 26; 22:43, 52 [MT 53]; 2 Kings 8:18, 27; 16:3; 21:21–22; 2 Chronicles 11:17; 20:32; 21:6, 13, 22; 22:3; 28:2; 34:2 (cf. 1 Samuel 8:3; Ezekiel 23:13). In other words, Mormon appears to use this formula to evaluate kings in using the same historiographic convention as other ancient Israelite/Judahite writers. Other expressions, like “walked in all the sins of X” (1 Kings 15:3; 2 Kings 17:22) constitute iterations of the same essential formula.

When Mormon transitions from his full length quotation of Zeniff’s autobiography to an abridged narrative of his son Noah’s reign, he resorts to the royal evaluative formula again: “And now it came to pass that Zeniff conferred the kingdom upon Noah, one of his sons; therefore Noah began to reign in his stead; and he did not walk in the ways of his father” (Mosiah 11:1). The statement that Noah “did not walk in the ways of his father” levies an immediate and distinctly negative evaluation of
him as a king and of his kingship. In fact, the rest of Mormon’s King Noah narrative and every mention of him thereafter can be seen, more or less, as a fleshing out of this statement. Mormon continues to use this evaluation formula in detailing the Nephite post-monarchic “reigns” or administrations with reference to some of the chief judges (Mosiah 29:43; Helaman 3:37) and even groups of people (cf. Alma 25:14), and Moroni uses it in Ether 10:2 to evaluate Shez as a righteous king. Moroni writes: “And it came to pass that Shez did remember the destruction of his fathers, and he did build up a righteous kingdom; for he remembered what the Lord had done in bringing Jared and his brother across the deep; and he did walk in the ways of the Lord; and he begat sons and daughters”.

Moroni calls Shez a “descendant of Heth,” rather than his immediate son (Ether 10:1). As the sole survivor of Heth’s royal household left to “build up a broken people,” Shez’s succession was atypical. Moroni’s use of the formula leaves out Heth and his failings, instead focusing on Shez’s righteousness and devotion to the Lord as a new beginning. Given these later recurrences of the formula in the Book of Mormon, it seems plausible, if not likely, that Mormon used it to evaluate earlier Nephite kings in that portion of his record that is now lost to us.

One of the features of King Noah’s kingship, in view of which Mormon levies his strongly negative evaluation against him, is the purge of the priests that had been ordained or installed by his father, Zeniff, a righteous king: “Thus he had changed the affairs of the kingdom. For he put down all the priests that had been consecrated by his father, and consecrated new ones in their stead, such as were lifted up in the pride of their hearts. Yea, and they were supported in their laziness, and in their idolatry, and in their whoredoms, by the taxes which king Noah had put upon his people; thus did the people labor exceedingly to support iniquity. Yea, and they also became idolatrous … ” (Mosiah 11:4–7). King Noah (King Rest) “rested” (“put down,” hišbit) his father’s priests and gave his own priests a “breastwork … that they might rest [*wayyannihu, causative of nwḥ] their bodies and their arms upon while they should speak lying and vain words to his people” (Mosiah 11:11). 17

Mormon appears to compare and contrast King Noah’s purge in Mosiah 11:5 with that of King Josiah who initiated his reform during the lifetime of Lehi. Josiah “put down” the priests whom his unrighteous father and grandfather had “ordained” (2 Kings 23:5) in an effort to suppress idolatry in Judah, and Noah “put down” the priests whom his righteous father had “consecrated” (or ordained) and consecrated his
own priests who were guilty of “idolatry” and numerous other sins. Although the final form of the book of 2 Kings (as part of a unified “Deuteronomistic History”), 18 certainly did not come about until after Judah’s exile to Babylon, Mormon almost certainly had access to royal annals and other historical/chronological material on the Brass Plates of Laban, such as became a part of the biblical history. Any comparison or contrast of Josiah and Noah would have necessarily drawn on this material.

Conclusion

The Deuteronomistic Judahite historian who wrote 2 Kings 23:5 and Mormon, the Nephite historian who wrote Mosiah 11:5 both used identical — or nearly identical — verbs (and additional like terminology) to describe the purges of the priests their fathers ordained — purges that came to define their kingships. The Deuteronomistic writer used this language to positively evaluate Josiah’s kingship (“And he put down [wēhišbît] the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained”), whereas Mormon levies a negative evaluation against Noah (“for he put down [cf. Hebrew hišbît] all the priests that had been consecrated by his father”). Mormon’s adaption and use of ancient Israelite historiographic conventions is evident in his reliance on the royal “walk/not walk in the ways of X” formula (wayyēlek bĕderek X/[lō’] hālak bĕderek X). Thus, Mormon appears to have drawn a deliberate historical contrast (or comparison) between kings Josiah and Noah. All of the foregoing data recommends Mosiah 11:11 as a significant, rather than a small historical and narratological detail in the Book of Mormon. The foregoing much more likely reflects the tendencies and concerns of ancient authors having an Israelite religious and cultural heritage who were attempting to write history, than it does the imaginative genius of a young man living in 19th century rural New York. We can thus see these historical and narrative details as additional evidence for the Book of Mormon’s antiquity and authenticity.

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Endnotes


4 HALOT, 1408.

5 Here I would briefly note that no consensus exists among Latter-day Saint scholars on whether Josiah’s cultic reforms were positive nor on whether they would have been considered positive by Lehi and Nephi and their successors. Some scholars, following the groundbreaking scholarship of Margaret Barker, view Josiah’s reforms as representing something of a departure or apostasy from earlier, more pristine forms of the temple cult, to which Lehi and Nephi may have been opposed. See e.g., Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” FARMS Occasional Papers, no. 2 (2001): 1–83, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/paradigms-regained-survey-margaret-barkers-scholarship-and-its-significance-mormon-studies; Kevin Christensen, “Prophets and


Since Book of Mormon writers never explicitly mention Josiah or his reforms, Lehi’s and Nephi’s attitudes (and those of any of their successors) on these events must necessarily be inferred. Mormon’s use of royal evaluative formulas from the brass plates similar to those Deuteronomistic writers used, and his use of the formulas in a manner similar to how the Deuteronomistic writers used them (I discuss such later in this paper) may constitute evidence that leans in favor of Lehi’s and Nephi’s successors regarding Josiah’s reforms as positive. Nevertheless, as evidence of the latter, Mormon’s use of these evaluative formulas would be far from conclusive and in any case, a more in-depth treatment of this subject is far beyond the scope of this short article. Jeffrey D. Lindsay (personal communication, 19 December 2021) raises the valid question: “[If] the annals that Mormon had regarding Josiah were not entirely written by Josiah’s supporters, but from, say, sources who saw his ‘putting down’ of priests (and the removal of various relics from the temple) as a negative action, could it be that Mormon’s apparent comparison to Josiah was not done in contrast but done to further impugn Noah’s wicked actions?” If Mormon’s sources were not entirely written by Josiah’s supporters — uncertain, but possible — that would cast Mormon’s intentions in this passage in a different light: Noah would not provide a point of contrast to Josiah, but one of direct comparison.

6 *HALOT*, 1408.

7 Mayer I. Gruber (*Hosea: A Textual Commentary* [London: Bloombury/T&T Clark, 2017], 415) writes: “Later, in both Jewish and Christian Aramaic, the noun in question [i.e., *kûmrāʾ*] came to be employed specifically to designate clergy of other religions of which the Jews
and Christians respectively did not regard as legitimate forms of the worship of the One God of Israel.”

8 See, e.g., Michael Sokoloff, A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum (Winona Lake, IN; Piscataway, 2009), 608.


10 See HALOT, 124. In addition to Hosea 10:5, see also Joshua 7:2; 18:12; 1 Samuel 13:5; 14:23; Hosea 4:15; 5:8. On the meaning of ‘āwen in bêt-āwen, see HALOT, 22.


13 Melchizedek is described as a kōhēn in Genesis 14:18 (cf. JST Genesis 14:17, 27; Hebrews 5:10; 7:1 [JST Hebrews 7:3]).


15 Jethro is described as “the priest of Midian” in Exodus 2:16; 3:1; 18:1 (cf. JST Exodus 18:1).


ALMA’S PROPHETIC
COMMISSIONING TYPE SCENE

Alan Goff

Abstract: The story often referred to as Alma’s conversion narrative is too often interpreted as a simplistic plagiarism of Paul’s conversion-to-Christianity story in the book of Acts. Both the New and Old Testaments appropriate an ancient narrative genre called the prophetic commissioning story. Paul’s and Alma’s commissioning narratives hearken back to this literary genre, and to refer to either as pilfered is to misunderstand not just these individual narratives but the larger approach Hebraic writers used in composing biblical and Book of Mormon narrative. To the modern mind the similarity in stories triggers explanations involving plagiarism and theft from earlier stories and denies the historicity of the narratives; ancient writers — especially of Hebraic narrative — had a quite different view of such concerns. To deny the historical nature of the stories because they appeal to particular narrative conventions is to impose a mistaken modern conceptual framework on the texts involved. A better and more complex grasp of Hebraic narrative is a necessary first step to understanding these two (and many more) Book of Mormon and biblical stories.

The idea of conversion has both a history and a geography.¹

As a BYU graduate student, I read (not for the first time) Fawn Brodie’s catalogue of narratives Joseph Smith purportedly plagiarized from the Bible:

Many stories he borrowed from the Bible. The daughter of Jared, like Salome, danced before a king and a decapitation followed. Aminadi, like Daniel, deciphered handwriting on a wall, and Alma was converted after the exact fashion
of St. Paul. The daughters of the Lamanites were abducted like the dancing daughters of Shiloh; and Ammon, the American counterpart of David, for want of a Goliath slew six sheep-rustlers with his sling.²

This frequently quoted passage from Brodie’s oft-and-still-cited book³ initiated a mission. I decided to examine each of these five narratives, convinced that this list represented neither an adequate philosophy of history nor suitable textual theory. In the more than 30 years since, I have addressed each narrative (this is the first of the five interrogations of Brodie’s examples to be published; the other four will be forthcoming); sometimes the insight came serendipitously from stumbling across a book in the library, and sometimes I directly searched out biblical criticism sources to explain the textual connection.

Brodie isn’t alone in concluding Smith plagiarized biblical narratives. Here is Wayne Ham’s plagiarism of Fawn Brodie’s passage:

Other apparent biblical allusions in the Book of Mormon include Alma’s conversion in a similar fashion to Paul’s; Ammon, like David, slaying six sheep rustlers with a sling; the daughter of Jared, like Salome, dancing for the king in return for a decapitation; Jesus’ blessing of the children; and an abduction scene similar to that involving the daughters of Shilo.⁴

If similarity indicates plagiarism, then Ham plagiarizes while accusing Joseph Smith of plagiarism (Ham doesn’t cite Brodie as a source for this passage), adding one item Brodie omits — Jesus’s blessing of the children. Similarly, a psychobiography of Joseph Smith claims the source of Alma’s conversion narrative is Acts: of Mosiah’s sons and Alma, the writer asserts that “their conversion story is patterned after that of Paul in Acts 9:1–31.”⁵ Such reductive readings are common. B. H. Roberts was already responding to similar claims in 1909 when one John Hyde (writing in 1857) stated that among other plagiarisms, Alma’s conversion story imitates Paul’s.⁶ More recently Susan Curtis also said that among other biblical narratives, Smith borrowed Alma’s conversion from Paul’s.⁷

Much has been published on issues concerning the difference between ancient historical narrative and modern historical writing, research entirely ignored by these writers who blithely and simplistically assert meaning without citing a single source. In this article I take up
what Brodie, Ham, Curtis, and Vogel (among others) assert is Smith’s theft of Paul’s Damascus-road narrative.

Conversion is curious and unpredictable. Often thought a one-way street from atheism to theistic belief or trading one religious tradition for another, conversion narratives need to be treated as a literary genre with different standards of judgment than one might find in modern historical treatments (1) by historians who assert they do scientific history free of all literary influence and (2) by historical writers who don’t recognize that narratives from antiquity can’t merely be assimilated to the expectations of modernity without losing tremendous and vital aspects of what gives antique stories their character and quality. But in antiquity, as in modernity, “traffic went the other way as well. Jews became Pagans, like the assimilationists in Alexandria who started out in the front seat at the synagogue, moved back to the last seat, and finally ended up singing in the Pagan religious processions on the street outside.” Conversion narratives have a complex cartography of starting and ending points. Front seat, back bench, to the streets outside: how one figures conversion impacts how one tells stories about conversion. A hymn shouted from the street procession carries a different timbre from one sung in the front pew. The stories of Alma’s, Paul’s, and Augustine’s conversions require historical and diegetic context neither researched nor explored by the Brodie school as catechists to the religion of modernity, most of whom traveled the route from front pew to back pew to the parades in the streets.

History of the Separation of History and Literature

Only in the past century and a half have moderns insisted that literature and history shouldn’t substantially coincide. From antiquity to the 1850s, history and literature were overlapping genres. They both shared a common trunk — rhetoric — and figurative language and literary style were valued in both literary forms. In the modern period, when humanists and social scientists saw the power of natural science to predict and control, they aspired to similar effect. Imitating the sciences and influenced by Enlightenment rationality, historians severed the discipline’s literary connections to pursue scientific status. This scientific history fashion began in the early 1800s and lasted for well over a century. The apex occurred when Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) articulated a historical method the discipline adopted (one most historians still espouse but whose theoretical foundation has been hollowed out),
a methodology based on source criticism, empiricism, and archival research.

Influenced by Rankean modernity (Leopold von Ranke laid the foundation for modern history with its emphasis on source criticism, repeatable scientific method, and objectivity that is still the dominant conceptual framework of the historical profession today — even if what that profession learned from Ranke wasn’t exactly what he taught or wrote), historians aspired to write in the plain style; to avoid metaphors because they distort the world as it really is; to get to the brute facts of the past, free of all embellishment and figuration; and to avoid adding imagination to the historical record. In the best-known modern definition of history, Johan Huizinga articulated this putative difference between literature and fiction: “The sharp distinction between history and literature lies in the fact that the former is almost entirely lacking in that element of play which underlies literature from beginning to end.” Although wrong when one considers the element of interpretive play available to the historian and the metaphorical templates historians inevitably impose on their histories, this definition has an element of adequacy because some imaginative play with sources and events is available to the novelist but not the historian. Bound up too tightly with this historical view is the idea that the presence of any literary motif undermines the account’s historicity, because (presumably) history is a linear process rather than a repetitive series of events and any recurrent motif must come from the later example plagiarizing the earlier.

The literature/history chasm is commonly assumed rather than argued. Tal Ilan (an Israeli historian of women in the history of rabbinic Judaism, among related topics), at least, justifies why literary themes might undermine historicity in rabbinic stories involving women characters, applying standard historical judgment to these stories: the later a story is (removed from the events described), the less likely it is to be historically accurate. The closer geographically to the place of origin, the more likely it is to pass historicity standards. Ilan doesn’t naïvely believe in automatic disqualification by literary motif, but its presence raises questions. Literary motifs are themes that appear in more than one source: “Within rabbinic literature discovery of a recurring literary motif can undermine the historicity of a narrative. When a literary framework is carried over from one composition to another, and in the process the anonymous characters of the motif acquire names and biographies of real people, this does not make the story more historically sound. Thus, one must be constantly on the lookout for the common literary
motif when dealing with a source that claims to be telling a seemingly historical event.”

This idea dominates the historical discipline to the extent that it is often assumed as self-evident.

**A Sharp Distinction between Literature and History in Biblical Criticism**

Robin Lane Fox is a historian of antiquity presenting the dominant view of history’s relationship to literature. “If we read biblical narrative as a story, we abandon its historical truth. If we read it as literature, we will often find literary art in it, but this art takes us further from truth which corresponds to fact: the fourth Gospel is an author’s strong interpretation, not an exact memoir.” For Fox, John’s gospel contains artistic and narrative elements that edge out historical truth: “If we allow this degree of art and shaping, the results of literary study are already pushing historical truth to one side.”

The allusiveness in biblical narrative has caused those influenced by this positivistic idea to reject biblical narrative’s historicity. The gospel infancy narratives, Jesus’s parables, and the passion are filled with references to Old Testament passages.

Not surprisingly, much of the material in these sections has repeatedly been equated with midrash, and the question has been raised whether the Old Testament passages might not have given birth to the narratives and teachings associated with them. In other words, the gospel writers would not be recording actual historical events but imaginatively involving Jesus in fictitious narratives and teachings inspired by Old Testament texts.

Examples of such midrashic touches would be to invent a story about Jesus’s birth at Bethlehem because of a biblical passage (Micah 5:2) or Jesus’s betrayal for 30 silver pieces concocted because of Zechariah 11:12–13.

The gospels have different last words for Jesus according to another commentator: “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me” (Matthew and Mark), “Father into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke), and “It is accomplished” (John), each alluding to Old Testament passages. Literary critic Randel Helms concludes that these utterances are fictional. “Each narrative implicitly argues that the others are fictional. In this case at least, it is inappropriate to ask of the Gospels what ‘actually’ happened; they may pretend to be telling us, but the effort remains a pretense,
a fiction.”14 This positivistic premise that literary features undermine historicity is a potent presupposition built into the modern project. It is also wrong.

What Christians call typology (type scenes, archetypes or any other word whose etymology traces to the Greek tupos) is to Helms fictionalizing. “Such a view of the Old Testament allowed it to supply the basis for entire scenes in the fictively historical books of the New.”15 The gospel writers “rummaged” through Old Testament narrative to rework stories as Christian prefigurations: the prophet who heals King Jeroboam’s hand (1 Kings 13:4–6) becomes Jesus’s Sabbath healing of a withered hand (Matthew 12:10–13).16 Jesus’s calming the sea is based on the book of Jonah, “a literary fiction built from a supposed prefigurement” with Jonah’s sailors exhibiting great fear and the apostles also after witnessing the calm water.17 Helms has Luke reading widely in ancient literature, purloining Paul’s conversion from Euripides’s The Bacchae.18 Similarly, New Testament scholar John Darr falls into this positivistic habit, first criticizing researchers who refer to Luke’s literary quality applying “highly questionable assumptions about Luke-Acts’ historicity (it is more ‘historical’ than the other gospels and thus less likely to indulge in poetic allusion).”19 Later in the same chapter, Darr endorses this binary opposition between poetics and historicity.20

Similarly, E. P. Sanders, a major historian in the historical Jesus quest, asserts that typological New Testament textuality causes problems because although Jesus doubtless acted in ways consonant with Old Testament passages, the gospel writers go beyond those real-life actions to invent other parallels. The birth narratives are particularly vulnerable to this charge.21 The typological connection between New and Old Testament events undermines the former’s historicity. All gospel accounts aren’t necessarily fabricated because, doubtless, Jesus thought his actions fulfilled biblical passages: “This does not mean that every single passage in the gospels that has a reminiscence or echo of Hebrew scripture really took place.”22 Even parallels within the gospels might reflect “literary art” rather than historical reality.23

I don’t want to pile on with excessive examples, but a few more will demonstrate the ubiquity of this positivistic assertion. Biblical critic Raymond Brown notes the similarities between the infancy narratives and Moses’s birth story,24 parallels between Pharaoh and Herod25 and between Herod and King Balak,26 Old Testament annunciation type scenes and those to Mary and Elizabeth,27 and the slaughter of the innocents and the Babylonian exile.28 Brown’s conclusion: “Such a perfect
adherence to literary form raises a question about the historicity of the stereotyped features in the Lucan story.”

Similar assumptions have been applied to Old Testament narrative, questioning its historicity. The loudest part of this debate goes under the umbrella of the minimalist/maximalist schools. Minimalists have disparaged biblical historical claims, asserting that literary features diminish historical reliability. The same approaches applied to Abraham and Moses, David and Jeremiah, are now being applied to the gospels. New Testament stories, like biblical narratives about David and Daniel, repeat folk tale and literary patterns. “A historical Jesus is a hypothetical derivative of scholarship. It is no more a fact than is an equally hypothetical historical Moses or David.” The writer, according to this argument, had no historical intentions but literary, allegorical, theological, and mythic goals. Consequently, “there is significant need, not to speak of warrant, to doubt the historicity of its figures to the extent that such figures owe their substance to such literature.” Biblical figures including Jesus are literary creations, which presumably precludes their also being historical.

This false dichotomy between literature and history that Huizinga posited “is rightly rejected by most scholars of ancient texts, and by many who study modern historical writing as well.” Definitions stressing the opposition between history and literature, claiming scientific status, or appealing to authorial intention are all difficult to defend. Recent decades have reversed historiographical assumptions regarding the history and literature relationship. Influenced by thinkers such as Hayden White and Jacques Derrida, all writing is now seen as literary, history writing included. An important critic of this sharp separation has been Robert Alter: he notes that history and literature are overlapping categories. “What we need to remind ourselves, as several contemporary theorists of historiography have proposed, is that those two categories are not mutually exclusive oppositions.” Alter argues that many historians confuse history and the history-like. Relying on “modern biblical scholarship rooted in a nineteenth-century positivist mindset,” these historians hold a simplistic concept of truth and fiction. This goes for all literary features said to undermine historicity:

As we attempt to identify symbols in John’s Gospel, we will bear in mind that something can be both symbolic and historical. We can discern symbolic significance in images, events, or persons without undercutting their claims to historicity, and we can recognize that certain images, events,
and people are historical without diminishing their symbolic value.  

Critics of the Alma story haven’t recognized that Paul’s Damascus-road experience belongs to a literary genre, the Old Testament prophetic commissioning type scene. Consequently, to call both stories fictional is to accept an intellectually and historically undermined theory of textual relationship.

That Luke uses Hebraic literary forms does not entail the narrative’s fictionality, for it is entirely possible for quite accurate historical materials to be set down in different specific literary forms. Just as a given writer’s individual, characteristic style need not mutilate the truth he intends to describe, so also the common literary style of a given historical period or a specific circle of writers need not produce a distortion of historical facts. What we have in fixed literary forms is the common literary style of a given historical period.

The historical discipline’s center of gravity coalesces around an uncritical view that literary elements undermine historical accuracy; philosophically sophisticated and theoretically informed historians are aware that the distinct separation between history and literature can no longer be maintained, but few are the historical theorists compared to practitioners who take an earlier generation’s philosophy of history for granted.

The Hard Distinction between Literature and History in Book of Mormon Criticism

Again, Brodie sees Book of Mormon repetitions as proof of fiction: for Brodie, “Alma was converted after the exact fashion of St. Paul.” Some examination of Alma’s conversion and Paul’s Damascus-road story is in order: “Other apparent biblical allusions in the Book of Mormon include Alma’s conversion in a similar fashion to Paul’s.” Other Book of Mormon critics have asserted that the historical and literary have no communion, because, presumably, historical representations are free of literary and rhetorical structuring.

In the case of claims about chiastic structuring of entire books, we must ask if the historical sequence of events produced the chiasm or if the chiasm arranged the historical episodes. Because Book of Mormon apologists say that chiasmus is an
intentional literary device, they must conclude that chiasmus can arrange historical episodes. At a minimum this means that some historical details of the Lehite story may not have occurred in the order presented in the narrative. Apologists must also allow for the possibility that some historical incidents never actually happened but were fictions imposed on the text to complete a chiastic structure designed to convey a moralistic or theological teaching.

Literary devices are antithetical to historical writing according to this positivistic historical theory. “Everything we know about the Jaredite ruler bears an analogue to the corrupt Nephite king. These mirrorings suggest that one narrative may depend on the other, and that only one, or perhaps neither, represents a factual account of historical events.”

Similarly, if two Book of Mormon characters are typologically figured, this similarity undermines historical claims.

Still, allowing for a literary device, questions regarding historicity remain since it is possible that Noah and Riplakish were actually monogamists but were portrayed as polygamists to accentuate their debauchery. If Noah and Riplakish existed ancienly, the historicity of every detail of their biographical sketches is nonetheless uncertain.

This view asserting a definitive boundary between history and literature is positivistic; another critic asserts that because the exodus motif is repeated in the Book of Mormon, the typology undermines confidence that historical events and people are being described: “It is remarkable that many of the Nephite ideas and events occur at the same point in the chronology and at similar places as in the Israelite wilderness experience. These twenty shared motifs suggest dependency on the Bible exodus story.” Though widely shared by historians who don’t follow the contemporary debate about history and literature (narrative theory is where historians, philosophers, literary critics, and others gather to focus on what all narratives — historical and fictional — have in common), support for this positivistic historiographical position has been increasingly attenuated recently.

The Crumbling Boundaries between History and Literature

Since modern historians attempted to make their discipline scientific, historical narrative has fallen under suspicion. Rather than math or statistics, measurements or computerized data, geological strata or
biological specimens, historians are stuck with stories. Historical narratives too much resemble fiction to satisfy those with scientific aspirations. “Fictionality is a counter-concept of objectivity in the semantic context of a positivistic epistemology.” Fictionality is opposed to the objectivity of facts empirically verifiable, according to this view. “Fictionality thus marks the ontological and epistemological status of those elements in historical knowledge and historiography which don’t share the pure factuality of the information from the sources. This term makes sense under the unquestioned presupposition of a positivistic epistemology.”

Historians fled from narrative between the 1880s and the 1970s. Now that history has undergone a new literary baptism, no longer can the positivistic distinction between historical factuality and fictionality be assumed. Like economics, sociology, and political science among the social sciences, history attempted to abandon story for nomological science. “Positivist attacks on the narrative mode, it seems, have left scars on its epistemic reputation that have never fully healed.”

The positivistic conception of narrative’s noncognitive status has been discarded as researchers in philosophy, literary criticism, history, and other disciplines have recognized the ubiquity of story. But positivists still dismiss storytelling as a mode that doesn’t deliver knowledge. If the historian imposes narrative structure on history instead of finding the pattern in the past, facts, or archive, this view undermines the representational status of narrative; other poetic devices (figurative language) are suspect to such historians. But conceding that history is constructed by historians, it doesn’t follow that the interpretation is untrue. History can be both figural and literal at the same time, simultaneously historical and literary.

The traditional argument would be to differentiate between factual and fictional narrations. Historical narration is usually defined as dealing only with facts and not with fictions. This differentiation is very problematical, and finally not convincing, because the all-important sense of a history lies beyond the distinction between fiction and fact. In fact it is absolutely misleading — and arises from a good deal of hidden and suppressed positivism — to call everything in historiography fiction which is not a fact in the sense of a hard datum.
Responding to claims that biblical literary features negate historical reference, Hoffmeier argues that “using a literary or structural framework that includes such features as chiasm and doublets need not militate against the historicity of the narratives.” The problem is not with Hebraic narrative but with positivistic notions about history.

The tendency, in contemporary English biblical studies, is to consider literary-critical and historical aspects of theological reflection as sharply distinct and to concentrate on the latter to the neglect of the former. This tendency derives from a period when positivistic conceptions of historical understanding went hand-in-hand with non-cognitive accounts of literary and poetic statement (which carried the implication that the fruit of literary-critical reflection on the biblical narratives could only be “subjective” in character). But if it has sometimes been assumed (in theology and elsewhere) that there is a “natural tension between the historian and the literary critic,” there is no timeless validity to this assumption.

To assert lack of historicity because a text has literary features is to be 50 years outdated in the philosophy of the disciplines. Continental philosophy, Anglo-American philosophy, and every landmass’s and ocean’s literary criticism assert that the clear-cut distinction between “empirical narratives” and literary narratives is obsolete. The fossilized position desired to uncover the empirical facts underlying the historical story. “For positivism, the task of history is to uncover the facts which are, as it were, buried in documents, just like, as Leibniz would have said, the statue of Hercules was lying dormant in the veins of marble. Against the positivist conception of the historical fact, more recent epistemology emphasizes the ‘imaginative reconstruction’ which characterizes the work of the historian.”

This narrative transformation profoundly impacts biblical readings. For example, the gospel of “Mark is a self-consciously crafted narrative, a fiction, resulting from literary imagination, not photographic recall. To say it is a fiction does not necessarily mean that it has no connection with events in history; rather, describing Mark as fiction serves to underscore the selection, construction, and choice behind the story it tells.” Selection, construction, and choice are present in all narrative. Literary features in narrative indicate nothing about fictive or historical status, because historical and literary narratives share those elements indifferently.
Most theorists distinguish between the fictive and fictional. All narratives (especially histories) are fictive — that is, fashioned to serve specific purposes as the etymology of “fictive” indicates — but such shaping doesn’t make them fictional (that is, not about actual events and people). Mark is the specific example here, but the same is true of all biblical narrative:

Although understanding Mark to be fiction and to develop its own coherence and unity does not mean that what is related in the story bears no relationship whatsoever to the events of the external world, it does mean that the nature of that relationship is complex and difficult to ascertain. Even in modern views of history writing as a factual record of “what really happened,” the constraints of narrative form on historiography blur the distinction between history and fiction. The simultaneous convergence of events, actions, characters, and the constant bombardment of visual, aural, and vocal stimuli that all together constitute every moment of real life simply cannot be represented by linear narrative with its ordered sequence and grammatical requirements. Thus, even modern, scientific history is but a highly selective distillation of “what really happened.” It is an interpretation of an event. Ancient historiography, particularly Hellenistic historiography, never pretended to be anything other than an interpretation. Speeches, characters, and even whole incidents could be created by the Hellenistic historian, and events for which records or sources existed were often thoroughly embellished. The aim of ancient history writing was rarely to produce an accurate chronicle or record; rather, its purposes were moral edification, apologetics, glorification of certain families, and mainly entertainment. Indeed, if one were to assume that the Gospel of Mark belonged to the genre of Hellenistic historiography, one would still be involved in the dynamics of fiction.53

Awareness of history’s fictive status has been excruciatingly slow to filter into Mormon studies. Consequently, older ideas still dominate.

**Literary/Historical Readings of Hebraic Narrative**

Hebraic narrative operates under different assumptions than does modern historiography. Moderns find repetition faulty, a narrative
mishap. They use words such as *fictional, plagiarized, redundant,* or *copied* to make sense of repeated motifs. Ancients viewed repetitions as more real than mundane life because these recurrences connected later events to foundational occurrences. “In the Bible, however, the matrix for allusion is often a sense of absolute historical continuity and recurrence, or an assumption that earlier events and figures are timeless ideological models by which all that follows can be measured. Since many of the biblical writers saw history as a pattern of cyclical repetition of events, there are abundant instances of this first category of allusion.”

The Bible repeats exoduses under Joshua, the judges, Ezra and Nehemiah, and many others because God’s saving acts are paradigmatic for later Israelites. Similar insights have come from the literary side of biblical studies:

I will examine the narrators’ use of covert allusions to other narratives known to them and to their audience; specifically, instances where the biblical narrator shaped a character, or his or her actions, as the antithesis of a character in another narrative and that character’s actions. The new creation awakens in the reader undeniable associations to the source-story; the relationship between the new narrative and its source is like that between an image and its mirrored reflection: the reflection inverts the storyline of the original narrative. Thus, the discerning reader, considering the implicit relation between the two narratives — the original and its reflection — and observing how the new character behaves contrary to the character upon which he or she is modeled, will evaluate the new hero in light of the model, the comparison created between the two stories sheds new light on the source story and its protagonist.

I call these ‘inverted’ stories reflection stories. Metcalfe, Brodie, and others assert such reflection stories indicate Book of Mormon fictionality. Grant Hardy, a literary aficionado/historian not given to positivism, provides an entire chapter (chapter 6) on such “parallel narratives” in the Book of Mormon. Such recognition places high demands on biblical, New Testament, and Book of Mormon readers:

In contrast to what we have been taught by biblical scholars in the past who isolated literary units and analyzed them with no interest in their canonical content, one realizes that...
the biblical narrators did not function in a cultural-literary vacuum but constructed their stories in dialogue with existing compositions known to their audience. The narrators propound a riddle to their readers, from whom they expect a high level of sophistication — a reader who absorbs the links and discerns the relationships between stories and their sources and who will take note of the contrasts between protagonists of the stories. The biblical narrator expects readers to become active partners, leaving to them the job of evaluating characters but equipping them with an important (though covert) tool: the reflection story. I invite all students of the Bible to place the phenomenon of reflection stories on their agendas.57

These parallel narratives should also be underscored for any Book of Mormon reader. Reading under modern assumptions that fictive qualities preclude historiographical status is fallacious: “Let me emphasize that the fictional quality of the struggle between God and the nation does not preclude the historicity of the text . . . In the Bible, history and literature go hand in hand, more explicitly than in modern historiography,”58 and, even so, in modern historical narrative. What happens in biblical narrative happens also in Book of Mormon narrative.

Asserting that Alma’s conversion is copied from Paul’s is to mistake both literary dependence and historicity. Alma’s call has a sophisticated intertextual relationship to biblical prophetic commissioning stories (of which Paul’s is merely one example), a relationship much more complicated than a positivistic textual theory permits.

Blake Ostler has addressed this commissioning story genre, comparing Lehi’s throne theophany and prophetic commission narrative to biblical and pseudepigraphal stories.59 John Welch also made a case connecting Lehi’s commission narrative to Hebraic models.60 The Book of Mormon already draws upon biblical models of prophetic activity before and after the Alma story. Form criticism (Ostler’s essay is specifically labeled an exercise in form criticism: the study of a story in terms of adherence to and deviation from a literary genre) doesn’t imply that a narrative is either historical or nonhistorical: “To declare that a particular passage has a particular literary form says nothing about its historicity.”61 Ignoring this well-established principle is perilous.

Ostler notes two call narrative versions: one where a dialogue ensues between the newly called prophet and the Lord (or a representative) and the throne-theophany variety where God is revealed before the commission
is extended. Black notes the oldest of the prophet commission type scenes: Micaiah’s throne theophany in 1 Kings 22:19–22. Isaiah’s throne theophany in chapter 6 shows some departures from the Gattung (German for “form,” in this case “literary form or genre”) with Ezekiel and Jeremiah developing the pattern still differently. “Among all these variables, however, two features of the tradition seem to be constant, the throne-vision and the divine word of calling and commission.” Lehi’s vision is the throne-theophany variant and Alma’s the narrative form. Both versions were “eventually absorbed into the genre ‘apocalypse,’” which explains so many pseudepigraphal examples. Using Old Testament examples (Moses, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Micaiah ben Imlah, Jeremiah), Ostler details elements of the prophetic commission:

1. Historical introduction: the details of the commission and confrontation are laid out.
2. Divine confrontation: either the Lord or an angel appears to extend the commission.
3. Reaction: the recipient often collapses or expresses inadequacy.
4. Throne-theophany: the prophet sees God on His throne or witnesses a divine council.
5. Commission: the prophet is assigned a task.
6. Protest: the prophet proclaims unworthiness or inability.
7. Reassurance: God assures the prophet support.
8. Conclusion: the prophet takes up his assignment.

A common element Ostler omits is the sign. Gideon asks for a sign (the fleece narrative), and Moses sees the burning bush. The sign in Alma’s commissioning narrative is his being struck dumb and immobile. These commissioning stories, like all biblical type scenes, display both uniformity and innovation. They don’t adhere mechanically to a genre but modify the form to local needs. Additionally, the reader must read with proper assumptions. Assuming a literary pattern negates historicity is problematical. “One can no more distinguish fictional story from factual history on the basis of formal characteristics than one can distinguish nonreferential from referential paintings on the basis of brush strokes.” Regardless of the story’s origin dates, “Understanding conversion was a hermeneutic project in the twelfth century, as it is today.” Approaching the text with presuppositions too modern results in inadequate interpretations.
Paul’s Commissioning Type Scene

If textual similarity means plagiarism, then Paul’s prophetic commission story is itself already plagiarized. Paul’s conversion story isn’t novel, for “Luke’s accounts of Paul’s conversion are deliberately patterned on Hebrew prophecy,” including commissioning stories of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. The apocalyptic form was absorbed into Christianity eventually and influenced the Revelation and Paul’s commission. These call type scenes function as “vindication and legitimization of the prophet in his office.” One biblical scholar notes 27 Old Testament examples of commission type scenes, but the New Testament contains 37. Hedrick disagrees with Munck about some elements in Paul’s call scene. They agree, though, that the Paul narrative adheres to the prophetic commissioning formula. “A simpler and more reasonable explanation is that Luke was responsible for stylizing the narratives in Acts along the lines of the OT call narratives.” The version in Acts 26:16–17 makes adherence to Old Testament prophetic call narratives clear by alluding to language from other commission stories: Ezekiel 2:1, Jeremiah 1:8, Jeremiah 1:7, and Ezekiel 2:3 (which are all patterned on Moses’s prophetic call story). This Pauline conversion story is so studded with biblical allusions that any adequate reading would concede its intentional allusive quality. Moses’s call is the gold standard for such narratives, but the calls of Gideon, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micaiah, and Deutero-Isaiah also fit the pattern. Invoking the pattern claims an ancient authority for a new prophet. “The employment of the literary form in no way negates the reality of the call encounter itself, but underscores the relevance of this form for the public affirmation of the claims which the prophet is making as Yahweh’s spokesman.”

Paul’s story (or Alma’s) fits the cultural background of the ancient world, so simplistic and reductive readings that assume its modern provenance should minimally consider the narrative’s depth and complexity. For example, Second Maccabees contains the story of Heliodorus, a better parallel to Alma’s narrative than Paul’s, showing a rebel against God and whose conversion is initiated by the people’s prayers led by the high priest, resulting in the recipient’s being struck dumb and prostrate until supplication revives him from death’s threshold. Heliodorus, commanded by the Seleucid king, journeys to Jerusalem to confiscate temple treasury. The high priest, temple priests, and people pray for divine intervention. At the temple, two divine beings “remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed” (2 Maccabees 3:26, RSV) and a mounted warrior accost the temple defiler, he collapses, and
he is carted away on a stretcher — blind, prostrate, and dumb. Fearing the king’s retribution, the high priest and the people intercede, praying and offering sacrifice for recovery. Heliodorus recovers after being warned again by the messengers, whereupon he sacrifices to God, testifying “to all men of the deeds of the supreme God, which he had seen with his own eyes” (2 Macabees 3:36 RSV). The similarities between Paul’s experience, Heliodorus’s encounter, and other Hellenistic parallels are a commonplace of Pauline scholarship.\(^{81}\) That cluster of commissioning narratives should include Alma’s.

Scholar of early Christianity Paula Fredriksen doubts *conversion* is the right word for Paul’s sidestep into Christianity; it implies a shift between belief systems. But Paul’s change was between two varieties of Jewish belief.\(^{82}\) *Call* is a better word. We might casually refer to Paul’s or Alma’s conversion, but any such reference should mean a prophetic call which foregrounds the biblical roots of the *Gattung*. For Paul and Alma, the change is dramatic (from fighting the church to advocating for it).

The prophetic commission has common elements. In Table 1 I note the eight elements biblical scholarship usually lists as part of the form. The Lehi and Paul stories closely follow the literary form. The two versions of Alma’s prophetic commission adhere faithfully to the pattern also, as shown in Table 2.\(^{83}\)

The most obvious clue to a prophetic commission type scene occurs when Alma quotes from Lehi’s throne theophany: “Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22). Even with the omission of this element in the first iteration (Mosiah 27:11–17). This reference connects the two most prominent call narratives to each other and to the biblical tradition by foregrounding the divine council.

Considering Old Testament call narratives, historian of religion and biblical scholar István Czachesz says of Acts 9 that “it is not difficult to isolate most of the above-mentioned components there. Scholars agree that *Acts* 9 presents us with a commission narrative that shows remarkable similarities to the commission of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures.”\(^{84}\) Paul’s narrative varies in detail from other commissioning stories,\(^{85}\) adding innovative touches such as the role of Ananias and multiple visions. But none rotely repeats the tradition.

Each Lukan narrative differs based on the author’s intent. In Acts 9, Luke presents the “institutional” commissioning version following Jewish traditions of Saul’s commissioning as Israel’s first king
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Elements of prophetic commissioning.</th>
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<td><strong>The Centuries</strong></td>
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Table 2. Elements of Alma’s prophetic commission.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Divine Confrontation</th>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>God Sitting on Throne</th>
<th>Protest</th>
<th>Reassurance</th>
<th>Rejection and Rejection by People</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alma and Sons of Mosiah rebel (verses 8–11)</td>
<td>Angel descends in cloud &amp; earth shakes (11)</td>
<td>All fall to the earth (7)</td>
<td>Like Lehi, Alma sees the angel who delivers God’s message (15)</td>
<td>Alma teaches the people (32)</td>
<td>Alma had rejected the redeemer and traditions of the fathers (30)</td>
<td>Alma and his cohort preach through tribulation and persecution (32)</td>
<td>Alma had been supported in trials, troubles, afflictions, bonds, and prison (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma seeks to destroy the church (6)</td>
<td>Angels speak with thunder and earth trembles (7)</td>
<td>All fall to the earth (12)</td>
<td>Like Lehi, Alma sees God on His throne (22)</td>
<td>Alma sees the angel who delivers God’s message (15)</td>
<td>Alma labors without ceasing to preach the word (24)</td>
<td>Alma remembers his sins and iniquities (13)</td>
<td>Alma has been supported in trials, troubles, afflictions, bonds, and prison (27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acts 22 and 26 portray the event differently, relying on different Jewish traditions. Acts 22 shows Paul as heir to Isaiah and Jeremiah, prophets in conflict with their own people. Acts 26, narrating Paul’s apology before Agrippa and Festus, depicts Paul as a wandering philosopher divinely commissioned. Commissioning stories written by the same author vary according to rhetorical purpose and audience.

Galatians contains Paul’s own commission account, independent of Lukan versions. Galatians 1:12–16 alludes to Old Testament prophetic call narratives, paralleling his own calling. He was called an apostle before birth, referring to Isaiah 49:1 and Jeremiah 1:5, where the prophets were called from the womb. “Thus in Galatians Paul describes his experience in terms of a prophetic call similar to that of Isaiah and Jeremiah. He felt hand-picked by God after the prophetic model to take the message of God and Christ to the Gentiles.” This calling isn’t a conversion, according to Krister Stendahl, because that wording implies a change of religious orientation. Instead, Paul shifted from one view of Torah and Israel’s chosenness to a different orientation within Judaism.

Johannes Munck, professor of early Christianity, notes not only the allusion to Paul’s calling from the womb, but also includes Sampson’s commission, called as a Nazarite from the womb (Judges 16:17).

When Paul applies these biblical expressions to his own call, he must be thinking, not only that he thereby illustrates God’s call to him personally, but that that call is the same as it was in the case of Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah, a renewal of God’s will for the salvation of the Gentiles, giving him a place in the history of salvation in line with those Old Testament figures.

Not only does the Galatians passage allude to Old Testament callings, but the three accounts in Acts do also. Acts 22 differs from the better-known story in Acts 9. Acts 22:16–18 relates Paul’s mission to turn the Gentiles from “darkness to light” and is “virtually a direct reference to Ezekiel 1:28” and Ezekiel’s commission continued in 2:1, 3. The language also invokes prophetic missions from Jeremiah and Isaiah. In Acts 26, in front of Agrippa — a reputed Roman authority on all things Jewish — Paul’s speech is “an elaborate tissue of OT quotations: Old Testament prophecies find their fulfillment in Paul’s call to the Gentile mission.”

A common feature in OT prophetic commissioning type scenes is some prophetic inadequacy. For Paul, in Galatians 1:13, the obstacle is Paul’s persecution of Christians. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel
also have weaknesses. Of all the prophetic commissions alluded to in Galatians, Isaiah 49:1, 5 is most relevant and foremost on Paul’s mind. “Paul did not understand his commission in terms of any particular prophet. He describes his call in terms and motifs that are analogous to the call of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Servant of the Lord. … It comes as no surprise that Isa 49 holds the dominate place” among these prophetic calls. Similarly, Alma’s weakness is his former enmity toward God and his inherited religious tradition: “I rejected my Redeemer, and denied that which had been spoken of by our fathers” (Mosiah 27:30), “yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments” (Alma 36:13).

New Testament scholar Fernando Méndez-Moratalla cites a consistent pattern of Lukan conversion stories, what he calls a “paradigm of conversion” making up “the oldest Christian narrative style.” The paradigm includes the following: God takes the initiative to save the world (especially the poor and outcast) through the Son, society’s marginalized are welcomed despite their rejection by the rich and powerful, all need salvation because even the religious establishment and wealthy are sinners, the sinners repent and turn to God (donating their worldly goods to help the poor), the repentant receive forgiveness and are welcomed to messianic feasts where status reversal occurs, the marginalized being honored. This conversion paradigm then becomes normative for the tradition following Luke so Paul’s story models readerly expectations of radical transformations: “The prominence that the stories on the conversion of Paul have received has overshadowed other similar accounts to the point that Paul’s experience has become normative for all conversions, and expressions such as ‘Damascus road experience’ have become tantamount to any conversion-like experience, not only in the religious sense.” Ultimately Paul’s narrative overwhelms our own, for “Paul was destined to become the prototypical convert in the imagination of western Christianity.” In the Western tradition this narrative exemplifies radical change, so it establishes the expectations for other notable conversions by Augustine and Luther.

Paul’s experience became a template by which later Christians understood their own conversions; that typicality doesn’t make conversions fictional. “Like Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, upon which it is demonstrably modeled, Augustine’s above conversion scene has become one of the principal, well-worn paradigms of Western Christianity.” Lewis Rambo uses that word paradigm to generalize about the impact of Augustine’s story on later generations: “Conversions,
especially within the Christian tradition, typically generate stories of that process which may then stimulate conversion in others. These stories as they are retold orally and composed as autobiographies become the paradigms by which people interpret their own lives.” Rambo cites convert examples with lives transformed from reading Augustine’s *Confessions*. But Augustine’s conversion type-scene is already belated: “The tradition of conversion stories is derived, at least in part, from the Book of Acts in the New Testament. The conversions of Paul, Cornelius, the Philippian jailer, and Lydia point to the personal impact of religious change. Every story of conversion calls for a conversion, confirms the validity of conversion, and shapes a person’s experience of conversion.”

Scholars have noted the patterns among conversion narratives, positing six motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectational, revivalist, and coercive. The “*mystical* conversion is considered by some to be the prototypical conversion, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus. Mystical conversion is generally a sudden and traumatic burst of insight, induced by visions, voices or other paranormal experiences.”

Paul and Augustine are the two great exemplars in the Christian tradition — prototypes — of dramatic changes wrought by conversion. Alma’s name ought to be added to this list.

**Augustine’s Conversion**

Augustine’s conversion story exemplifies how literary features are assumed to contradict historicity when alien, modern, positivistic assumptions are employed.

Leo Ferrari tells his own stereotyped story of encounters with Augustine’s conversion account: how he proved “the essentially fictional character of his famous conversion scene” in the *Confessions*. Positivistic indicators are abundant in Ferrari’s claims. Ferrari found a “scientific” method to explore Augustine’s compositions, compiling a concordance and using computers to analyze the saint’s words, leading to “irrefutable proof of the fictional nature” of Augustine’s conversion narrative, “born of the fertile imagination and ingenuity of the then forty-three-year-old Augustine.” With computer and concordance, plotting references in Augustine’s writings to a specific timeline, Ferrari claims to have “scientifically demonstrated for the very first time in history [that the conversion scene was] obviously quite fundamentally fictional in nature.” Rather than being historical, Leo Ferrari asserts the *Confessions* conversion is a dramatic event that lacks historicity, for “we must bear in mind that Augustine saw no contradiction between
truthful history and figurative expression. Indeed, Augustine explicitly
defends the use of figures in spiritual writings, including even the Bible
itself.”¹⁰⁷ I side with Augustine on this one; I see no inherent contradiction
between historical truth and literary expression. Ferrari is burdened
with dated positivistic ideas about history and figuration.

Ferrari believes his account is “scientific,” indisputable, proven,
empirical, certain. He rails against the research consensus that
perversely refuses to accept his argument. He imputes evil motives
to his opponents rather than accepting that they might begin from
nonpositivistic presuppositions. Ferrari dates the debate between
“historicists” and “fictionalists” to 1888 when two crucial studies were
published.¹⁰⁸ For Ferrari, a literary element such as a symbol (the fig
tree in Augustine’s story) fundamentally indicates fiction; for Ferrari,
historical narration is less truthful when incorporating literary elements
(citing a contrast between literary and empirical/verifiable controls that
positivists commonly invoke). “These various aspects of Augustine’s
notion of truth in the *Confessiones* bespeak an interiorized mystical
mode of truth far removed from the empirically verifiable kind called
for by the debate about the conversion scene.”¹⁰⁹ For Ferrari, Augustine’s
conversion scene can only be true in a symbolic way; it didn’t factually
happen in history. “We have seen how Augustine’s notion of truth in
the *Confessiones* transcends empirical verifiability, and so too the whole
question of the factuality or fictionality of the conversion scene.”¹¹⁰ For
one brand of positivist, an event must be empirically verifiable in order
to rise to the level of historical knowledge (epistemological questions
about how the past can be empirically verified are rarely addressed by
positivists). “It was shown [in a 1968 study] that the fig tree, by reason
of its widespread symbolism in Augustine’s milieu, had a very definite
relation, not merely to the conversion scene, but to the entire eighth
book of the *Confessiones*. This demonstrated yet again the extreme care
with which the entire description of the conversion scene had been
constructed, and so supported the claims of the fictionalists.”¹¹¹ Ferrari
has difficulty reconciling the Augustine who wrote tracts against lying
with the writer of the *Confessions* who “made up” the most crucial
event in his story. Ferrari uses the concept of fiction: the *Confessions*
is a dramatic staging of conversion with more influence if it follows
a well-known conversion type scene.¹¹² Augustine himself, according to
Ferrari, asserts that one can lie using figurative language and not really
falsify because of figuration. “Coming as it does, just before the writing
of the *Confessiones*, that manner of signification offers a convenient
starting point for the subject of truth and figurative language in regard to Augustine’s paulinizing of his conversion scene.”

According to Ferrari, Augustine took liberties with the historical record because “the demonstrable similarities of Augustine’s conversion to that of Paul would not only increase the impact upon his audience, but such similarities would leave no doubt about the origins of his own conversion and the spiritual tradition to which it belongs.” Similar positivistic claims about the Book of Mormon’s symbolic truth while lacking historicity are sometimes made within the Mormon tradition: Augustine’s “lively appreciation of figurative language becomes an important factor in interpreting the conversion scene as a metaphorical expression of an extraordinary transformation which has undoubtedly occurred in his life, if not in exactly the form described in the justly famous conversion scene.”

Similar to Ferrari, Fredriksen reconstructs Augustine’s conversion such that the church father’s own perspective changed radically between the event in 386 and his account of the event in the Confessions in 400 AD when Augustine needed to rehabilitate Paul’s image in the father’s polemic with the Manicheans. Augustine’s account of his conversion in the Confessions, in other words, is a theological reinterpretation of a past event, an attempt to render his past coherent to his present self. It is, in fact, a disguised description of where he stands in the present as much as an ostensible description of what occurred in the past. And he constructs his description from his reading of Acts 9 as well as from his new theological convictions.” Paul becomes a prototype of Augustine’s own passage from sinner to salvation, from rebel to believer. According to this textual theory, Augustine fictionalizes how own account of his own experience.

Ferrari summarizes the “Historicists” who believe Augustine’s conversion account is historical. But others, the “Fictionalists,” find Augustine’s accounts “embellished” minimally and “romanticized” maximally. When a literary feature emerges (the fig tree in Augustine’s story parallel to the fig tree in Nathaniel’s call — John 1:48), this signifies to Fictionalists literary midrashing going on, undermining historicity. Here two trends emerge in the relevant literatures: the positivistic one sees any literary theme, motif, or feature to indicate fiction. The other views life and history as inherently fictive experiences, always corresponding to motifs and themes with the literary as inescapably part of historical narrative.
Alma₂’s Commission and Theophanies

Alma₂’s commissioning narrative is complex; allusions to biblical passages are just one aspect of that complexity. Readings asserting larceny are too simplistic to explain this sophistication. To adequately treat Alma₂’s call account, the reader must begin earlier with the prophetic commissionings in the book of Mosiah.¹²⁰

Mormon, in editing the record, doesn’t discuss Abinadi’s prophetic commissioning; he just hints by having Abinadi say the following when he emerges publicly: “Behold, thus saith the Lord, and thus hath he commanded me, saying ...” (Mosiah 11:20), suggesting direct discourse between the Lord and the newly called prophet. When Abinadi reemerges (initially in disguise) after two years, he again pronounces his calling: “Thus has the Lord commanded me, saying — Abinadi, go and prophecy unto this my people” (Mosiah 12:1). We aren’t told the nature of the disguise,¹²¹ but veils and disguises are often part of these commissioning scenes. Abinadi’s two-year absence and disguise when he returns are forms of concealment symbolically invoking a traditional biblical formula. “In several scenes of prophetic commission or recommission, particular emphasis falls on the silence or concealment of the prophet,” which, “taking Moses and Elijah as models, I identify prophetic silence or concealment as part of a type scene of prophetic crisis and commission (or recommission).”¹²² Moses veils his face (Exodus 34:33–35), Elijah also disguises himself (1 Kings 19:13), and Ezekiel conceals his face (Ezekiel 12:6) by divine command. Abinadi’s story alludes to this tradition with the nexus of wicked king, confrontational prophet, and disguise (Mosiah 12:1), and his successor Alma₁ conceals himself (Mosiah 17:4) emphasizing the feature. The type scene is flexible, but “the prophet is concealed (or restrained) at a moment of danger and theophany” with four customary elements: (1) a crisis emerges because the people have broken God’s covenant, (2) resulting in a theophany, (3) followed by a prophetic commissioning, and (4) a “new divine plan is given and it takes effect immediately.”¹²³ This narrative form fits the Abinadi narrative.

The nature of Abinadi’s disguise isn’t specified, but in the biblical type scene, “most prophetic concealment or restraint is accomplished by a garment: a veil, mantle, cloak, or the cords of netting that bind Ezekiel.”¹²⁴ The root of the conflict for Moses and Elijah is the Israelites’ rebellion against God: Elijah flees to the desert after his confrontation with the priests of Baal, and Moses destroys the golden calf, and then derides the people for faithlessness.¹²⁵ Abinadi also speaks for God
that “this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage” (Mosiah 12:2), this because they violate the law of Moses (Mosiah 12:29). Like Elijah and Moses, Abinadi contemplates his own death (Mosiah 13:7–9).

Theophany is another element. Both Elijah and Moses visit the sacred mountain, sitting in the rock cleft for 40 days, talking with God, lamenting covenantal breakdown and wickedness. In each biblical theophany, concealment of the prophet’s face is required. After Noah and his priests declare Abinadi insane and attempt to seize him, the story invokes the Moses narrative: “Touch me not,” Abinadi charges, “for the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; and his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses’ did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (Mosiah 13:3, 5). Abinadi’s command not to touch him introduces a common theophanic theme: proximity to divine manifestations is dangerous. In the bloody bridegroom episode, God almost kills Moses, Aaron’s sons are killed in the tabernacle, and Uzzah is killed for steadying the ark. In the golden calf narrative, the “veil episode is part of the reordering of the community and the renewal of the covenant,” serving as a folk theophany. Other biblical passages point to the radiance emanating from God, God’s messenger, or God’s prophet. “Something of the divine radiance was imparted, then, to Moses’s face, which thereafter also shone.” The Israelites fear Moses and keep their distance. After the first shining face event followed by a veiled covering, the occurrence becomes routine with Moses always donning the veil after the theophany to commune with the people.

Abinadi’s face is by this time uncovered, but the radiance functions to reveal God and establish prophetic authority. Moses’s face shines in his official capacity as messenger. He only dons the veil when returning to private life, and the shining effects linger after the theophany. Abinadi’s initial disguise openly reveals the prophet’s shining face. “The status of the prophet mirrors the status of the covenant. Concealment reflects the majesty of a theophany and the tension between revelation and concealment in ancient Israelite religion.” The concealment theme emerges once more. Abinadi cites a suffering servant theme from Isaiah (Isaiah 53); this servant is “despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him” (Mosiah 14:3). While Abinadi’s face is revealed in splendor, the people hide their own faces from the covenantal mediator who bears their grief and carries their sorrows. Britt cites a similar passage from Micah 3:4–8 where the Lord hides his face from the people who
have embraced false prophets. As Abinadi and Paul associate their ministries with Moses’s, so do the people with Alma (especially in the manner of his death, Alma 45:19). The three are joined by stories of prophetic commissioning. Paul’s experience is patterned after Moses’s encounter with divinity. In 2 Corinthians 2–4 Paul frames his own calling in terms of Moses’s throne theophany and another prophetic commission in Isaiah 42 (especially 2 Corinthians 3:13–18). Abinadi’s Moses connection is powerfully made as Abinadi teaches the law of Moses, isolating the ten commandments (Mosiah 12:27–37, 13:11–35). The discourse’s first half focuses on the violated Mosaic law and the second half on the telos of that law, the atonement of Christ when “God himself should come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 13:34). The argument’s structure is reflected in the message. The focus shifts to Christ’s intercession: “Salvation doth not come by the law alone; and were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people” (Mosiah 13:28). The law isn’t mentioned again until Abinadi’s last words: “Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come — Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father, Amen” (Mosiah 16:14–15).

An additional element of the type scene is the prophetic commissioning or recommissioning. Often this (re)commissioning strengthens the prophet for the difficulties ahead and reaffirms the covenant. In the Book of Mormon story, the commissioning comes with the appointment of a successor to the prophet. “In almost every case there is a reference to the concealment or silence of the prophet.” Alma, one of the priests and Abinadi’s prophetic successor, fled the court and “went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi” (Mosiah 18:1), but he must flee further into the wilderness and hide from the king’s servants (Mosiah 18:5). The next element requires some physical journey as the covenant is reaffirmed. The prophet is again established as the covenantal mediator and “this sometimes involves the continuation of a physical journey: back to Israel, back into battle, or back to the work of mediating between God and people.” Alma, the new prophet of the renewed covenant, reaffirms that pact as he baptizes (Mosiah 13:8–10). But Noah discovers this defection, and the Alma group flees further (Mosiah 13:34). They settle in Helam where Alma refuses kingship. They appoint new teachers and keep the commandments, prospering in their work. The Lamanites enslave them,
and they eventually migrate to Zarahemla where the people reorder their political system.

Moses’s veil is a form of masking, and it is about establishing his authority. “The research suggests that Moses’s masking contains cultural and theological significance about God, leadership, law, and community.”\textsuperscript{135} The Abinadi story also has the prophet masking and also has Abinadi with a shining face. Throughout the episode the story explicitly refers to the Moses story, the ten commandments, and the law of Moses; Abinadi’s shining face demonstrates God’s glory (\textit{kabod}) shining through his prophet and shows not only that Abinadi’s power comes from God but places the prophet and his message on par with Moses. Thomas Dozeman views both the veil and the shining face to be masks: “A mask, according to Ronald Grimes, is any mode of facial stylization intended to transform the body. A mask, therefore, is a disguise, but a paradoxical one. It both conceals and reveals identity. Masks often hide the identity of the wearer in order to represent another power or person. Thus, a mask transforms the wearer, bringing about metamorphosis or alteration of identity.”\textsuperscript{136}

Masks have two functions, concretion and concealment. Each is illustrated in the Moses and Abinadi stories. For concretion, the shining face of Moses demonstrates God’s power penetrating through the mask: “The mask gives substance and form to this outside power, by representing deity. In the process the everyday identity of the wearer is concealed and transformed.”\textsuperscript{137} Concealment, or masking, works differently than concretion. “Masking as concealment both hides the everyday identity of the wearer and associates the primary face with that person. As a result, masks of concealment accentuate the authority of the wearer by separating the person from everyday culture.”\textsuperscript{138} As with Abinadi (King Noah asks, “Who is Abinadi, that I and my people should be judged of him” [Mosiah 11:27] on this question of the prophet’s authority), Moses’s veil separates him from the Israelites and increases his authority (Abinadi’s confrontation takes place in a judicial context — his own trial — a trial in which the prophet berates the people for breaking legislation, requiring a reiteration of the ten commandments and reassertion of the Mosaic law). “The veil symbolizes unification and consolidation of judicial authority in Moses. It designates Moses as the lawgiver, who administers divinely revealed legislation into the life of Israel.”\textsuperscript{139} This legal emphasis in Moses’s story is also why Abinadi refers insistently to the law of Moses the Zeniffites are violating.
Masks are about prophetic office. Coats asks if Moses’s veil is particular to Moses or representative of some office. The shining face and the veil represent the prophetic office, his authority to speak in God’s name. Coats notes the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17) has a similar function. “The concern of the transfiguration scene, whether in the Moses tradition or in the Jesus tradition, is to paint a picture of the leader who carries the authority of God for his community.” These biblical motifs are used in the New Testament. “The briefest glance at the Markan transfiguration scene reveals a narrative liberally seasoned with Jewish motifs” pointing mostly to Moses’s theophany that includes a six-day timeframe, setting on a mountain, a physical change in the hero, tents, clouds, voices, and the visit of Moses and Elijah “have led many to argue that the transfiguration account is purely a reformulation of Exodus 24 and 1 Kings 19.” Mark could be described as plagiarizing the Moses and Elijah accounts. The narrative richness is deepened by the allusive quality. The brightness of the divine commission veils the meaning from superficial readers who see plagiarism at work instead of allusion.

Many prophetic commissioning stories transition prophetic authority to a successor. Elijah anoints Elisha. Moses appoints Joshua. Abinadi doesn’t anoint his successor, Alma, because the narrative doesn’t have them meet personally except as they both were present at the prophet’s trial. The prophetic call stories in Mosiah not only have a succession but also a bonus narrative; Abinadi is followed by Alma and the latter by Alma, so by Mosiah 29 Alma has succeeded his father as high priest and prophet (he is recognized a prophet by Amulek — Alma 8:20 — and the angel — Alma 10:7).

The setting of Alma’s commission is one of rebellion. As Alma and Mosiah’s sons go about this business, an angel appears, causing the earth to shake and they collapse. Like Paul and Alma, both Isaiah and Ezekiel are “thrown to the ground by the impact of the divine manifestation.” Septuagint divine commissions often shift from the reproof stage to the calling by commanding to “arise” and “enter.” This is reflected in Acts 9:6 where Paul is told to “arise.” Similarly, in Mosiah 27:13 Alma is commanded to “arise and stand forth.” After the stunned recipients gain sufficient wits to understand, the angel notes that “the Lord has heard the prayers of his people, and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father” (v. 14) and has intervened following that intercessory prayer. Present in many non-biblical theophanies but no biblical examples, the intercessory prayer is usually offered by the prophet.
For Alma₁’s commissioning, his father, Alma₁, is the high priest. Alma₁ organizes an intercessory prayer for Alma₂ (Mosiah 27:20–22), and the prayer triggers the angelic intervention (Mosiah 27:14).

After the intervention, the angel specifically commands Alma₂ to “go, and remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi; and remember how great things he has done for them; for they were in bondage, and he has delivered them” (Mosiah 27:16). Almost every narrative involving Alma₂ hereafter emphasizes how he keeps the angel’s injunction. In Zarahemla, Alma₂ recalls the Zeniff colony’s deliverance from Noah and the Lamanites, asking if the audience has similarly remembered, comparing physical deliverance to the spiritual redemption: “Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of our fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and longsuffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?” (Alma 5:4–7). Similarly preaching at Ammonihah, Alma₂ asks, “How have ye forgotten the tradition of your fathers” and the commandments of God (Alma 9:8)? He reminds them of Lehi’s deliverance from Jerusalem and the many instances since that God “delivered our fathers out of the hands of their enemies, and preserved them from being destroyed, even by the hands of their own brethren” (Alma 9:10). After meeting with the sons of Mosiah, Alma₂ laments he can’t more forcefully declare the gospel. He reminds his readers of the “calling” he received: “Thus we see the great call of diligence of men to labor in the vineyards of the Lord” (Alma 28:14) and has to be satisfied his calling is different from Mosiah’s sons (Alma 29:6). This call language recalls his own commissioning scene reported in Mosiah 27: “O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth” (Alma 29:1). The angel who commissioned Alma₂ and the sons of Mosiah did exactly that, spoke with an earth-shaking voice. These similarities between Alma₂’s commissioning narrative and this passage are apparent, as shown in Table 3.

Alma₂ can’t preach in foreign lands as the sons of Mosiah did, but he commends their work and notes he kept the angel’s injunction: “Yea, and I also remember the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage … Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers” (Alma 29:11–12). This remembrance injunction emerges twice when Alma₂ recounts his conversion experience because that passage is a chiastic structure. He urges his son Helaman that he
“should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers” and their deliverance (Alma 36:2; again in verse 29).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mosiah 27</th>
<th>Alma 29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Angel and the Earth Shaking</strong></td>
<td>The angel spoke with a voice of thunder (verse 11)</td>
<td>I wish I were an angel; I would declare repentance to every soul with a voice of thunder (1–2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And did cause the earth to shake (11, 15)</td>
<td>I wish I could speak with the trump of God to shake the earth (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Command to Remember</strong></td>
<td>“Go, and remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi” and remember the Lord’s deliverance from bondage (16)</td>
<td>“I also remember the captivity of my fathers … Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers” (11–12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alma’s Calling</strong></td>
<td>Alma teaches the gospel from the time the angel speaks to him (32)</td>
<td>“Why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instrument in the Lord’s Hands</strong></td>
<td>Alma and his friends taught the gospel and “thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth” (32, 36)</td>
<td>“This is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance” (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Similarities between Mosiah and Alma accounts.

Alma$_{2}$ has a second theophany when preaching at Ammonihah. The people completely reject him. While departing, the angel from his commissioning scene stops him (Alma 8:14–17) to redirect and strengthen him. An auxiliary theme in biblical commissioning type scenes is food. Sometimes the theme is feasting and sometimes fasting (both Moses and Elijah fast for forty days at Horeb), and when Moses has the Mt. Horeb theophany with all Israel witnessing his shining face, the feasting theme emerges: “Mentions of food in the type scene can relate to fasting, sacrifice, divine provision, or divine displeasure,” all centered around the people’s breaking of the covenant (1 Kings 18; Judges 6; Ezekiel 3–4; 12:18–19; Exodus 32; Numbers 11). Similarly, when Alma$_{2}$ reenters Ammonihah, “he was an hungered” (Alma 8:19) and asks Amulek for food, for Alma$_{2}$ “had fasted many days” (Alma 8:26). Not only does Amulek “impart [of his] food” to Alma$_{2}$ (Alma 8:20), but he gives bread until Alma$_{2}$ “was filled” (Alma 8:22–23).

After repenting, Alma$_{2}$ begins a new life phase. His prophetic commission is implied. As noted, both the angel and Amulek call him
a prophet (although his official title is more commonly used — high priest). From his commission, Alma₂ “began from this time forward to teach the people” (Mosiah 27:32) although the rest of the chapter focuses on the sons of Mosiah. Alma₂ uses angel and the earth-shaking imagery from his conversion scene to refer to the “work to which I have been called” (Alma 29:6, 13); he also refers more generally to all who “have been called to this holy calling” of preaching (Alma 13:4). When Alma₂ talks about his life-changing event, he notes that “I have labored without ceasing” (Alma 36:24) since to let others taste the gospel fruit, and in Ammonihah, he notes his calling to preach by the spirit of revelation and prophecy (Alma 8:24) and refers to the preaching he performed after the holy order to which he had been called (Alma 43:1–2). Although understated, the Mosiah 27 experience is the beginning of Alma₂’s prophetic calling.

A standard feature of commissioning scenes has the Lord warning about the difficulty of the task. Commonly, the prophet is comforted that the Lord will strengthen and enable him. Ezekiel 2:6–7 exhorts Ezekiel to fearlessness. Jeremiah 1:8 also contains this admonition which Zimmerli says demonstrates this “to be an essential part of a call-narrative.”¹⁴⁹ Most commissioning scenes anticipate hardship and rejection. “Jeremiah and Ezekiel are told to expect harsh opposition from the people, and Isaiah’s commission to deceive the people in order to bring about their destruction [Isaiah 6:9–11] is hardly the sort of behavior calculated to lead to popular acclaim.”¹⁵⁰ Similarly the narrator notes that as Alma₂ and his friends teach immediately after his call, he faced “much tribulation, being greatly persecuted by those who were unbelievers, being smitten by many of them” (Mosiah 27:32), but always being “supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions” (Alma 36:27, the matching chiastic element in verse 3).

As with biblical call stories, prophetic commissioning narratives in Mosiah don’t mechanically follow a schema: “The elements of the type scene do not march in lockstep, but they form a constellation-like pattern that adds interpretive value because of their associations.”¹⁵¹ The relationship between the two main iterations of Alma₂’s prophetic commission is sophisticated, as is the relationship between Alma’s commissioning scene and Paul’s. Asserting plagiarism is too naïve to be satisfactory.
The Conversion Paradigm

Conversion stories always idealize.  

From early Christianity conversion stories to the convert arrived yesterday, the narratives presume some pattern moving from a sinful life, through a radical break, leading to a new faith. My Latter-day Saint stake holds missionary firesides monthly; since I started work on this conversion concept, I have attended several. The converts’ stories follow a consistent pattern: the investigator meets a member or missionary, the inquirer overcomes resistance, the prospect encounters other obstacles, and then the person receives a testimony and embraces baptism. I happen to believe the stories: I think they are historical despite their formulaic content. “The roots of this understanding of conversion are with the Early Church, and in particular with the prototypical conversions of Paul and Augustine. Each man experienced a dramatic moment of conversion, Paul on the road to Damascus and Augustine in the garden at Milan. Both described conversion as a sudden but permanent change: the rebirth of a sinner.” The pattern begins not with Paul but with OT antecedents. The transformation from Saul to Paul reverberates through history to our day. Justin Martyr tells his conversion story using a “common literary convention” of the philosopher sampling philosophical schools before discovering true philosophy in Christianity. Although Justin’s conversion story isn’t built on the same pattern as Paul’s, “we should bear in mind that neither Paul nor Justin has given us an unretouched account of his experience. All these reports are retrospective, written many years after the event, and all are shaped by conventions both of the larger culture and of the movement the writers have joined, as well as by the rhetorical strategies that led each author to recall his conversion. Thus, while we do not obtain from them a clear picture of the experience of Paul and Justin, we are able to discover in their use of the conversion reports moments in the process of the institutionalization of conversion.” So common is the conversion pattern that sociologists often discuss the “model of a typical ‘conversion career’ that is believed in by the group,” and each supplemental narrative adheres to the model and adds innovation. Even the Christian pattern of conversion isn’t so original; it fits into larger narrative patterns. “In the Epicurean ‘Garden,’ if not in other philosophical schools, we find that dimension which, I will argue, is essential to early Christian conversion: the change of primary reference groups, the resocialization into an alternative community.”
Moderns find conventional narratives problematical. But that is a modern problem, not an ancient one. An example from modern history might helpfully show that literary convention doesn't necessitate an unhistorical judgment. “To be sure, there is often an element of patterning in the Bible's portrayal of people and events, but this does not disprove the essential historicity of those portrayals. The life of Abraham Lincoln can be recounted according to the man-of-humble-origin-makes-good pattern, but no one would cite this fact as evidence against the historicity of Lincoln's career. On the contrary, it is Lincoln's historical experience that has contributed to the fondness for such stories.”

Other Lincoln type scenes of boy born into poverty making his way to the White House are popular. Other variations on the theme include Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In the Bill Clinton story this theme was embodied in the inaugural campaign video: The Man from Hope. The film traced a story of boy born into poverty and a broken family. An abusive stepfather was overcome, and gradual ascent began through education and ambition until the boy became president. Similarly, Barack Obama's parents met as students, and he faced the difficulty of being mixed race and impeded by prejudice. With the father's abandonment, he faced the difficulty of a broken family and suffered through poverty so deep that at times he left his mother to be raised by grandparents. Enduring drug use, street life, and a partially misspent youth, the young man eventually turned things around to attend Harvard and later orchestrated a meteoric political ascent. A variation on this motif is the rags-to-robes type scene for Supreme Court justices, witnessed in the nomination process for Clarence Thomas and Sonia Sotomayor. None of these characters are fictional nor does the typical aspect of the story negate their historicity. It explains why we find the narratives compelling.

I find what are often called deconversion (or conversion to modernity) narratives to be highly stereotyped: think of biblical critics (such as Bart Ehrmann) or critics who have departed Mormonism: David Wright, Edwin Firmage, Jr., or Martha Nibley Beck. Their stories follow a pattern. Jon Levenson emphasizes that the pattern is common to those who study academic biblical criticism. The applications to the doctoral program in religion he had joined as a faculty member had autobiographical narratives following a two-step pattern. The students discussed their conversion to an uncritical Christian faith and then a second conversion to modernity (in the form of a commitment to historical criticism of the Bible). A colleague reassured Levenson that
after two weeks the program would have all the applicants straightened out as fully catechized adherents to modernity.\textsuperscript{160}

That these deconversion narratives result in the convert attaching to a new religion called modernity told through highly conventional stories does not mean the stories are fictional. Capps notes that historical characters — Lincoln is the example — often find their meaning in history because their lives adhere to mythic themes. We can’t separate their historic from their mythic status. “Oftentimes, myths successfully locate the ‘life’ within the context of a preexisting model or paradigm. Jesus is perceived as the new Adam, the new Moses, the new Abraham. Whether or not Jesus himself considered his life to be the mirroring of these well-established paradigms, his followers and supporters believed it necessary to interpret his life in terms of these primitive mythical models. His own life, in turn, may itself become an exemplary model, worthy of emulation because it has demonstrated its affinity with traditional models.”\textsuperscript{161} The fit between historic and mythic is imperfect, so adjustments between the two must be made, usually to make the historic particular fit the exemplary pattern. “There is nothing in these adjustments to imply deliberate deception or conscious distortion. It simply means that the model provides the basis for the selective evaluation of the life. Usually, therefore, the highly idiosyncratic aspects of the leader’s life and personality are muted or entirely eliminated, and those aspects which coincide with the exemplary model are retained and even highlighted.”\textsuperscript{162}

Lewis asserts that Americans, having severed themselves from important European sources of mythology, had to reconstitute important stories out of their own resources and history. They needed the myth of a dying god (Osiris, Adonis), and the Lincoln story filled that need. Persistent belief that John Wilkes Booth had survived and escaped after the assassination provided another folklore theme: the myth of the wandering malefactor (the Wandering Jew, Pilate’s servant who struck Jesus, the Flying Dutchman, the Mysterious Huntsman).\textsuperscript{163} These archetypes soon attached to the Lincoln narrative, and his assassination on Good Friday bred many familiar archetypes. Many thought “that the Lord had sent Lincoln to earth as His mysterious representative, to die for His people, was a belief that rose from many of the Easter sermons and grew with time to blend into the American faith that the humble backwoodsman had been by some miracle, the savior of the Union.”\textsuperscript{164} Some thought Lincoln a Moses who guided the people through the deserts of the Civil War,\textsuperscript{165} and a Joshua shall be raised up who would
lead the people into the promised land. Others saw his death during Passion Week as an antitype of Jesus being sacrificed on the cross, and Booth as Lincoln’s Judas. Lincoln needed to die to expiate the sins of slavery, making Lincoln a martyr and savior figure. But Lincoln wasn’t only a type of Christ but also of Moses: “Ministers both black and white pointed out that God had permitted Moses to lead his people to the Promised Land but not to enter it.” That Lincoln toured recently conquered Richmond, the Confederate capital, the week before his death also pointed to a Christian parallel: “Death on Good Friday made parallels with Jesus inescapable, not to mention a Christian understanding that saw the president’s recent entry into the enemy capital as parallel to Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem before crucifixion.” Like Moses, Lincoln was permitted to see the end of the long journey through the Civil War as it were from Mount Nebo, but not get to enter the Promised Land of a country reunited by charity instead of malice and warfare.

A more complex view of the relationship between history and literature must be grasped in order to make sense of the historical claims of all conventional stories, not the least stories about Lincoln, Alma, and Paul.

### Reductive Readings and Religious Explanation

Attempts to explain religious behavior in nonreligious terms are ultimately no more empirically verifiable than properly religious interpretations, because they too depend on the foundational assumptions of the investigator.

One can’t explain ancient texts (modern texts for that matter) or the past without making pretheoretical and theoretical assumptions, and those assumptions precede the explanatory narratives proper while never being free of ideological entailments:

Every scholarly discipline, whether biblical studies or sociology or literary criticism, of necessity works with a number of foundational assumptions that shape its theoretical work. These may be called control beliefs, or root metaphors, or metaphysical axioms, or worldviews, but they are pervasive and inescapable. To deny that they exist, or to deny that they necessarily exist, is a form of positivism — a view of the
academic enterprise which I take to have been thoroughly discredited in the philosophy of science in recent decades.\textsuperscript{173}

If the researcher denies the possibility that God can be known by humans to work in history and asserts that true knowledge must be based on empirical observation, that narrative similarity is an indication of plagiarism, such claims are some of these foundational assumptions that “all involve choices of a kind that are difficult to define, but which may be called personal and existential, as well as broadly cultural. I would argue that they are, in fact, ultimately religious.”\textsuperscript{174} In explaining the past, the researcher’s presuppositions play a significant role in determining what will count as evidence and what won’t: “Postmodern attacks on the ideal of historical objectivity have proven convincing enough to show that what counts as evidence in any historical investigation depends to a significant degree on the researcher’s prior assumptions.”\textsuperscript{175} Constricted ideas about the dichotomy between history and literature narrow the possible interpretations too much to be useful.

What is true of the pursuit of the historical Jesus is just as true of the pursuit of the historical Alma. “There is no story of the historical Jesus that can be isolated from faith convictions, and this is as true for the stories told by ‘scientific, critical historians’ as it is for the story told by the Church. The story of Jesus is always a story of a Jesus of faith.”\textsuperscript{176} Some critics adhere to the faith assumption that they can confidently tell the difference between historical stories and fictional ones. But this requires a huge, and too frequently uncritical, leap of faith.

The situation is no different in Mormon studies than in biblical studies that an older model of historical explanation, demonstrated to be inadequate, continues to dominate the subdisciplines: “In spite of the progress made in the philosophy of history in the last third of the twentieth century, and the concomitant innovations in the academic field of historiography, biblical studies in the historical mode has generally continued on the basis of an ‘old historicism’ (i.e., a mode of critical study that tied meaning to historical reconstruction, behind the text) not identical with but with close ties to the historical positivism of the nineteenth century,”\textsuperscript{177} that often proceeds uncritical of its own ideological presuppositions and asserts the past can be known, as Ranke is often thought to prescribe “as it really happened.”

Book of Mormon readings need to improve drastically if they are going to prove adequate. A recent study of the Mormon scripture asserts that “if the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction, it is more intricate and clever than has heretofore been acknowledged.”\textsuperscript{178} If the reader has a more
complex view of the relationship between history and literature, the task of reading the text becomes even more complicated, and necessary.

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Endnotes

1 Brett Christophers, Positioning the Missionary: John Booth Good and the Confluence of Cultures in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), 114.

2 Fawn M. Brodie, No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1982), 62–63. Only intellectual sloppiness would permit saying that Alma’s story is “in the exact fashion” of Paul’s experience. For one thing, the book of Acts presents three different versions of the narrative; some of the details between them are contradictory (and that doesn’t count Paul’s own first-person account in Galatians). For another, Paul is blinded, not Alma, who is incapacitated and struck dumb. Other differences are apparent upon careful comparison.

3 Roger D. Launius notes that Brodie “set the agenda for much of the historical research conducted since that time” in Mormon history. Launius largely sees the legacy to be negative. “From Old to New Mormon History: Fawn Brodie and the Legacy of Scholarly Analysis of Mormonism,” Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1996), 196. Launius thinks Brodie’s impact has been malignant because her biography focused the research too much for the next couple of generations on issues of Mormon origins. I think Brodie’s impact
has been negative because she set an excessively low standard for textual and historical analysis.


6 Brigham Henry Roberts, *New Witness for God*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 512. The heading under which this page falls is titled “Alleged Plagiarism of Historical and Biblical Events.”


12 Ibid., 388.


15 Ibid., 19.

16 Ibid., 69.

17 Ibid., 79.


20 Ibid., 136.

21 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 84–85.

22 Ibid., 96.

23 Ibid., 117.


26 Ibid., 193–96.


28 Ibid., 217.

29 Ibid., 296.

30 Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna, eds. *“Is This Not the Carpenter?” The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (New York: Routledge, an imprint of Acumen, 2014), 10.


33 Ibid., 12.

35 Ibid., 55.


38 Brodie, No Man, 62–63.

39 Ham, “Problems in Interpreting,” 22n8.


41 Ibid., 170.

42 Ibid., 170–71.

43 Grant H. Palmer, An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 78.


45 Ibid.

46 Andrew P. Norman, “Telling It Like It Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms,” History and Theory 30, no. 2 (1991): 121.

47 Ibid., 133–34.


53 Ibid., 32–33.


64 Ostler, “Throne-Theophany,” 70.

65 Ibid., 69–70.

66 Ibid., 69–70.


71 Alan F. Segal, Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 7.

72 Ibid., 9.


78 Karl Olav Sandnes, Paul—One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle’s Self-Understanding (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 76.


Mark Alan Wright acknowledges that Lehi’s commissioning type scene fits the pattern of prophetic commissioning stories but denies that the pattern applies to Alma: “Unlike Lehi, later prophets in the Book of Mormon — those grounded firmly in the New World — did not receive their commissions according to this ancient Near Eastern pattern; rather, their calls conform to a pattern that can be detected in ancient Mesoamerica,” in “‘According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding’: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon,” Studies in the Bible and Antiquity 3 (2011): 59. Obviously, I disagree with Wright’s assessment.


Czachesz, Commission Narratives, 88–89.


Ibid., 9.

Johannes Munck, Paul and the Salvation of Mankind (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1977), 25–26. Note that Alma points out that all who are ordained priests after this holy order (Alma 13:1) were “called and prepared from the foundation of the world” to be “called with [such] a holy calling” (Alma 13:3).

Ibid., 27–30.

Ibid., 29.

Stendahl, Paul Among the Jews, 10.


Sandnes, Paul, One of the Prophets, 64–65.

96 Ibid., 217–21.

97 Ibid., 2.


99 Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 3.


102 Ibid., 14–15.

103 Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine,” 3.


105 Ibid., 129. Emphasis in original.

106 Ibid., 135. Emphasis in original.

107 Ibid., 136.


109 Ibid., 12.

110 Ibid., 14.

111 Ibid., 9.


114 Ferrari, “Beyond Augustine,” 104.
117 Ibid., 24.
118 Ibid., 26.
120 Welch and Ostler have already treated the commissioning story of Lehi, so I don’t feel the need to begin that early in the Book of Mormon.
121 I have explored the connection of Abinadi’s disguise to biblical type scenes of prophet/king confrontations which incorporate disguises. Alan Goff, “Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History,” Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 7, no. 1 (1995): 170–207. Abinadi’s disguise is at least effective enough that “they knew him not” (Mosiah 12:1) until he announces his name in the same verse.
123 Ibid., 38.
124 Ibid., 43.
125 Ibid., 45.
126 George W. Savran, Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 190–92. Our understanding of Nephi’s command for his brothers not to touch him should also be mediated by Abinadi’s warning: 1 Nephi 17:48.
127 Britt, “Prophetic Concealment,” 50.
Britt, “Prophetic Concealment,” 52.

Ibid., 54.

Sandnes, *Paul, One of the Prophets*, 140, 144.

Britt, “Prophetic Concealment,” 46.

Ibid.


Ibid., 26.

Ibid., 27.

Ibid., 27–28.

Ibid., 28.


Terence Mullins notes that “the function of the reference to standing or a command to stand or rise is to indicate that the person who stands (or is commanded to stand) is accepted as a representative of the commissioning person,” and he cites Paul and Peter as examples. “New Testament Commission Forms,” 612.

Ostler, “Throne-Theophany,” 75.

Britt, “Prophetic Concealment,” 46–47.

Ibid.

Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 106.

Savran, “Theophany as Type Scene,” 124.
Brent Christophers, *Positioning the Missionary*, 113. Christophers notes that this simple notion of radical change has been modified recently to emphasize the process of conversion in addition to the event.


Ibid., 21.

Ibid.

Ibid., 26.


Ibid., 394.


Ibid., 92.

Ibid., 93.

Ibid., 94.

Ibid., 95.

Ibid., 97.


Ibid. 111.
171  Ibid.
174  Ibid., 60.
178  Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, xv.
An Elegant Book on Gifts, Gifting, and Remembering

Louis Midgley


Abstract: David Holland, the youngest son of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, is the John Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School. Consistent with his training and focus, Holland has approached Moroni as an historian. Hence, despite the subtitle to this series about books in the Book of Mormon, Holland has done neither systematic nor dogmatic theology in his contribution.

Latter-day Saints are aware that Moroni visited Joseph Smith and instructed him on the recovery of the Book of Mormon. Why Moroni? With the death of his father, Moroni had become the keeper of the precious Lehite history inscribed on various metal plates. Moroni also added to his father’s account (see Mormon 1–7) his own understanding of how this entire record would eventually be used by the Lord to counter the absence of genuine faith — that is, it would bring genuine light to a people ground down by sin and hence the absence of genuine faith in God. These people were then indifferent, even hostile, to new divine revelations (see Mormon 8–9). This was also Moroni’s first attempt to conclude the entire Book of Mormon. He did this while cautiously wandering and carefully hiding from the slaughter and moral debauchery that was taking place around him, as he also sought to close and carefully hide the sacred text for an unknown time and also a wise purpose known only to God.

Then Moroni abridged the book of Ether, and thereby provided a history of the Jaredites, a very ancient people, that was engraved on
24 plates found by the people of Limhi in the days of King Mosiah. In her *Ether*, Rosalynde Welch provides an excellent account of Moroni’s treatment of the strange record found earlier among the debris of an ancient people.\(^1\) The book of Ether also includes Moroni’s second farewell (Ether 12:38–41).

Finding that he “had not yet perished,” even while “wandering” in fear of being murdered in the terrible war in which the Lamanites were about to destroy each other and also the last of the Nephites, Moroni finds that, since he had not perished, he could “write a few more things, that perhaps they may be of worth to my brethren, the Lamanites, in some future day, according to the will of the Lord” (Moroni 1:4). He must also, among other things, testify of his own faith at the end of his final assortment of carefully chosen items which includes his own last farewell (Moroni 10:34).

**David Holland’s Splendid Moroni**

My first reason for reviewing *Moroni: A Brief Theological Introduction* — what I now believe is the very best in the excellent series — is that the author, David Holland, is both a former student and friend.\(^2\) I am also pleased that there is not even a slight hint in *Moroni* that the Book of Mormon is not an authentic history of real people who began in Jerusalem and ended up somewhere in America — most likely in Mesoamerica.

This historical record of the Lehite colony, which also came eventually to absorb a people known as Mulekites, was finally buried in a small hill in what would later be known as the State of New York. There Moroni made it and two seer stones\(^3\) available for Joseph Smith’s work as a Seer, before he became a prophet who could speak for God, and thereby lead the community of the fledgling Saints. With these “interpreters,” and then his own seer stone, it was possible for Joseph Smith to somehow


\(^2\) Holland’s book is the last in a series of twelve “brief theological introductions” to different portions of the Book of Mormon. I have read each of the books in the series, but I have not read any reviews of those books. I decided to make my own assessment of the series.

\(^3\) In the Book of Mormon these seer stones were called *interpreters* (see Mosiah 8:6–19, 21:28; Ether 3:22; cf. Omni 1:20). In addition, we are informed in the Book of Mormon that seers are greater than prophets, but that they also speak for God, and hence are also prophets. Also note the last phrase in Mormon 9:34, which was written by Moroni.
dictate to various scribes the English text of the Book of Mormon. This book provides the founding divine special revelation of the restored Covenant People of God, including the items very carefully set out by Moroni.

**Beginning with the Conclusion**

David Holland’s *Moroni* is a genuinely remarkable book. I highly recommend it. Before I provide some reasons to support my very favorable opinion, I must call attention to something none of the authors of these twelve brief theological introductions has noticed.

As I remember it, in 1983 — almost four decades ago — I was with Gary Novak, one of my students, pawing through the newly arrived periodicals in the BYU Library. We happened to open the July 1983 issue of *Commentary*, the leading Jewish opinion publication. There we noticed an item by David Singer entitled “Testimony.” That word caught our attention. Singer provided an account of the well-known fact that Jewish people were the “first to assign a ‘decisive significance to history,’ … ‘whose essential premises were eventually appropriated by Christianity and Islam as well.” Singer then claimed that “only in Judaism is the injunction to remember [zakhor] ‘felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.”

When I read those words in Singer’s review essay, I immediately remembered the only two fixed prayers in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These crucial prayers are part of the covenant renewal for Latter-day Saints, both of which have the crucial words remembrance and remember. If Latter-day Saints genuinely strive to remember and keep the commandments, “they may always have the Spirit with them.” Without the Spirit with us, we simply wander in strange paths. It is, therefore, clearly not merely Judaism that has what Singer calls an

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5. Over twenty years ago I began to listen very carefully to those prayers, and then, as my hearing started to decline, I also began to read them from Moroni 4 and 5 silently with those mostly young fellows who give voice to them in my ward. I have also come to see the consumption of a bit of bread and water as a miniature memorial meal, which can be truly life-giving.
injunction — or imperative — to remember and keep the commandments of God.

Novak and I also discovered that Professor Josef Hayim Yerushalmi, who was for 28 years the Salo Wittmayer Baron Professor of Jewish history, culture and society at Columbia University, demonstrated how the Jewish people, the most history-conscious people in the premodern world, had maintained their identity by remembering God, especially through crucial memorial rituals. However, when Jewish scholars eventually began to write the history of their faith, they tended to do so with gentile secular categories and explanations. They were, of course, often very good at doing something that has eroded Jewish faith. Rather than being faithfully observant, they, and those who relied upon their endeavors, became merely cultural Jews. For Latter-day Saints this serves as a dire warning, since some Latter-day Saint scholars actually have ended up undermining the faith of some Latter-day Saints.

This was not, however, the only thing that Novak and I found immediately attractive and informative in Professor Yerushalmi’s book. Instead, we were led to the first endnote in the book, where he listed three scholars who explain in great detail “the meaning and functions of this verb [zakhor].” The first essay mentioned in that endnote was published in 1962 by Brevard Childs. There we discovered that the Hebrew verb zakhor (“to remember”) appears 169 times in all periods in the Old Testament. That verb does not mean merely to recall information, like the alphabet, one’s name or address or telephone number, and so forth. One who is known as an excellent cook, who does not fix an appointed meal, has not remembered. One who has even written essays and books about mercy and love, who is not merciful and genuinely loving, has not remembered. A husband who is not strictly faithful to his wife has not remembered. One ought to remember that those who are endowed have made a covenant to build and defend the Kingdom of God. Instead, one has not remembered (but has forgotten), if one has not actually done

6. Yerushalmi, Zakhor. This little volume, when it was first published, was just short of a hundred pages of text. It has been reprinted many times and translated into a half-dozen languages. A revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1996, with an important foreword by Harold Bloom.

7. For me, the key issue is how one situates the Book of Mormon — is it an authentic history of real people, or is it merely frontier fiction fashioned by Joseph Smith?


something that is required or that one has promised to do, including strict obedience to the sacred covenants one has made. We are all constantly faced with the critical question — have we really remembered?

When I read the monograph by Professor Childs, I verified the meaning of zakhor by queries with those at BYU who knew biblical Hebrew, including Hugh Nibley. I then turned to the Book of Mormon and, with Novak, was stunned to discover that this radically different way of understanding remembrance appears 227 times in essentially the same way as zakhor does in the Hebrew scriptures.10

At the 1984 Mormon History Association conference held at BYU, Novak and I presented (and circulated) a paper entitled “Remembrance and the Past,” a version of which we eventually published.11 I have since published a series of essays, reviews, and book notes on what we began to call the “Ways of Remembrance.”12 See also the address entitled “Remember and Perish Not,” by Elder Marlin K. Jensen, then Church Historian, in the Saturday afternoon session of general conference


in April 2007,13 which is an indication that awareness of the Ways of Remembrance had moved beyond a few Latter-day academics.

It turns out that Holland is the only one of the twelve authors in the “brief theological introduction” series to call attention to the importance of remembrance in the Book of Mormon. Of course, he had the advantage of commenting on the sacrament prayers. However, with remembrance being in the Book of Mormon 227 times, one might expect that perhaps several of the authors who made a close reading of their assigned portions of the Book of Mormon would have noticed the Ways of Remembrance.

**Virtue by Habituation**

I urge readers of Moroni to pay close attention to Holland’s important chapters in Moroni’s book on the ordinances. He explains that

as Moroni’s instructions on the ordinances turn toward the administration of the “flesh and blood of Christ unto the church,” he offers the Book of Mormon’s only statement on ritualized prayer (Moro. 4:1). He provides the precise wording of the blessings on the sacrament — wording that he indicates came from Jesus Christ four hundred years earlier, wording that would be essentially affirmed in a subsequent revelation to Joseph Smith fourteen hundred years later. (p. 36)

This ritual offers, among other things, what he calls “a moment of shared reliving, a chance to collapse the temporal distance between sacred times of the past and the regular occurrences of the present” (p. 36). We even, for a few moments “transcend the barriers of time that separate generations of God’s children” (p. 36). We reach back to the event where Jesus was with his apostles. The only change has been in one word, from wine to water. Hence, behind this “seemingly simple ritual of the sacrament,” he finds what he calls “a host of blessings” (p. 37).

What we see in the instructions on the sacramental prayers is a community intent on personal transformation that starts with “a discourse on pure love” (p. 38). He explains how the mere repetition of a ritual can result in such a transformation. However, he grants that he does “not take the sacrament because I always remember Jesus Christ, because I always keep his commandments, or because I always bear his

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name well” (p. 39). Latter-day Saints do not take the emblems because they are perfect. Instead, they do so because they desire to be Saints — that is, genuine Holy Ones. He describes his own reasons for partaking of the sacrament as follows:

I go to church and partake of the sacrament because I want to be more mindful, more righteous, and more courageous. I hope to remember, obey, and represent better. The sacrament is, in this sense, much less about who I am and much more about who I yearn to be. (p. 39)

The sacrament is not a way of witnessing to the congregation that one actually does remember Jesus Christ and keep his commandments. Instead, it is a way of renewing our own covenants. Hence, Holland correctly insists that “the sacrament prayer makes no reference to any such messaging to fellow mortals” (p. 39). Instead, they witness to “the one Being who already knows absolutely everything about me. I am at no risk of deceiving him. He is fully familiar with the yawning gap between who I am and who he wants me to be” (pp. 39‒40).

Holland has made what he calls a “rough calculation” that a Latter-day Saint who reaches age 80 “will partake of the sacrament some four thousand times. This reliable punctuation to our weekly calendar — [is] a conscious effort to step repetitively into a state of remembrance toward Christ and into a covenantal conversation with our God” (p. 40, emphasis added).

At this very point Holland introduces Aristotle. Why? Aristotle thought that humans become excellent — that is, acquire the virtues — by doing the same thing over and over again. This he called *habitus*. (Alexis de Tocqueville could then later describe the virtues as “habits of the heart.”) Holland sees that this salutary habituation in the virtues is accomplished by repetition. Such actions can even “rewire a soul. Like a pianist running through scales over and over again, this repetitive ordinance sharpens [our] reflexes of remembrance and covenanting” (p. 40). “Scales do not,” of course, “an artist make, and neither are the ordinances sufficient for the full development of discipleship, but the conditioning exercises of the sacrament help shape a disciple’s character.

14. For an extended treatment of the need for habituation, see N. T. Wright’s *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012). This is a 307-page setting out of the same issues that Holland addresses on the salutary role played by Christian ordinances in assisting in transforming our souls.
Week by week, crust by crust, sip by sip, I change. Or, at least, I should” (p. 40).

Latter-day Saints now see partaking of the Lord’s supper as something that should be done frequently, just as Moroni set it out for them in his description of how the church should function. This sets Latter-day Saints apart from some Protestant congregations that conduct this ordinance only once or twice a year, but not Roman Catholics and Anglicans. Holland, as the only historian among the other authors in this series, is uniquely equipped to compare and contrast such things as the different styles and frequency of sacramental practice. He is also aware that the Church once “played around” with different frequencies for the sacrament, but soon settled on the pattern of administering the sacrament, when possible, each Sunday by following Moroni (p. 42).

Holland also addresses two complaints against the way Latter-day Saints administer the sacrament. First, some Protestants sometimes complain that we are far too liberal in whom we allow to partake of the emblems — including, even, very small children. This, they insist, undermines “the solemnity that should attend such a sacred ritual” (p. 42). Holland sees the extensive participation as a way to “train a Saint’s soul” for life by what he calls “a regular discipline” in “the gradual development of our being” (p. 42).

Of course we face the possibility of “empty formalism” (p. 42). However, the “sacramental habit can be powerfully transformative, but only if it does not descend into thoughtlessness” (p. 43). One must actually seek sanctification and hence holiness, and become a genuine Saint, or they have “lost power” and have ignored a genuine gift from God. He also insists that the emblems of the sacrament shed their ordinary attributes for us precisely because of the prayer to God himself, in the name of Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify them. Almost anything can be made an instrument of Light. “God can take the most mundane of materials and turn them into miraculous instruments of redemption” (p. 44).

**Gifts**

Holland begins *Moroni* with an “Introduction” (pp. 2-4) in which the words *gift, gifts, giving,* and *giver* appear 25 times. He also set out some of the questions he seeks to answer. These include “[a] What is the relative agency of the giver and the receiver in the exchange of a gift?  

15. Holland’s “gift words,” which appear a total of 135 times in his book.
Do true gifts come with obligations or are they given freely? How does a diverse distribution of divine gifts affect the way our communities function and our relationships develop?" (p. 4).

In stressing God as the great giver, Holland seeks to describe “the character of a God whose nature is to give” (p. 4). Moroni, we are told, longs for a community open to the gifts from God, while he is on the run in a situation where divine things are being trampled. Hence,

As the book [of Moroni] opens, we find Moroni roaming through a forbidding environment. As it closes, we envision him ascending toward heaven. His personal transformation over the course of the book, from plodding wanderer to soaring angel, illustrates the redemptive impact of God’s greatest gift, Jesus Christ. Both human and divine, both embodied and spirit, both just and merciful, both crucified and alive, Jesus himself represents the elevating contrasts that often lie at the heart of God’s giving. (p. 4)

Holland sees Moroni as “a proclaimer of gifts” (p. 2), not as a chronicler of events, as are all the other authors in the Book of Mormon. Put another way, gifts and gifting are mentioned much more frequently by Moroni than by any other author in the Book of Mormon.

In “A Note about Order” (pp. 6‒8), Holland explains that for the most part he will follow closely the order in which Moroni set out the themes in his book. The reason is that he demonstrates that the items in Moroni were carefully sorted for specific purposes (p. 6). He also insists that Moroni knew far more about the Lehite past “than about what is happening in his present moment” (p. 6). Moroni was thus freed from being a chronicler of events, so he was able “to assemble his historically disparate materials according to his own purposes” (p. 6).

Holland sets out seven of these purposes, which he labels Moroni’s “soteriological sequence” (pp. 7‒8). I mention these for the one who is about to read Moroni again or for the first time. I also urge the reader to take careful note of these as they read what Moroni included in his book. Holland mentions that Moroni’s “book opens and closes with an expression of faith in Jesus: first as an anchor in a time of earthly insecurity and finally as the source of eternal assurance” (p. 8). Then Holland explains that Moroni’s own “path to salvation runs as follows: The Savior gives the rituals that form the church. The church then helps inform the soul. The soul then conforms to Christ. And every step on that path acknowledges the generosity of a giving God, whose gifts flow through the greatest gift of all — his only begotten Son” (p. 8).
“A Prophet on the Lam”

Moroni was, according to Holland, deeply troubled by his own mistakes; he was also “inclined to worry and self-doubt in a world falling apart around him, and determined to hold on to his faith” as he finished the Book of Mormon (p. 13). Is such uncertainty also part of our own experience in our mortal probation? The answer should be obvious.

Moroni wanders without knowing where he will end up. He gifts to us an assortment of items he wanted to share with the Lamanites, who are, then and there, intent on killing him and those of his remaining associates who might still have survived. He is, of course, troubled by the real danger and difficulty of what he must keep on doing. In his first chapter, Holland describes Moroni as both “resolute and unsure,” while “on the run.” He also pictures Moroni as unsure and unsettled, where “we expect the prophetic voice to be confident” (p. 10). While he wanders, Moroni worries about imperfections in his work, but he is “holding out hope that God’s work will be done despite human imperfection” (p. 12). Such a one has thereby begun to grasp the need for and advantages of meekness, which is itself a virtue.

In the next chapters in his own book, Holland questions why a “fugitive prophet, running for his life, [would] suddenly begin etching specific ritual procedures onto the plates” (p. 16). “Against the backdrop of the high drama in which Moroni finds himself — a flight for survival against mounting odds — the next chapters of the book of Moroni head in a decidedly undramatic direction” (p. 16). Moroni sets down instructions on such things as

the proper way to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost, the steps for ordaining priests and teachers, and the specific wording for consecrating the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper follow in rapid succession. These things come from a man well aware that he will not live to see a church community capable of implementing these practices. They are offered to a people, the Lamanites, who at that point showed very little interest in the message and had very little reason to trust the messenger. (p. 16)

Acquiring the Virtues—and Habituation

At this point Holland turns to Aristotle for an explanation. Aristotle is, of course, known for several things. He seems to have thought that God was pure thought thinking about thought, or a mover who merely
initiated the motion in the cosmos, but who had no need for or interest in human beings. A being unable or unfit for social life, according to Aristotle, “would have to be either a beast or a god” (p. 17). But Aristotle is also famous for insisting that human beings are social beings — they need each other to survive and prosper. Aristotle sharply distinguishes between humans — none of whom are self-sufficient, and hence need each other — and his own understanding of divine things. But Aristotle also thought that humans acquire virtues only by habituation — that is, by doing the same things over and over until that becomes a “second nature.”

The first five chapters of Moroni’s book deal with, among other things, the procedures and proper practices within a community of Saints — a church — which for Moroni no longer existed. We should pay attention to two letters from his own father that Moroni inserts in his own book. These constitute correctives to what could otherwise be seen as a kind of Rameumpton-style “formalism,” which is contrasted with “structural instability,” according to Holland (pp. 19‒20). The struggle is between what he also calls “dead works” that tend to “obscure … the atoning grace of the Savior” (p. 21) and hence the possibility of genuine spiritual renewal.

At this point Holland shifts from following exactly Moroni’s own ordering of the contents of his book. The reason is to counter what otherwise may seem to be the stress on both the crucial role and also the proper form of ordinances with which Moroni begins his book. He wants to be sure that his readers see in Moroni what Holland calls “a link between order and human decency” (p. 22), which are some of the fruits of the virtues. In the ancient world there were attempts to winnow the virtues and hence thereby identify what came to be known as the Cardinal Virtues — courage, justice, prudence, and temperance (or moderation). To both learn and then practice these virtues would make one a flourishing human being and hence happy. Christians later added faith, hope, and love, since these virtues were necessary for sanctification (Moroni 7).

Faith, hope, and love are the virtues that go beyond the Cardinal Virtues and generate and sustain what Holland calls “the external structural bonds of community [that] play an important role in developing the genuine sentiments of empathy housed within our hearts” (p. 22). This he then contrasts with what is found in the second

17. See N. T. Wright, After you Believe, 39–42.
letter by Mormon that Moroni includes in his book. He describes this as the “scriptural record’s most nauseatingly graphic references to rape, murder and cannibalism — show[ing] the steep fall of a nation living in disorder” (p. 22). Those two letters from his father that Moroni includes in his book demonstrate that lacking such order is to risk losing the capacity to love (p. 22). Moroni sees the ordinances as divine gifts to humans, who must be prepared to receive them for the high purpose for which they were given. Otherwise, those gifts can become a curse.

Holland raises the questions, but does not always answer them, related to the differences between the language found in Moroni’s book on the proper order in the church and current church practice. Chapter Two’s title is “The Gifts of Sacred Community in a Time of Chaos,” but much of the chapter contrasts the language found in Moroni 2 through 6 with what Holland describes as current church practice. I strongly urge readers to pay close attention to his cautious and careful treatment of the issues he raises. One reason is that he argues that

even as these opening passages on ordination and authorization point to the official structures of a Christian community, Moroni’s history of Christ’s visit simultaneously reminds us that the authority of office is not the same thing as divine power. Indeed, these chapters seem to insist on driving home a distinction between the two. The act of ordaining may convey a role of particular responsibility within the church, but the power of God is something other than that. It is bigger in its capacity and more universal in its distribution than a narrow fixation on ordination could possibly accommodate. (p. 24)

Then he points out that the resurrected Lord gave “the authority to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost” on his disciples, but the power to do so came only after “mighty prayer” (p. 24).

Put bluntly, power comes through prayer, and not merely by ordination, and hence it necessarily comes from the Holy Spirit. This eventually leads Holland to say that one should not lose confidence in the “gifts and callings of God” merely because they are brought by “a fellow fallen creature.” Such “gifting involves both high personal spiritual standards and community of generous acceptance” (p. 29). He then asks: “Who are the givers and who are the receivers in this community of gifting?” His answer is that “givers and receivers have distinctive roles and obligations, but we all occupy both positions” (p. 31).
This leads to some nicely set out but rather blunt comments on how the “modern Church’s singular and paradoxical effort both to maintain a very high notion of priestly power and to impart it relatively widely has unleashed radical and conservative instincts, generating its share of ecstasy and agony” (32). I highly recommend Holland’s reflections on what he describes as “the recovery of old truths and the discovery of new light” (pp. 31‒33).

The Conclusion—Again

I have not nearly begun to set out the excellence of Moroni. I hope I have included a sufficient account of the gifts that Holland brings to his “brief theological introduction” to Moroni’s final testimony.

Addendum

The Maxwell Institute’s “brief theological introduction” series seems, to me, to be a direct response by J. Spencer Fluhman, the director of the Institute, to remarks made by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland in 2018.18 “I come tonight,” Elder Holland said, “in my true identity as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.”19 He then demonstrated how and why Elder Maxwell fully endorsed the kind of scholarship that had been produced by what had originally been known as the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS).20 Hence the title of Elder Holland’s address: “The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century.”

Among other things, Elder Holland set out the reasons why the Apostles will not tolerate at BYU a Latter-day Saint version of the “Mormon studies” programs fashionable at other universities,21 and certainly not the kind of “secular religious studies” first launched by two gents in England, one of whom ended up in the United States and the other in Australia.

“About four years ago, at the university’s invitation,” Elder Holland indicated, “three outside scholars reviewed the circumstances the institute was then facing and wrote nineteen pages of observations. Some

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20. The name of the Institute was eventually changed to honor Elder Maxwell.
of what they said addressed the matter of apologetics broadly defined.”

He quoted and cited ten times this “external review” of the Maxwell Institute, which was conducted by Terryl Givens, David Holland, and Reid Nielsen and submitted in December 2014. The review was conducted because of concerns over what was described as a “new direction” that was put in place early in 2014 by the then-serving Executive Director of the Maxwell Institute.

Elder Holland made it clear that, whatever the merits of what are now called “Mormon studies” programs — which are at least necessarily patterned after purely secular religious studies and currently found in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere — they are not acceptable at the Maxwell Institute or elsewhere at BYU.

This series of twelve books on the Book of Mormon was the idea of J. Spencer Fluhman, who now directs the Institute. These books seem, to me, to be a direct response to the very forceful and carefully worded remonstrance by Elder Holland about why a Latter-day Saint version of “secular religious studies” will not be tolerated at either the Institute or BYU. Hence I see the series as a solid effort to properly honor Elder Maxwell by moving in the right direction.

**Louis Midgley** (PhD, Brown University) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught the history of political philosophy, which includes efforts of Christian churchmen and theologians to identify, explain, understand, and cope with the evils in this world. Dr. Midgley has therefore had an abiding interest in both dogmatic and systematic theology and the alternatives to both. His doctoral dissertation was on the religious socialist political ideology of Paul Tillich, a once famous German American Protestant theologian, most famous for his systematic theology, which is a radical elaboration of classical theism. Dr. Midgley’s encounter with the writings of Leo Strauss, an influential Jewish philosopher/intellectual historian drew his attention to the radical challenge posed by what is often called modernity to both

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22. Ibid., 14.
23. Ibid. This was the first time any of the actual contents of this “external review” had been made public. Careful attention should be given to those forty-nine endnotes in Elder Holland’s paper.
24. Givens and David Holland were later invited to contribute to the Maxwell Institute’s series of “brief theological introductions.”
the wisdom of Jerusalem, which is grounded on divine revelation, and also the contrasting, competing wisdom of Athens, which was fashioned by unaided human reason. Dr. Midgley has an interest in the ways in which communities of faith have responded to the challenges posed by modernity to faith in God grounded on divine special revelation.
Rich Vein or Fools Gold?

Morgan Deane


Abstract: Proclaim Peace is the first full-length volume discussing nonviolent theology in Latter-day Saint thought. It seeks to provide a new understanding of Restoration texts that aligns Mormon thought with modern pacifist traditions. Unfortunately, the book suffers from methodology issues that include an overly creative reading of some scriptures to support pacifist theories and the minimization of others’ theories. The book fails to interact with just-war ethics in meaningful ways that could enhance their ethic of peace. As a result, the book is longer than other pacifist texts but suffers from the same problems as previous entries in talking past those with differing opinion. The text will likely only appeal to a small audience of like-minded individuals who already share the same theories.

The study of unique Latter-day Saint scriptures and how they apply to nonviolent theology and just war remains in its infancy. This process started to change with the important 2011 volume, War and Peace in Our Times, and the conversation continues with Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher’s latest offering, Proclaim Peace: The Restoration’s Answer to

The book is an attempt to use nonviolent theology to help bring about an Enoch-like Zion and peace on earth. They mostly rely on novel interpretations of the scriptures buttressed with famous pacifists and nonviolent theologians. Several chapters address major objections their theories would likely encounter like the clear just-war verses in restoration scripture and divine violence. The book concludes with several chapters that contain practical advice.

*Proclaim Peace* is the most comprehensive and systematic enunciation of nonviolent theology to date. Unfortunately, the text relies on several dubious methodologies that include a narrative-driven analysis that skews their interpretation; a sole and “absolute” focus on Christ’s life that ignores, contradicts, or minimizes a broad range of sacred text; and a failure to do more than minimally interact with just-war theory. These problems fatally undermine the strength and applicability of the text.

**Narrative Over Close Reading**

Despite one of the authors describing the limits of nonviolent methodology, this book perpetuates those limits. In an essay that appears in an earlier book, David Pulsipher described the contortions theologians make to promote a nonviolent theology:

Crafting an argument against *any* violence — even defensive warfare — requires navigating a scriptural minefield …. The Book of Mormon … contains the most hazards. Compiled by a seasoned general, the text often exudes a just war sensibility. To diffuse the power of that story, Latter-day Saint pacifists resort to … arguing that a careful observation of the larger Book of Mormon narrative speaks to the futility of violence, its endless cycles, and its inability to achieve lasting peace.

To be clear, the authors of *Proclaim Peace* do not condemn all violence. Most of their work, though, is clearly in that vein. They cite a bevy of nonviolent theologians and faith leaders and focus on just a few scriptures. In multiple places they acknowledge the strength of the just-war ethic and divine violence, but they minimize the former, calling it “lesser” by inserting a sanctifying nonviolent option, found nowhere in

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D&C 98, that somehow trumps justified warfare (125–28). They do so because it “sounds like the higher law” (130) and not because of anything directly in Section 98.

Despite those acknowledgments, the authors claim that the life of Jesus and the ethic derived from it is the absolute we should follow, or that “war is violation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is always a manifestation of unrighteousness, and the Church of Jesus Christ can never be truly in favor of it” (186). This and many other comments show a sentiment that acknowledges a limited use of force, yet the text’s central message exudes a nonviolent theology to the point it seems that other parts are grudgingly added because they can’t completely navigate through the minefield of just-war texts without admitting their plain message.

Part of that creative reading is perhaps admitted in the introduction. The authors say that readers must look at the Book of Mormon with “new eyes” and the new nonviolent theories can “draw from and be responsive to” scriptures (xix). Both quotes sound like a speculative reading that requires framing the narrative in a way that favors their theology and ignores or minimizes clear scriptures that don’t.

This is seen most clearly in the one just-war scripture they do cite:

> Inasmuch as ye are not guilty of the first offense, neither the second, ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies. And again, the Lord has said that: Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed. (Alma 43:46–47)

This key part of the author’s analysis is striking:

> Perhaps we can also ask whose blood is being shed here. … Those committed to loving nonviolence … affirm that they would rather have their own blood shed than shed the blood of another person. Keep in mind that the Anti-Nephi-Lehis did defend their families, even unto bloodshed, but they did so through loving nonviolence and the voluntary shedding of their own blood. On an even broader scale, Jesus chose to defend the entire family of God from evil not through the violent shedding of blood of his “enemies,” but rather through voluntary sacrificing his own body and blood on the cross. (164)

This is a stunning and perplexing reading that shows the rhetorical contortions pacifists attempt to defend their theories. The first major problem with the argument comes from reading the whole verse. They claim that “defend your families even unto bloodshed” means shedding
their own blood in preference to shedding the blood of another in defense of family. But the immediately preceding sentence denies that reading: “ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain.” How can one shed their own blood in preference to the blood of others and still “not suffer yourselves to be slain?” The authors never explain, and the clear meaning of the scripture is not considered.

In their analysis (164) the authors limit the scope of a just defense to one’s family, which implicitly rejects any larger social obligations to one’s community or nation. This is further evidenced by claiming that nationalism has replaced God as the “ultimate concern” (176–77), a common pacifist argument that denigrates patriotism. Yet the authors are quick to apply a “broader scale” of family (“the entire family of God”) when it suits their purposes.

The bottom line is that the authors’ analysis of Alma 43:47 frames the narrative in a way that favors their theology while ignoring or minimizing readings that don’t. They ignore context to claim a reading that simultaneously minimizes the scope of an opposing ethic while maximizing their own. Operating from within such an incomplete framework, it is no wonder the authors later second-guess Mormon when they question why the Book of Mormon contains 20 chapters about 14 years of warfare, but only 22 verses covering 165 years of peace (210).

The authors’ analysis of Alma 43:47 isn’t the only example, however. D&C 98:16 includes the injunction to “renounce war and proclaim peace,” a reference the authors mention repeatedly. Their claim is that to “proclaim peace” one must renounce all forms of violence (xxiv). The glaring problem is that the verse doesn’t really say what the authors claim. As I later explain, the seeming contradiction between renouncing war while wielding the sword has been addressed by Christian thinkers going back to Augustine. It has been repeatedly addressed by Latter-day

4. Some may assert that there is a difference between nationalism and patriotism and that it was not the authors’ intent to denigrate patriotism. Without the authors making the difference clear and specifically stating that they were addressing just nationalism, such an assertion seems unfounded. Additionally, many consider nationalism and patriotism to be synonyms. See, for example, https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/patriotism.

Saint authors. Though the Mason and Pulsipher are aware of those sources, they don’t acknowledge it. Instead, they change the scriptural meaning to fit their narrative.

Mason apparently views missionaries as colonialist and imperialist (222). This builds upon Mason’s earlier writings where he lays out what he sees as the limits of King Benjamin’s state building and the coercive power of the state. Here Mason summarizes his interpretation of the Words of Mormon using his preferred narrative:

Within the space of only about a generation, Nephites had entered the land of Zarahemla as a minority, asserted their linguistic, religious, and political dominance over the longtime inhabitants, and eradicated the remainder of the native population that either refused to accept their rule or which they deemed to be dangerously unassimilable. This pattern, with variations, will be familiar to scholars of settler colonialism, particularly as it played out in the modern history of the American West, Canada, South Africa, and Australia.

Mason chooses his vocabulary carefully, but his message is clear — imperialist, colonialist Nephites, led by King Benjamin, dominated ethnic and linguistic others into submission and then oppressively assaulted dissidents, criminalized ethnic minorities, and invaded their Lamanite enemies for little reason beyond asserting their own political power.

But that argument is mostly creative fiction shaped only by ignoring or radically reinterpreting scriptures in the Words of Mormon. To cite a few examples, the Nephites could be called refugees who fled religious persecution instead of colonizing imperialists (Omni 1:12–13). Verse 14


8. Ibid., 6.
in Words of Mormon states that King Benjamin fought “in the strength of the Lord” and verse 17 says he reigned “in righteousness.” Even righteous individuals make mistakes, but both verses strongly undermine Mason’s narrative. He invents an offensive when v. 14’s phrase “driven out” suggests a defensive war.9

Mason interprets King Benjamin’s “sharpness” and “punish[ment]” (Words of Mormon 17, 15) towards spiritual enemies in sinister terms. He completely ignores the magnificent speech that, if read closely and without Mason’s narrative, suggests that King Benjamin was better than contemporary rivals because he didn’t claim to be divine (Mosiah 2:10), was chosen by the people (v. 11), served the people (v. 12), didn’t tax them excessively (v. 14), forbade slavery and the use of dungeons (v. 13, also Alma 27:9), and didn’t allow lawless citizens to murder, plunder, and steal without consequences (v. 13).10

The authors’ narrative dexterity is also seen in their context-deficient treatment of the story of Ammon and the Anti-Nephi-Lehis. For example, they acknowledged that Ammon used the sword twice, but asserted, without explanation, that the narrative really focused on love and service, not his martial prowess (86). A quick scriptural review suggests both are present. The head king was stunned at Ammon’s magnanimous reaction to victory in single combat (Alma 20:24–26), but the love that Ammon had for Lamoni (v. 26) and his correspondingly just terms more closely reflect the concept of just peace (jus post bello) rather than the authors’ concept of assertive love. In their summary of just warfare, the authors failed to mention the critical concept of just peace (134–35).

Their narrative rereading doesn’t recognize the servants that Ammon protected, nor the presentation of arms to the Lamanite king, which impressed him to the point of being receptive to Ammon’s preaching.11 King Lamoni asked, “[W]here is this man that has such


11. Ammon’s presentation of his foe’s arms to the king seems to mirror a documented Mesoamerican practice. See Bruce H. Yerman, “Ammon and the Mesoamerican Custom of Smiting off Arms,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies
great power” before being impressed by his faithfulness (Alma 18:8, 10). And the king remained stunned at Ammon’s military power after learning of his lethal service (v.16). At the very least it is debatable which had more influence and suggests the authors should be more careful in their sweeping pronouncements.

The most important details left out of Mason’s and Pulsipher’s narrative reflect how the conversion and removal of Lamanite kings set in motion a chain of events that resulted in many innocent deaths and an equilibrium that was only restored by Nephite soldiers. Those Lamanites not converted by the assertive love of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis “swore vengeance” and attacked the Nephites at Ammonihah (Alma 16:2, 25:1; see also 27:1).

Mormon presented the destruction of Ammonihah as spiritual punishment for their wickedness against Alma and the members of the church. Yet the account also includes “some around the borders of Noah” and “others” taken captive into the wilderness (Alma 16:3). Presumably, these some and others were righteous members of Nephite society that didn’t deserve the same punishments as those in Ammonihah, yet they were swept up in the Lamanite attack anyway. The account in Alma 16:8 says that the Nephites managed to retrieve the captives after a battle that presumably meant many deaths of innocent Nephite soldiers.

Alma 25 also records multiple battles (Alma 25:3). Again, the death of many Amulonites after their defeat in battle was presented by Mormon as the fulfillment of prophecy. But like the captives from Noah, these battles weren’t bloodless and meant the many Nephite soldiers who died presumably didn’t invite God’s wrath like the people of Ammonihah. All these deaths could reasonably be considered innocent and needless that resulted from the missionaries’ “assertive love.” Even if the authors didn’t produce a voluminous analysis of every scripture, at the very least they should have considered the implications of their favorite stories they exhaustively repeated.

The authors present a good number of scriptures, but the scriptures are sandwiched between rather long discussions of pacifist principles and ignore key context. Their one citation of a just-war verse was the most egregious example, but they ignored key context in their favorite scriptures as well. They fail to recognize that the great stories (like Ammon’s missionary efforts) had dangerous side effects that, ironically, were solved by the just use of force. Strong analytical reading is important,
but it shouldn’t ignore, as the authors repeatedly demonstrate, stronger readings of the text.

### Sole Ethic

Related to the first methodology problem, there are many seemingly contradictory verses that require systematic examination. But the authors solely focus on the life and ministry of Christ. They do mention some other ethics in a couple places, as already mentioned, but clearly state their preference and focus: “The nonviolence of Jesus’s life and example is absolute” (168).

It should go without saying that Jesus is extremely important to Christians. Mason and Pulsipher, however, fall into the same trap as authors like John Howard Yoder, whom they frequently cite. Their approach “obliterates” the tension in Christian and Latter-day Saint ethics by making one set of injunctions absolute and ignoring or minimizing the rest.12

Even if we accept the parameters of their debate by ignoring massive chunks of clear and commanding scripture to focus on Jesus’s life, we still find actions of Jesus that undermine nonviolent theology. The authors mentioned one example of Christ overturning the tables at the temple. This was a use of force they concede, but then minimize it by saying it was not violence against people, but only against property and animals (161). This was still a significant use of force, and if it violated the rights of people, it was still violence against that person. If done by someone who wasn’t Jesus, violence against property would still be considered property crime and a violation of rights that King Benjamin, among others, might have called plunder (Mosiah 2:13). A just king like Benjamin could not let the rights of his subjects be trampled. He would send out soldiers in a police function to apprehend and punish the wrong doers. That is, the force used in clearing the temple would have been enough to invite the use of counterforce from the sovereign authority. As the early modern just-war theorist Hugo Grotius observed using a King Benjamin sounding couplet: “Kings received authority in order that men might enjoy justice.”13

One could again consider the story of Ammon and the flocks of king Lamoni. Losing the king’s flocks would have earned the death penalty

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for the servants of the Lamanite king, and the threatened punishment for failing to stop property crime caused Ammon to kill and disarm his opponents (Alma 17:27–29). (Notice in v.29 how Ammon’s heart was “swollen with joy” to show his martial prowess, not assertive love.) Like King Benjamin, violence against property and animals was enough for Ammon to kill the aggressors. Thus, even if one accepts the authors’ minimized account of Jesus’s use of force, other scriptural stories are still incredibly problematic for nonviolent theologians.

This isn’t the only example. There is no record that John the Baptist or Jesus told Roman soldiers to put away their swords. In the New Testament accounts the Roman soldiers were either told to be just or praised for their faith (Luke 3:14; Matthew 8:8–10). Further, if sword wielding was a lesser example of the Law of Moses (as the authors claim D&C 98 says), such would have been done away with by Christ, the literal fulfiller of the Law of Moses (3 Nephi 15:4–5). Yet, there is no record that he ever taught that such was the case.

It is interesting that Mason and Pulsipher spend several detailed pages on the concept of turning the other cheek. Notably, however, when Jesus himself was struck, he didn’t stay mute (John 18:23). In the parable of the great banquet, Jesus’s version of the master “compelled” the people to enter (Luke 14:23). These and other examples demonstrate the severe limits of trying to force an “absolute” ethic on the life and example of Jesus Christ.

The authors seem aware of their shaky interpretative framework because they sound almost militant in preemptively striking all other theories:

We have asserted that Latter-day Saint theology, ethics, and hermeneutics should be centered on the nonviolent life, teachings, ministry, and atonement of Jesus Christ. Any alternative approach has the burden of explaining why Jesus should be decentered and what ought to be put in his place as the lens through which we should read and evaluate all other scripture. (169)

This touches upon a major problem in the book in that the authors try to have their cake and eat it too. As mentioned previously, they acknowledge the just use of force, but their discussion of just war contains few sources and sparse use of scriptures. The text is replete with pacifist rhetoric that makes it seem like they had to include the sections on just war because they wanted to ameliorate the first methodological problem, but they still vastly preferred a nonviolent ethic and created a second
problem by calling it absolute. They spend a great deal of time saying that Latter-day Saints have catching up to do on peace making (xxv), the scriptures renounce all violence (xxiii-xxiv), and violence never fully overcomes violence (92); contemplating using some portions of police and military budgets to create peace armies (117–18); and citing pacifist and nonviolent theologians where it would be stronger and more logical for a scripture.

Most importantly, the authors endlessly talk about love, but never mention the parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus used to show a Christ-like love of one’s neighbor (Luke 10:25–37). This may be because Catholic theologian Paul Ramsey commandingly used this parable to summarize Christian love as the basis for the just use of force. He asked simply, what if the Good Samaritan happened upon the beaten traveler in the middle of the attack? It would be ridiculous to think that he should follow nonviolent theology and turn the other cheek on behalf of the beaten traveler. Instead, the love that the Good Samaritan had for his fellow man would have justified intervention, at some level beyond that advocated by nonviolent theology, and possibly required the use of physical force. It would be unjust and unkind not to help the traveler under attack by using appropriate force to stop the attack. The love the Good Samaritan had for his neighbor forms a simple and powerful logical core for why many find military service rewarding or just force compelling. And it is why I found the authors’ discussion of military service as a “resigned acknowledgement of the terrestrial duties of citizens” (139) to be rather insulting, as my service and so many others were based on love of God, family, country, and brother-in-arms.

Ignoring Stronger Ethical Paradigms

Obviously scriptural references and the ethics they support are debatable. In fact, Biblical verses have been debated by leading theologians for thousands of years. I introduce them here to suggest that making Christ’s ministry the authors’ sole ethic is not only contradictory to their arguments, but it’s not even the strongest ethic. Applying new Latter-day Saint scriptures, mostly D&C 98 and Alma 17–26, to old debates without

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15. To be fair, the authors are quoting a First Presidency text about conscripted military service, but this is their only mention of military service in the text. Given their rhetoric against any violence and their tone throughout the book, it seems like a fair representation of their opinion on the subject.
(1) properly acknowledging potential criticism of their own ethic and (2) largely ignoring other ethical paradigms undermines the usefulness of their book. The authors somewhat acknowledge this limitation by calling their text an “early chapter” (234) and not the final word on the subject (xxv), but they spend a great deal of time in the body of their text discussing how their nonviolent theology is the best and absolute.

That is a shame because their text would have been much stronger if they seriously engaged the arguments of just-war theorists. The authors quote Bruce Springsteen (xxvi) and the rock band Rush (75), but not Thomas Aquinas, Francisco Vitoria, Francisco Suarez, Hugo Grotius, John Locke, and Emmanuel Kant. (There is a single mention of Augustine on page 164.) Collectively these writers influenced Western ideas regarding humanitarian intervention, human rights, international law, and natural rights. These, in turn, influenced the American Constitution and still undergird the peacekeeping efforts of international bodies. The body of strong and salient issues from wise thinkers makes them a confusing omission for authors that believe in a peace consisting of justice, equity, and abiding commitment to the common good built into structures as the highest goal (xxii), and who hope their assertive love alleviates global economic inequities, the results of centuries of racism and misogyny, and large-scale conflict (217).

Simply put, as I read the book, I got the impression the authors believed that the ideas of just-war theorists weren’t good enough when compared to modern pacifist theologians, so they simply ignored them. That hunch was solidified when they not only summarized just warfare in only several short paragraphs but made statements such as that just-war theory was “neither broad enough nor comprehensive enough” compared to restoration scriptures (135). Such hand waving cannot dismiss centuries of pertinent thought that long ago addressed concepts of peace, war, justice, and the common good before the introduction of fashionable buzzwords such as equity.

Ignoring earlier thinkers creates a strategic blind spot for the authors that hinders their analysis. For example, the focus on the heart is particularly important for just-war theory and provides a stronger interpretation for many of the scriptural verses the authors provided for their nonviolent theology. The focus on the heart in just-war theory negotiates the seeming contradiction between “turn the other cheek”

16. If that sounds like a dog whistle for left-wing beliefs, you would be correct. The authors use the example of racism a page later and take a swipe at television, talk radio, and social media for good measure. Proclaim Peace, xxiii, 73.
peacemakers and those who wield the sword. Restoration scriptures might change the vocabulary to something like “renounce war and proclaim peace,” but the dynamic and tension between war and peace remains the same for Latter-day Saints as it has for Christians throughout history.

The Christian writers ignored by Mason and Pulsipher found no contradiction. Augustine summarized this duality with the term “benevolent harshness” or “severity,” depending on the translation, which could sometimes be seen in God himself. Thomas Aquinas said that war is waged for peace, so those fighting “are not opposed to peace, except to the evil peace” that allowed slaughter and injustice to permeate the earth. It sounds like a contradiction in terms, but Augustine used the example of a parent that punishes a child. The punishment may be perceived as harsh, but it is done out of love. Martin Luther compared it to a doctor that must save the patient by sawing off a limb:

For a good physician, when the disease is so deep and virulent that he has to cut off and destroy hand, foot, eye, or ear in order to save the body, seems, when we consider the limb that he cuts off, a terrible, merciless man, yet considering the body that he thus tries to save, he is in truth an excellent, faithful man, and is doing a good.


19. To be clear, the culture in which Augustine lived (and, thus, Augustine) viewed corporal punishment as appropriate for children and others in society — this was the type of physical punishment that Augustine had in mind in his example. In most societies in today’s world corporal punishment involving inflicting pain on children with an object such as a strap, switch, or cane is considered child abuse. Disapproving of parenting approaches utilized in Augustine’s time doesn’t mean that one should ignore the arguments put forward by him or others of his time, however. The example may be viewed as inappropriate, but one should not ignore or throw out the entire argument because one doesn’t like the example used.

The Salamanca School scholar Francisco de Vitoria wrote that only under compulsion and reluctantly should a leader come to the necessity of war, which doesn’t sound too dissimilar from the Book of Mormon description of Nephites who were “sorry” to take up arms (Alma 48:23).

With this framework we can look at scriptural verses that weren’t explained away, minimized, or ignored, but used as key pieces of nonviolent theology. For example, the authors cite Mormon 7:4 (xxiii–xxiv), which says, “Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood.”

Knowing the heart of just war leads the reader to see the key to that verse is the second clause, the command to “delight no more in the shedding of blood.” This directly refers to attitudes of the heart. Consequently, the sin isn’t wielding the sword, as Mason and Pulsipher maintain, but doing so with a delight to shed blood.

The authors quote Ether 8:19: “[N]either doth [the Lord] will that man should shed blood.” This sounds like an authoritative verse for their theory of assertive love and nonviolence. Considered in context, though, the scripture says something different, indicating that the blood shedding was based on a foundation of greed and avarice:

And it was the daughter of Jared who put it [the wicked desires to murder, plunder, lie] into his heart to search up these things of old; and Jared put it into the heart of Akish … . And it came to pass that they formed a secret combination, even as they of old. (Ether 8:16–18)

This leads to the conclusion in the next verse: “For the Lord worketh not in secret combinations, neither doth he will that man should shed blood, but in all things hath forbidden it” (Ether 8:19). Clearly the Lord would never sanction men to shed blood with hearts inspired by Satan. That, however, doesn’t apply to men that have a peaceful heart and are sorrowful in taking up arms but feel compelled to protect their loved ones from the barbarous cruelty of invaders (Alma 48:23–24).


This pattern could be repeated throughout scripture, but these two points are sufficient to show how understanding key tenets of just-war theory provide alternative interpretations that illustrate a different and maybe even better path based upon love. As we again consider the story of the Good Samaritan, the heart that is sanctified and driven by pure love for a neighbor can make the correct decision to wield the sword.

Most importantly, with a better knowledge of just war, or anticipating and answering possible criticisms, the authors could address how their assertive love relies on and operates within the framework of just war. As Michael Walzer noted, “[W]hen one wages a ‘war without weapons,’ one appeals for restraint from men with weapons.”22 They rely on the moral foundations and restraints of just war. Gandhi benefited from living in a relatively free society protected by Britain. When the British army left, it led to abject slaughter between Hindus and Muslims, despite the impotent presence of Gandhi’s peace group that Mason and Pulsipher praise (115).

Speaking of Gandhi, George Orwell once wrote that it is difficult to see how nonviolent principles could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard from again.23 The authors partially acknowledge this weakness when they compensate by repeating variations of the same thought that “violence is still worse, so our nonviolent theology remains better.” For example: [Assertive love] “fail[s] less often than violence” (120).24

In general, any discussion of modern pacifism is only possible due to earlier military victories. Again, the authors seem to unironically acknowledge this when they point out how most members live in peaceful countries in the Western hemisphere which make them seem like a “refuge” to the world (218). They write this line without recognizing


24. The authors provide one book that shows the relative effectiveness of nonviolence resistance (259n47). Those nonviolent protestors still operated within and relied upon the framework of just war. The claims of success often rest on modest government concessions and reform over a short period of time, making this rather limited to the author’s broad goal of an Enoch-like peace and the absolute of Jesus’s nonviolence.
the rights of worship, freedom of speech, and religion may be related to the just use of force that secured those rights. That’s also why I found it incredibly galling when the authors cited the importance of nonviolent principles in church manuals immediately before and after World War II — as if there was nothing in between but “destructiveness,” no justifiable use of force (101–102). Indeed, they gloss over and largely ignore the massive, noble efforts of millions of soldiers that protected the freedom to worship and the freedom to print and read those manuals advocating peace. In their discussion of the assertive love of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis, they compare their actions or courage to those of Tank Man25 in Tiananmen Square (99) but fail to mention credible reports of his execution by the authoritarian government days later and the current imprisonment of democracy activists in Hong Kong who publicly remembered the tragedy.

Simply looking at the heartbreaking events in Afghanistan realizes these points in dramatic ways. The image of Afghans hanging off the sides of planes remains etched in the memories of everyone who saw it. Women will likely be denied education and forced into marriage as childhood brides and sex slaves. Echoing the point of George Orwell about the effectiveness of assertive love in a repressive regime, people are randomly beaten in the streets and most are deathly afraid of a knock on the door. Does anyone seriously believe that Ukrainian citizens practicing assertive love and nonviolent opposition would prosper as Russian tanks and missiles level their cities?

The outpouring of love and sympathy for those in Afghanistan and Ukraine is admirable. And that love led to two separate and often competing courses of action. The desire to intervene using force (as in the earlier considerations about the story of the Good Samaritan) or using assertive love. The authors let their readers down by not fully explaining the alternative and at least acknowledging how applicable just-war theory is to modern problems. Their theories are asserted in a philosophical vacuum.

25. “Tank Man” is one nickname given to the unidentified man who stood in front of the tanks leaving Tiananmen Square after the brutal reaction of the Chinese government to the previous day’s protests. For additional information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tank_Man.
Does Nonviolence Really Work?

The authors state in the introduction and conclusion that they want to start a dialogue that leads to peace. Is that desire reasonable? Is such a dialogue even possible in today’s world?

Personally, I think that reasonable, measured dialogue is a noble goal that most everyone shares. Unfortunately, dialogue isn’t always kind and peaceful, and the actions of those professing nonviolence can undermine the theories they profess. To be clear, I am not talking about the actions of Mason and Pulsipher; I am referring to the actions of many others who profess the same ideas that Mason and Pulsipher proffer in their book.

I’ve been writing about warfare for decades. This has resulted in my being on the receiving end of numerous insults and derision for stating thoughtful, well-supported opinions on the use of force which, obviously, contradicts nonviolent theology. I personally understand what Duane Boyce called the “reproach without evidence” style and what theorist Colin Gray called a “near demonic reputation.” While Mason and Pulsipher have always remained professional and very kind, they are not the only people in this “thought arena” and it is the vociferous and un-Christlike responses of many others to which I’m referring. Considering the behavior of all of those in the arena allows us to consider whether the nonviolent approach suggested by the authors is even possible.

To use the authors’ term, the “cultural violence” in response to my critical opinions in this review will show that many don’t like philosophical opposition, let alone show love when they encounter criticism (xxiii). The authors expect readers to believe that the love of nonviolent proponents — which can’t even overcome mild criticism among culturally similar people having a low-stakes academic discussion in online forums — is supposed to produce a Zion-like peace that transforms centuries of ethnic strife, geopolitical tension, and genocidal hatred. Is such an expectation reasonable? My experiences don’t indicate it is. The inability of many to express nonviolent assertive love in open discussions makes me question the viability of the theory overall.

Such personal attacks not only undermine the theory of assertive love advocated by Mason, Pulsipher, and others, but become very personal to me. As a former Marine it was my military brothers that were put in harm’s way and died in the Kabul terrorist attack. My older familial brother served in Desert Storm and died shortly thereafter. My stepfather died in the Fort Bragg mass shooting. I have a personal stake in peace and have, arguably, seen the effects of violence more “up close and personal” than any other Latter-day Saint academic. I don’t want war, not in the least because I know those that will fight the war and I come from a double gold star family. Yet I also recognize the dangers of unchecked violence and support the use of force to stop it. Those who throw around terms like “war monger” or “hawk” against just-war theorists with reckless abandon not only undermine their theory but engage in ignorant and uncalled for personal attacks.

What does any of this have to do with Mason and Pulsipher’s book? After all, as I mentioned earlier, they have always been professional and very kind. However, my personal experience is that there are many others who claim the same moral high road marked by Mason and Pulsipher who are more than happy to respond to academic criticism with vitriol, vituperation, vilification, and personal denigration of those expressing the criticism. This isn’t a case of academic discussion or responding to criticism with similar criticism — it is a case of “ratcheting up” the response and effectively shooting the messenger because one doesn’t like the message. In other words, many of those professing to Mason and Pulsipher’s standard don’t practice what they preach.

When proponents of nonviolent theology can create a nonviolent conversation among Latter-day Saint scholars and members it will be an important first step towards making nonviolence a reality. Until then, it seems like many proponents of the theory are simply sharing their fashionable vocabulary with a likeminded audience, and too many of that audience quickly abandon the theory when encountering those with whom they disagree.

Conclusion

Mason and Pulsipher provide the most comprehensive Mormon theology of peace to date. Unfortunately, their methodological problems will limit their audience to likeminded advocates. Despite being aware of the dangers of fancy narrative footwork, the authors ignore solid readings of stronger scriptural verses and ideas to promote their tenuous theories. The authors are torn trying to have it both ways. Most of the
book sounds like an exclusively nonviolent text, and they use the same language and vocabulary as nonviolent theologians and frequently cite them. Yet they also, in a limited fashion, acknowledge just war and divine violence. After conceding some alternatives, they immediately repudiate and minimize those alternatives or their usefulness by claiming the “absolute” example of Jesus’s life and ministry as their sole ethic.

The authors mention just war several times, but frequently claim to possess the higher, sanctified, and celestial way. Unfortunately, Mason and Pulsipher ignore just-war theorists and theories that contain significant application to their stated goals about making the world a better place and using love to achieve it. They don’t recognize the framework of just war that makes nonviolence possible. Their minimization of the theory limits its use to most Latter-day Saints, especially military service members.

All together, these problems make Proclaim Peace another in a long line of limited pacifist texts (241n34), only this one has Latter-day Saint scriptures sprinkled among its pages. The result is that the book simplistically offers pacifist theories in a faulty framework of the authors’ own making.

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“Can You Suppose That the Lord Will Spare You?”: Moroni’s Charged Rhetoric in Alma 60:30–32

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: Under the duress of a lengthy war, and prompted by recent Lamanite military successes, as well as incensed at the government’s failure to resupply Helaman’s armies with provisions and to send men to reinforce the city Nephihah, Moroni sent a second scathing letter to the leaders of the Nephite nation in the Nephite capital city Zarahemla. As other scholars have noted, the name Zarahemla likely denotes “seed of compassion” or “seed of sparing.” In this article, I propose that Moroni’s rhetoric in the letter includes an acerbic word-irony involving the meaning of Zarahemla perhaps achieved in terms of the Hebrew verb ḥml (“[he] will spare,” from ḥml, “spare,” “have compassion.” This word-irony points out that although the Lord had spared the people of Zarahemla and the Nephites in the past, the uncompassionate behavior of the nation’s leaders in Zarahemla was creating conditions under which the Lord would not spare the leadership in Zarahemla. Moroni wrote, “Behold, I come unto you, even in the land of Zarahemla, and smite you with the sword … For behold, the Lord will not suffer that ye shall live and wax strong in your iniquities to destroy his righteous people. Behold, can you suppose that the Lord will spare you…?” (Alma 60:30–32). The covenant background of this threat will also be explored.

Writing at the very end of Nephite civilization, Moroni states, "And if our plates had been sufficiently large, we should have written in the Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also. And if we could have written in the Hebrew, behold, ye would have
had none imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:33). This statement suggests that the Hebrew language and script remained a vital part of the Nephite linguistic repertory throughout the entirety of Nephite history, although they underwent change over time as language and language usage inevitably do. Amaleki, writing during King Benjamin’s reign, mentions that Mosiah I encountered in Zarahemla a “corrupted” language — presumably a dialect of Hebrew — being spoken among the descendants of Muloch, who “had brought no records with them” (Omni 1:17) and kept no records. With no written record and no scriptures to act as a language (and religious) conservator, their language had changed rapidly. Nevertheless, shared linguistic affinities between the Nephites under Mosiah I and the Mulochites would explain how Mosiah could have “caused that they should be taught in his language” with evident facility and could unite together in the way that they did (Omni 1:18–19). Nephite recordkeeping and scribal practices ensured that Hebrew remained a prominent part of the Nephite linguistic and literary repertory after the time of Mosiah I, Benjamin, and Mosiah II, and throughout the reign of the judges, even to the time of Mormon and Moroni.

Scholars working in the Latter-day Saint tradition widely agree that “seed of compassion,” “seed of pity,” or “seed of sparing” (Hebrew noun zera, “seed,” + noun hemlå, “compassion”) represents the most likely etymology and meaning of the Book of Mormon personal name and toponym Zarahemla. Previous studies have located wordplay and puns

2. See Omni 1:23: “Behold, I Amaleki was born in the days of Mosiah; and I have lived to see his death and Benjamin his son reigneth in his stead.”
3. In this article, I will use Skousen’s corrected forms of proper names in the interest of promoting the most correct readings of Book of Mormon texts. I hope to see these accepted and used more widely among Latter-day Saints.
on the name Zarahemla and ḥml in terms of “sparing.” Pedro Olavarria and David Bokovoy suggest that Zeniff creates an ironic wordplay on the name Zarahemla in terms of sparing in Mosiah 9:2 (“and we returned — those of us that were spared — to the land of Zarahemla”). As I noted in a subsequent study, wordplay on Zarahemla in terms “compassion” occurs in Alma 27:4–5, where Ammon and his brethren “were moved with compassion” on behalf of their Lamanite converts, wordplay which recurs in Alma 53:10–13 where the converted Lamanites reciprocate that compassion a generation later in Zarahemla (“they were moved with compassion”). Nephi the son of Helaman uses rhetorical wordplay in Helaman 7:24 (“the Lord will be merciful unto [the Lamanites]. Yea, he will lengthen out their days and increase their seed, even when thou shalt be utterly destroyed except thou shalt repent”) and in Helaman 8:21 (“and do ye not behold that the seed of Zedekiah are with us”).

In this short study, I will propose an additional, intriguing wordplay or word-irony involving the name Zarahemla, perhaps in terms of the Hebrew verb ṣahṃēl (from ḥml “have compassion,” “spare”) in Moroni’s letter to Parhoron (or Pahoron, rather than Pahoran) and other government officials in Alma 60:30–32. The rhetorical intent of Moroni’s bitter word-irony involving the name Zarahemla appears to have been to bait or jolt Parhoron and other government officials into action on behalf of Helaman’s army and the other Nephite armies by reminding them that their being Zarahemla-ites — the “seed of compassion” in


7. Ibid., 250–52.

8. Ibid., 234–35.


their aptly named capital Zarahemla — did not guarantee that the Lord would “spare” them as a presumed covenant entitlement in the face of the imminent Lamanite threat, especially in view of their uncompassionate treatment of their own countrymen.

Background

The long war between the Nephites and the Lamanites, the latter under the leadership of Nephite (Zoramite; see Alma 54:23–24) dissenters Amalickiah and his brother Ammoron, had gone on for a little over ten years.11 After receiving a letter from Helaman, detailing the success of the latter’s armies in retaking previous lost cities and territory from the Lamanites and requesting more supplies and support, Moroni sends the first of two letters to the government in Zarahemla (Alma 59:3). He does not appear to have received any response to the first letter. Around this same time, the Nephite city of Nephihah, which Moroni presumed that the government would have reinforced due to its apparent strategic importance, fell to the Lamanites (Alma 59:5–12). The great length of the war, the government’s non-response to his first letter, and the government’s utter failure to reinforce the city of Nephihah motivated Moroni to write the scathing letter now preserved in Alma 60. Beyond inaction, Moroni suspected malfeasance on the part of government officials (see, for example, Alma 60:18). Moroni’s rightful anger and suspicion constitutes the backdrop for the rhetoric he uses, including the bitter word-irony involving Zarahemla and his allusions to divine covenant.

Zeraʿ (“Seed”) as (an Abrahamic) Covenant Term

In order to more fully appreciate why the name Zarahemla (“seed of sparing,” “seed of compassion”) and Moroni’s acerbic word-irony involving this name would have been emotive to a Nephite-Mulochite (Mulekite)12 audience, we must first contextualize the Hebrew noun zeraʿ as an Abrahamic covenant term. From its earliest biblical post-creation

11. The war began “in the latter end of the nineteenth year of the reign of the judges” (Alma 48:2). It was “in the thirtieth year of the reign of the judges” that Moroni “received and … read” Helaman’s letter (Alma 59:1).

uses in direct reference to human beings (e.g., Genesis 3:15; 4:25; see also Moses 5:11), the word zera’ (“seed” as posterity) takes on covenantal and christological overtones. In the christological paradigm, Christ is understood to be Eve’s “seed” in Genesis 3:15, and Abraham’s “seed” in the narrowest sense, as Paul sometimes does (e.g., Galatians 3:16). When the Lord “covenanted” with Enoch, he promised that “a remnant of his [Enoch’s] seed should always be found among all nations, while the earth should stand” and “Blessed is he through whose seed Messiah shall come; for he saith — I am Messiah, the King of Zion, the Rock of Heaven, which is broad as eternity; whoso cometh in at the gate and climbeth up by me shall never fall; wherefore, blessed are they of whom I have spoken, for they shall come forth with songs of everlasting joy.”

The “seed” of Noah were heirs to the covenant that God made with Noah and his “seed” (Genesis 9:9), “seed” that would include the Messiah (cf. Moses 7:50–53).

Beginning in Genesis 12, and thereafter in the Book of Genesis, zera’ becomes a key Abrahamic covenant term, as designating the “seed” or descendants of Abraham born in fulfillment of the covenant promises to Abraham regarding a numberless posterity, who will themselves potentially become the recipients and heirs of the same promises (of an eternal relationship with God, certain lands, priesthood, and numberless posterity). The patriarchal narratives of Genesis emphasize that Isaac,

13. The curse on the serpent in Genesis 3:15 — “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed [zarākā] and her seed [zarāḥ]; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel [āqēb]” — anticipates the covenant “seed” of Jacob [ya’āqōb, cf. Jacob as the grabber of his brother’s “heel” in Genesis 25:26] and Christ as the “seed” who will bruise or crush the serpent’s head. The etiological explanation for Seth’s naming, describes Seth as an “appointed” zera’ — i.e., a covenant, chosen “seed”: “And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth [šēt]: For God, said she, hath appointed [šāt] me another seed [zera’] instead of Abel, whom Cain slew” (Genesis 4:25; cf. Christ as the “seed” begotten in the “likeness” and after the “image” of his Father, comparing Genesis 5:1–3 with D&C 107:42–43).


Jacob, and Joseph, each in their turn, secured the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant through their faithfulness and righteous desires, although they, like Abraham and Sarah, do not receive all the blessings during mortality (see Hebrews 11:13).  

16 Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, in Nephi’s small plates record, evidence a near-obsession with the concept of “seed” as a key component of the divine covenant. Nephi ties the concept of the preservation of “seed” or posterity in fulfillment of divine covenant into Isaiah’s onomastic Shear-jashub theme, a theme built from his son’s name (šĕʾār-yāšû́b = “a remnant shall return”) foretelling both divine judgment and mercy upon Israel, when he uses the phrase “remnant of our seed” (1 Nephi 15:13–14; 2 Nephi 30:3–4), reflecting his concern for the divine judgments and mercy upon his and his brothers’ “seed.” This concern was shared by Nephi’s successors.

That this concept was of tremendous importance to Moroni himself is evidenced by his creation of the “title of liberty” or “standard of liberty” as a symbol of the miraculous preservation of a “remnant of the seed of Joseph” (Alma 46:20–27; see especially vv. 23, 27). Moroni had drawn inspiration for this covenant and the symbolic action involving the tearing of garments and coats that accompanied the making of this covenant, from the patriarch Jacob’s prophecy regarding the “remnant” of the coat of Joseph: “Even as this remnant of garment of my son’s hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God, and be taken unto himself, while the remainder

16. Hebrews 11:13: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”


19. See Moroni’s use of the title of liberty and the story of Joseph’s coat (Alma 46:23–24, 27); Mormon’s remarks in 3 Nephi 5:23–24; 10:16–17; 29:8; 4 Nephi 1:49; Mormon 5:9, 12 (cf. 5:24); 7:1, 10; and Moroni’s remarks in Ether 13:6–10. See also the post-resurrection teachings of Jesus in 3 Nephi 15:12; 16:4; 20:10, 16; 21:2, 4, 12, 22–23, 26.

of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment” (Alma 46:24). Moroni considered the miraculous preservation of the Nephite nation as a fulfillment of covenants made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — i.e., the Abrahamic covenant (see especially Alma 44:4). \(^{21}\)

Before the Lamanite conquest of the city of Nephi and after, Moroni always regarded the preservation of the Nephite nation as a matter of covenant. Near the end of his letter, Moroni states, “And now behold, I Moroni am constrained, according to the covenant [cf. Hebrew habbĕrît] which I have made [kāratî, “I have cut”],\(^{22}\) to keep the commandments of my God. Therefore I would that ye should adhere to the word of God” (Alma 60:34). Moroni viewed the failure of Nephite government officials to support himself and Helaman and their troops as evidence of their infidelity to the covenant concluded in Alma 46:17–27 and as the consequences of such infidelity.

**Moroni Addresses Parhoron and the Other Government Officials in Zarahemla**

The Lamanite conquest of the Nephite city of Nephihah caused Moroni, the supreme Nephite military leader, to become “exceeding sorrowful” and to “beg[î]n to doubt” the chances of Nephite success in repelling the Lamanite invasion (Alma 59:11). Indeed, “all his chief captains … doubted and marvelled … because of the wickedness of the people, … because of the success of the Lamanites over them.” This resulted in an exchange of letters between Moroni and Parhoron.\(^{23}\)

Recognizing that Parhoron is not Moroni’s only addressee is crucial to understanding the force of his word-irony involving Zarahemla. Although Latter-day Saints sometimes frame Alma 60 as an invective-filled and even misguided personal letter from Moroni to Parhoron, the opening of Moroni’s letter makes it clear that Parhoron is

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\(^{21}\) Moroni makes clear his view on the covenant nature of divine preservation in his words to Zerahemnah in Alma 44:4: “Now ye see that this is the true faith of God. Yea, ye see that God will support and keep and preserve us so long as we are faithful unto him and unto our faith and religion. And never will the Lord suffer that we shall be destroyed except we should fall into transgression and deny our faith.”


\(^{23}\) See “Why Was Moroni’s Correspondence with Pahoran Significant?” *KnoWhys*, Book of Mormon Central, August 18, 2016, [https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-was-moronis-correspondence-with-pahoran-significant](https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-was-moronis-correspondence-with-pahoran-significant).
not his only addressee. Moroni also addresses the other high government officials and bureaucrats working under Parhoron’s authority in Zarahemla, the Nephite-Mulochite capital during this era: “Behold, I direct mine epistle to Parhoron in the city of Zarahemla, which is the chief judge and the governor over the land, and also to all those who have been chosen by this people to govern and manage the affairs of this war” (Alma 60:1). This emphasis on plural addressees continues in the next verse: “For behold, I have somewhat to say unto them by the way of condemnation. For behold, ye yourselves know that ye have been appointed to gather together men and arm them” (Alma 60:2).

The plural pronoun “you” occurs twelve times in Alma 60:3, 7–8, 23, 27, 29–30, 32, 35 and the possessive pronoun “your” occurs twenty-eight times in Alma 60:5–7, 9–12, 18, 20, 28–29, 31–36. The distinctively plural reflexive pronoun “yourselves” occurs four times in vv. 2, 10, 18, 29. The pronoun “ye,” which is usually plural in English usage and ambivalently has singular or plural referents in the Book of Mormon, occurs forty-nine times in Alma 60:2, 5, 8–13, 18–25, 29–31, 33–35. Notably, the prevailing singular pronouns “thou,” “thy/thine,” “thee,” and “thysel’” occur nowhere in Moroni’s letter, which suggests that all instances of “ye” here are to be taken as plural. Indeed, Moroni’s addressing the recipients as “my beloved brethren” in Alma 60:10 confirms the case beyond doubt: Moroni addresses his letter to the leadership in Zarahemla generally, of whom Parhoron is “chief” (Alma 60:1). The point is made even more clearly in Moroni’s recitation of the revelation given to him: “Behold, the Lord saith unto me: If those whom ye have appointed your governors do not repent of their sins and iniquities, ye shall go up to battle against them” (Alma 60:33). To read Moroni’s letter as a misguided personal critique of Parhoron’s individual leadership is to misread the letter entirely.24

Within the spatial bounds of Moroni’s rhetoric, “Zarahemla” (Alma 60:1, 30) also serves as a kind of metonym for the Nephite government (cf. Washington as a metonym for the United States government). Moroni also refers to “the wickedness which first commenced at our head” (Alma 60:15) and “it will be expedient that

we contend no more with the Lamanites until we have first cleansed our inward vessel, yea, even the great head of our government” (Alma 60:24). “Head” here refers to Zarahemla, which constituted the “head” or capital (< Latin caput = “head”) city.25

“Can You Suppose That the Lord Will Spare You?”:
Moroni’s Acerbic and Word-irony Involving the Meaning of Zarahemla

Parhoron, the son of Nephihah (Alma 50:39–40), seems to have been a descendant of Nephi, as perhaps indicated by his father’s Nephitish name (Nephi + the suffix [i]hah). On the other hand, many, and maybe most, of the political leadership in Zarahemla, were descendants of Muloch through his descendant, Zarahemla. Any wordplay or word-irony involving this name would necessarily resonate even more acutely with descendants — the “seed” — of Muloch and Zarahemla:

Behold, I wait for assistance from you. And except ye do administer unto our relief, behold, I come unto you, even into the land of Zarahemla, and smite you with the sword, insomuch that ye can have no more power to impede the progress of this people in the cause of our freedom. For behold, the Lord will not suffer that ye shall live and wax strong in your iniquities to destroy his righteous people. Behold, can you suppose that the Lord will spare [Hebrew yaḥmōl] you and come out in judgment against the Lamanites when it is the tradition of their fathers that hath caused their hatred — yea, and it has been redoubled by those who have dissented from us — while your iniquity is for the cause of your love of glory and the vain things of the world? (Alma 60:30–32)

The etymological “sparing” or “compassion” in the name Zarahemla (“seed of compassion,” “seed of sparing”) is implicitly divine compassion or sparing. Moroni avers that no expectation — covenant or otherwise — will spare government officials in Zarahemla guilty of malfeasance and

25. This concept can be readily discerned in Isaiah 7:8–9, where the prophet describes Damascus as “head” (capital city) of Syria (Aram) and Rezin as “head” (of state) in the capital at Damascus. He describes Samaria as the “head” (capital city) of Israel (Ephraim) and Pekah, “Remaliah’s son,” as “head” (of state) in the capital at Samaria: “For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin; and within threescore and five years shall Ephraim be broken, that it be not a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is Remaliah’s son. If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established.”
covenant violation from divine judgment — including retribution from Moroni’s own sword. The leader’s malfeasance and covenant violation had been particularly and painfully evident in the uncompassionate neglect of their own countrymen who were fighting for national preservation. Moroni’s question cuts to the heart of the nature of divine covenants: will the Lord spare (yahmōl < hml)\(^26\) a people and punish their traditional enemies merely on the basis of covenant status or chosenness? Or, put another way, can a covenant people rely upon divine sparing and the destruction of their enemies as a covenant entitlement (rather than a conditional covenant blessing)? Moroni’s question clearly presumes a negative answer.

It should not pass without notice that Moroni appeals to Yahweh as the suzerain enforcer of the covenant. Accordingly, Moroni claims divine authority for himself as a leader of the Lord’s covenant people — “his righteous people” (Alma 60:31). He even goes so far as to invoke the ancient covenant image of the Lord as Divine Warrior\(^27\) when he invokes the image of the Lord “com[ing] out in judgment against the Lamanites,” which many Nephites in Zarahemla had come to expect as a covenant entitlement.

**The Covenant Preservation of the True “Seed of Sparing”**

Moroni goes further still. He advocates that he and his supporters — rather than the Nephite leaders and bureaucrats in Zarahemla — constitute the Lord’s “righteous people” (v. 31), the former qualifying for the Lord’s sparing, even at the expense of the latter: “And behold, if ye will not do this, I come unto you speedily. For behold, God will not suffer that we should perish with hunger. Therefore he will give unto us of your food, even if it must be by the sword. Now see that ye fulfil the word of God” (Alma 60:35).

Because they are faithful to the covenant, Moroni and his supporters are the true seed of sparing. Thus, “God will not suffer” them “[to] perish with hunger.” Since the name Zarahemla, as “seed of compassion” or “seed of sparing,” bespeaks covenant preservation, Moroni and those loyal to the same cause (i.e., “the cause of liberty,” Alma 51:17) can expect

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\(^{26}\) On the form yahmōl, see, e.g., Malachi 3:17.

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divine assistance, while the uncompassionate leaders, especially those
who have allied themselves with the would-be vassal king Pachus (and
by extension the Lamanite king Ammoron) as described in Alma 62:6–9,
cannot expect divine assistance, but rather divine judgment — all of this
because of the covenant detailed in Alma 46:17–27.

Conclusion
Like several other Book of Mormon texts, Moroni’s letter to Parhoron
with its threat to him and to the leaders of the Nephite nation behind
the lines in Zarahemla plays on the meaning of Zarahemla (“seed of
compassion” or “seed of sparing”) and its covenant overtones in terms of
the Hebrew verb *ḥm*l, “spare,” “have compassion”: “behold, I come unto
you, even into the land of Zarahemla, and smite you with the sword …
For behold, the Lord will not suffer that ye shall live and wax strong in
your iniquities to destroy his righteous people. Behold, can you suppose
that the Lord will spare [yahmōl] you…?” (Alma 60:30–32). The first
element in Zarahemla, *zera* (“seed”), constitutes a key Abrahamic
covenant term in the ancient Israelite and Nephite religious worldview.
Recognizing the covenant background of Moroni’s rhetoric, including
the concept that divine preservation (or sparing) requires covenant
faithfulness and righteousness, helps us more fully appreciate the
strength of Moroni’s threat. The righteous, faithful, and loyal in the
manner described by Moroni himself in Alma 44:4 and 46:20–27 could
expect divine preservation or “sparing,” and the uncompassionate,
unrighteous, and disloyal had no promise of divine sparing. Indeed,
Moroni himself would enforce the divine judgment for the covenant
violations of the latter.

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Liahona: “Prepared of the Lord, a Compass”

Calvin D. Tolman

Abstract: This study assesses some of the interpretations of the name Liahona, which are unsatisfactory from a linguistic perspective. Since a dialect of Hebrew is the most likely underlying language of the Book of Mormon, the approach taken in this study parses the word Liahona into three meaningful segments in Hebrew: 1-iah-ona; a Biblical Hebrew transliteration would be 1-Yāh-ōnā. This name is a grammatical construction that attaches the prepositional prefix 1- to Yāh, the name of “the Lord,” followed by the noun *ōnā. The preposition 1- in this context denotes the following name as the agent or the one who is responsible for the following noun, i.e., 1-Yāh designates the Lord as the agent, author, or producer of the *ōnā. Languages are complex, and etymological conjectures in ancient languages are hypothetical; therefore, the explanations and justifications presented here, of necessity, are speculative in nature. Etymological explanations have to involve the complexity of linguistics and sound changes. The hoped-for result of this study is that a simple and reasonable explanation of the meaning of Liahona will emerge from the complexity, and a more reasonable translation of Liahona will be the result.

The root and meaning of the word Liahona, only mentioned once in the Book of Mormon (Alma 37:38), has been a topic of conjecture and debate for decades. In this paper I briefly evaluate four earlier studies or comments on the etymology of the word. Each study varies in its methodology and therefore comes to different conclusions. There is general agreement that Liahona is divided into three parts. Each study translates the first segment L- as “to.” The second element is identified either as Yah or Yaho, the short form of Yahweh, that signifies “the Lord.” There is no agreement in these studies as to the phonemic construction of the third element, i.e., what word it represents, what its phonemes are,
how it is pronounced, and how it is to be translated. None of the earlier treatments identify the third element as a physical object; the Liahona is described as a round ball of fine brass with spindles (1 Nephi 16:10). An acceptable etymology of Liahona should at least take its physical characteristics into account in addition to its interpretation as a compass. The interpretation of Liahona given in the translated text is “a compass — and the Lord prepared it” (Alma 37:38). Since these studies do not address the Liahona’s physical characteristics nor its function, they fall short of an acceptable etymology for this name.

As I make clear shortly, I propose that the name Liahona is also parsed into three acceptable grammatical elements of Biblical Hebrew. The first element L- is a preposition that attaches to a name [-iah-] that is followed by an object [-ona]. In this grammatical construction L- does not signify “to,” but denotes that the named person [-iah-] is the agent, actor, author, or the one responsible for the object [-ona]. This proposal necessitates a lengthy discussion on the justification for this interpretation taken from the Bible and from epigraphic Hebrew texts of the pre-exilic period.

The second element of Liahona is Yāh, the short form of the divine name Yahweh, “the Lord.” There are no l-Yāh- expressions in the Masoretic Text, so a few l-Yahweh expressions are documented to demonstrate how this expression can be interpreted. The preposition l- occurs with other names in the Biblical text, and examples are given that show that it denotes the named person as the agent, author, or producer of the object. The l-Yāh expression identifies Yāh as the one who produced the object [-ona], or as interpreted in Alma 37:38, the one who prepared it.

The third element in the name Liahona is proposed to be *ʔōnâ.¹ This has the structure of a legitimate word in Hebrew, but it does not occur in any known Hebrew inscription or text. I propose a workaround by postulating a reconstruction of *ʔōnâ as it would have occurred as a proto-Semitic word. The next step is to look for cognates (words that have a common origin) of the reconstructed word in related Semitic languages. Principles of historical linguistics and sound changes are utilized to identify possible cognates in other Semitic languages. Cognates are found in Akkadian, Aramaic, Ugaritic, and Arabic. The fundamental meaning shared by these cognates is “vessel.” The conclusion is that *ʔōnâ denotes “a vessel.” The name l-Yāh-*ʔōnâ literally translates as “prepared the Lord a vessel.” The interpretation of this name is given to us by the translator Joseph Smith as “a compass, and the Lord prepared it.” The Nephites would not have had a word that signified
a magnetic compass that indicated directions, but they would have had a word for vessel — *Ɂōnā. A vessel is a portable physical object and qualifies as an appropriate designation for the Liahona. The proposed etymological translation of Liahona is “the Lord prepared a vessel,” and the interpretation is “the Lord prepared a compass.”

**Reynolds and Sjodahl Propose a Meaning for Liahona**

The etymology of the name Liahona has been of interest to some members of the church for a long time. Reynolds and Sjodahl divide Liahona into three parts.

*L* is a Hebrew preposition meaning “to,” and sometimes used to express the possessive case. *Iah* is a Hebrew abbreviated form of “Jehovah,” common in Hebrew names. *On* is the Hebrew name of the Egyptian “City of the Sun” …. *L-iah-on* means, therefore, literally, “To God is light;” or, “of God is light.” That is to say, God gives light, as does the Sun.²

Reynolds and Sjodahl propose the Hebrew name of the Egyptian city Ɂōn [Genesis 41:45, 50] as the final segment. The city Ɂōn “was celebrated for worship of sun-god Ra & hence called also sun-city.”³ Reynolds and Sjodahl likely conclude that Ɂōn is the closest word in the Hebrew Bible that would correspond with -ona, the final segment of Liahona. However, the final *a* is not found in Ɂōn. They explain where they believe the *a* came from. “The final *a* reminds us that the Egyptian form of the Hebrew name On is Annu, and that seems to be the form Lehi used.”⁴ This does not adequately explain the final *a* of Liahona. The *a* in Annu, does not follow the *n* but precedes it; the final *a* in Liahona follows the *n*. “This etymological explanation is rather unlikely because ancient Near Eastern people did not mix languages, especially in the onomasticon.”⁵ One may ask, how is the interpretation “to God is the light” compatible with the interpretation of Liahona as a compass (Alma 37:38), a physical object? There is a significant semantic difference here.

**Curci Defines Liahona: “To Yahweh is the Whither”**

Jonathan Curci also parses Liahona into three Hebrew segments: *l-* “to” + *iaho*, a theophoric indicator of Yahweh, i.e., “the Lord,” + ồna “whither,” “an adverb meaning direction or motion to a certain place.” Curci gives a literal translation, “To YHWH is the whither,” signifying “The Direction (director) of the Lord.”⁶ Curci’s study of the etymology of the word Liahona identifies the first part as Liaho “to (of)
the Lord.” He identifies the last part of Liahona, ‘ona (I prefer to write aleph, a glottal stop, with the IPA symbol ?. It is more visible and less likely to be confused with ayin ζ, a pharyngeal voiced fricative.) that he derives from the Hebrew adverb ʔānāh, e.g., ʔānāh ʁēlēkī “whither wilt thou go?” (KJV), and “where are you going?” (NIV) (Genesis 16:8). The adverb ʔānāh derives from ʔān “where, whither” plus -āh, the he locale or directional he, that indicates the direction toward a place. Curci suggests that the ə vowel is pronounced as an open o. There is no way to know for certain the exact phonetic pronunciation of these vowels in 600 BC.

If Curci’s ʔānāh “whither” is the source of -ʔona, and if the Tiberian system of pronunciation were used, then both ə’s should be pronounced ə (a low back rounded vowel) as in ʔən, this would result in *liahoʔən, which would be transcribed *liahono. If the long ə is a low back open vowel, then we would get *liahana. Neither of these matches the spelling in the Book of Mormon, thus Hebrew ʔānāh “whither” is likely not the meaning of the last part of Liahona (-ʔona). Curci’s literal translation “to Yahweh is the whither,” uses an adverb in the place of the concrete noun compass, and his explanation of his interpretation is “the direction of the Lord.” Here he uses an abstract noun in the place of a concrete noun, i.e., a portable object “a compass.” There is a semantic disconnect between his explanation (abstract noun) and his interpretation (adverb) and the actual physical object (concrete noun) — “a round ball of curious workmanship, and it was of fine brass” (1 Nephi 16:10).

Bowen’s Interpretation: “To Yahweh, Look!”

Matthew Bowen proposes an Egyptian explanation for the meaning of Liahona:

Regarding the preposition l- in Liahona, the liquids r and l were frequently indistinguishable or interchangeable in Egyptian writing … There was, in fact, no standardized writing for l as distinct from r in Egyptian until Demotic times (600 BC–AD 400) … many words with l and r continued to be spelled interchangeably. … the interchangeability of r and l in Egyptian writing and the significant semantic overlap between Egyptian r and Hebrew lē make them handy candidates for interlingual calquing. Thus, the final element -na (-[']nā’ can be accounted for as an Egyptian element, Liahona need not be considered a ‘Hebrew’ expression per se, particularly if the lē- can be viewed as a calqued form of the
Egyptian preposition $r$. The possible objection that Liahona constitutes a mixed-language construction is mitigated if not obviated. … The syntax of Liahona emphasizes the divine name $yāhô$ in a fronted prepositional phrase.\footnote{12}

Here Bowen supports his interpretation that Liahona is Egyptian. The object of the preposition $l$- is $yāhô$, i.e., $lyāhô$; “$\text{*liahu > *liaho (â > ô}$.” Bowen doesn’t clarify if $\text{*liaho}$ is the Hebrew form or the Egyptian form (the preposition $l$- and the divine name $Yāhô$ are Hebrew). Bowen also assumes that the prepositional phrase is “followed by a verbal construction.” He proposes that the final segment -na derives from the Egyptian imperative verb $nw$ that is pronounced $*-$naw/-nao. “It is also possible that the Lehites pronounced $[\text{?i}nw$ as – $[a > o]na$.”\footnote{13} There are problems with this proposal from a linguistic standpoint. The vowels $i$, $a$, and $o$ in the same environment following a glottal stop cannot just be changed at will to satisfy a proposal; this is not how vowels change. If the initial syllable $\text{?i-}$ of $\text{?inw}$ deletes leaving only $nw$ that vocalizes as $*naw/nao$, and if Lehi used only this half of the Demotic imperative verb, then this could explain the final -na. However, Lehi lived in Jerusalem and spoke Hebrew, so why would a partial Demotic verb get mixed in with the obvious Hebrew $lē-yāhô$-? Another problem with Bowen’s proposal is that he expects the final syllable -na of Liahona to be a verb. Bowen states: “I propose an Egyptian explanation that provides the expected verb.”\footnote{14} A verb as the final segment is not required nor necessary in this type of grammatical construction, as will be shown in my discussion of the prefix lamed. The verb that Bowen settles on is Demotic $\text{?inw}$, an imperative verb “look!” or “see!” Bowen’s interpretation of Liahona is an imperative statement: “‘To Yahweh, look!’ — that is, ‘Look to the Lord!’ or ‘Look to God!’”\footnote{15} The Liahona is described in the Book of Mormon as “a round ball of curious workmanship, and it was of fine brass” (1 Nephi 16:10). It is a physical instrument of some kind that is interpreted “a compass.” A compass is a concrete noun not an imperative statement. It is not necessary to go to Egyptian to define the nature of this marvelous instrument, when the first part of the name is Hebrew. Bowen’s proposal doesn’t account for the physical characteristics of the name Liahona.

There is substantial evidence that the original “language of the Book of Mormon is probably not Egyptian. … The original language of the Book of Mormon is based on a dialect of Hebrew.”\footnote{17} The Egyptologist John Gee makes this observation:
The term *language* occurs forty-three times in the Book of Mormon, and can represent both script (Mosiah 1:4; 8:11; 9:1; 24:4; 3 Nephi 5:18; Ether 3:22) and speech (1 Nephi 1:15; 3:21; 5:3, 6, 8; 10:15; 17:22; 2 Nephi 31:3; Omni 1:18, Alma 5:61; 7:1; 26:24; 46:26; Helaman 13:37), and thus it is often ambiguous (e.g. 1 Nephi 1:2).\(^\text{18}\)

Gee comes to this conclusion: “With the original tongue of the Nephites being Hebrew, what is Egyptian must be the script. A Hebrew dialect written in Egyptian script fulfills all the conditions set forth by both the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith for the ‘language’ of the Book of Mormon.”\(^\text{19}\) Sidney B. Sperry long ago came to the conclusion that the spoken language was Hebrew and the written language was a “reformed Egyptian” script.\(^\text{20}\)

At the end of the record of Mormon, Moroni writes, “we have written this record, according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us according to our manner of speech. And if our plates had been sufficiently large, we should have written in the Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also. And if we could have written in the Hebrew, behold, ye would have had none imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:32–33). This specifies that the record was written in Egyptian characters (indicating a script and not the spoken Egyptian language) that did not always express the nuances of their spoken Hebrew language, thus there were imperfections in the text. “None other people knoweth our language [script], therefore he [the Lord] hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof” (Mormon 9:34), that is, the Lord would provide the interpretation of the “reformed Egyptian” script and the underlying Hebrew-derived Nephite language. Lehi, as a relative of Laban, likely learned this script from his father or grandfather, therefore he could read the plates of brass, and Nephi used this same script to write his record in his native Hebrew by using the “reformed” Egyptian script.\(^\text{21}\) A spoken language can be written in different languages or writing systems as long as the language or script can represent the phonemes and morphemes of the spoken language. Also, it is no surprise that the spoken Hebrew of the Nephites “hath been altered by us” in the thousand years since the time of Nephi. Spoken languages naturally change over time.

There are many who conclude that “the language of the Egyptians” in 1 Nephi 1:2 refers to both Egyptian speech and Egyptian script.\(^\text{22}\) It is true that there are a number of Egyptian derived names in the Book of Mormon narrative,\(^\text{23}\) but this by itself does not justify concluding
that they spoke the Egyptian language. These Egyptian type names may have become part of the Israelite culture during their long sojourn in the land of Egypt. The names may have persisted in Joseph’s lineage (his wife was Egyptian), and they are also likely to be on the plates of brass.

**Spendlove’s Interpretation is an Exclamation: To Jehovah!**

Loren Spendlove offers another explanation for *Liahona*. He writes:

its derivation [is] based on the Hebrew language. ... I also believe that the initial part of the word derives from the Hebrew ליהו (le’yaho, meaning “to or toward Jehovah”). Generally speaking, the various explanations often vary from each other only in the final syllable of the word *Liahona*, -na. I propose that the final syllable in *Liahona* comes from the Hebrew particle נא (na), described by Koehler and Baumgartner as a “particle giving emphasis,” and by Brown, Driver and Briggs as a particle of “entreaty or exhortation.” It has also been described as a “pleading for what is desired.” In the Hebrew Bible this word is translated most often as now, please, oh!, I beseech thee, or I pray thee. However, none of these translations really do service to this Hebrew word. I would describe נא (na) as an exclamation without any translatable meaning in English. Perhaps it could be best rendered as simply ! (exclamation point). If we join the particle נא (na) to the initial part of *Liahona* (ליהו le’yaho) we arrive at ליהו-נא (le’yaho-na), to Jehovah!, or toward Jehovah!.

Spendlove’s interpretation agrees with the general consensus that *Liaho* is a combination of the Hebrew preposition ל, meaning to, with the theophoric element yaho, a form of the divine name Yahweh (or Jehovah) — that is, “to Yahweh,” or “to the Lord.” Spendlove proposes that the final syllable -na is an exclamation without any translatable meaning in English, i.e., it is an exclamation. A problem with this interpretation is similar to Bowen’s in that *na* is a particle and not a concrete noun like a compass. The Liahona is a physical object whose interpretation in English is a compass, so how is it possible to get the interpretation of “a compass” out of an exclamation “to Jehovah!”?

**Parsing Liahona into Meaningful Segments**

The word *Liahona* should not be divided into syllables based on possible English pronunciation and syllable patterns, for example, it could be
pronounced in English either leè-a-hòe-na or lié-a-hòe-na. I have heard it pronounced both ways. A more appropriate way to determine the probable ancient pronunciation and meaning would be to parse the word into meaningful segments based on Biblical Hebrew grammar. The first Hebrew segment is the letter $l$- or lamed that is a prefixed preposition that attaches to a substantive (in this case, a name), and in this phonemic environment it has no vowel.\(^{25}\)

The second meaningful segment is -$iah$-. This is a short form of the name of the Lord or Yah. The Book of Mormon spelling follows the Greek or Septuagint system using iota, $i$ for Hebrew yod, $y$. The theophoric element -$iah$ occurs as a suffix on some Book of Mormon names.\(^{26}\) Since the yod in -$iah$- is a consonant, I prefer to use $y$ instead of $i$. Scholars believe the full name of the Lord, the Tetragrammaton or four letters $Yhwh$, is pronounced Yahweh.\(^{27}\) The short form $yh$ or $Yāh$ occurs as a suffix on many names, and it is also a stand-alone name (Exodus 15:2; 17:16; Psalm 68:4 plus 20 more). It is also the final name in the phrase, halēl- $yāh$ “praise ye $Yāh$ (the Lord)” (Psalm 105:45 plus many more). Of the above scholars, who have proposed the etymology of Liahona, only Reynolds and Sjodahl choose $yh$ or $Yāh$, the short form of Yahweh, as the second segment in Liahona. Curci, Bowen, and Spendlove choose the other short form $yhw$ that is vocalized in the Masoretic Text as $yəhō$- when it is a prefix and -$yāhû$ when it is a suffix. The form $yhw$ only occurs as a prefix or a suffix in names. The problem with $yhw$ or $yahw$ as a prefix is that the vowel $a$ deletes or reduces to schwa in propertonic position (two syllables before the tone or stress) based on Masoretic pointing, and the consonant $w$ changes to the vowel $ō$, e.g., $yəhōʔahūz$ (2 Kings 10:35). The suffix vocalization of $yhw$ is -$yāhû$, where $a$ lengthens and $w$ changes to the long vowel $ū$, e.g., $ʔābìyāhū$ “Abijah” (2 Chronicles 13:20).\(^{28}\) Only Curci discusses this issue. His answer is that -$yaho$- is the middle of the word.\(^{29}\) The final syllable is -$na$ that he proposes comes from $ʔānāh$ “whither.” He merges the $o$ of -$yaho$- with the first syllable $ʔā$- of $ʔānāh$ to get $ʔōna$.\(^{30}\) Bowen and Spendlove keep the final syllable -$na$ as a separate entity. The selection of -$yaho$- as the middle segment creates problems of interpretation; $yhw$ only occurs as a suffix on theophoric names with the vocalization -$yāhû$. If the vowel $o$ is part of the middle segment, then the final syllable -$na$ has to function as a meaningful element in the name that identifies the object as a compass. If $Yāh$ is selected as the middle segment, as Reynolds and Sjodahl do, then the final segment has two syllables, which is more acceptable as a Hebrew noun. If $Yāh$ can be a stand-alone name for the Lord, then it can be prefixed by the
The name \( \text{Yāh} \) occurs as a stand-alone name in these scriptures: Exodus 15:2; 17:16; Psalms 84:5; 68:19; 78:12; 89:9; 94:7, 12; 102:19; 115:18; 118:5, 14, 17–19; 122:4; 130:3; 135:4; Isaiah 12:2; 26:4; 38:11; and it is the final name in the *halləlū-Yāh* expression about twenty-five times in Psalms.

With \( \text{Yāh} \) as the middle segment, \( o \) becomes part of the third segment and not part of the divine name. The final segment is, therefore, two syllable-*ona*. Hebrew words begin with a consonant not a vowel. The most likely choice for the first consonant is the *aleph*, transliterated \( \text{ʔ} \), a glottal stop; this results in the word *ʔona*. Neither English nor Greek have a letter that represents a glottal stop, so the glottal \( \text{ʔ} \) is not transliterated, it is simply ignored when spelling Hebrew names, e.g., \( \text{ʔāḏām} \) “Adam,” \( \text{ʔaḇrām} \) “Abram.” Biblical Hebrew has long and short vowels, but these are not evident in the transliteration of Book of Mormon names. The conclusion is that the name *Liahona* can justifiably be parsed into three Hebrew segments \( l-Yāh-*ʔōnā \).

### The Lamed Prefix

The prefixed preposition \( l- \) in Biblical Hebrew has a broad semantic range, so there are a number of possible interpretations for it. Koehler and Baumgartner give twenty-six nuanced definitions of the prefixed \( l-\). Languages are complicated. Choosing only the first definition of \( l- \) “to, toward” to solve the meaning of *Liahona* is not the only approach. Each definition should be looked at to see which one best fits the context. In a grammatical construction where \( l- \) attaches to a name or title that is associated with an active verb, then the interpretation “to” is appropriate, e.g., Jonathan “gave it to David” (l-David) (1 Samuel 18:4), “They have ascribed (credited) unto David” (l-David) (1 Samuel 18:8), “Thus shall ye say to David” (l-David) (1 Samuel 18:25). This is the grammatical construction that Bowen expects in his analysis of the name *Liahona.* However, if the verb in this grammatical construction is passive then the meaning of \( l- \) is not “to,” but \( l- \) signifies the agent or originator — “the one who performs the action,” e.g., “blessed be Abram by God \( l-\text{ʔēl} \) Most High” (NIV Genesis 14:19). In other words, the expression \( l \)-God does not mean “to God,” but means that God is the originator or agent of the blessing, and this is best expressed in current English with *by*. The KJV translates \( l-\text{ʔēl} \) “of God.” Of in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century introduced the agent or originator of the action; today we would say *by*, as per NIV translation. The English preposition *of*, like the Hebrew preposition \( l- \), is very complex in its many uses.
In a phrase where a noun follows the prefixed name instead of a verb, the prefixed l- denotes something similar to the construction that has a passive verb, i.e., the named person is the originator of the object. For example, there are many psalms that are attributed to David as the author, and many begin with l- prefixed to his name, l-dâwid “of David” (Psalms 25–27). The introduction to many of David’s psalms include the word mizmôr “psalm” either before or after l-David, e.g., l-dâwid mizmôr (Psalm 24) or mizmôr l-dâwid (Psalm 23) “a psalm of David.” It doesn’t seem to make any difference in meaning if mizmôr precedes or follows l-dâwid. The noun, in this case mizmôr “psalm,” functions like the passive verb “blessed be” where l-God is the originator or the one doing the blessing, while l-David is the originator or author, the one doing (writing) the psalm. The prefixed l- in this case is an expression of the subjective genitive (the subject or originator of the object). Gesenius writes that the introduction: A psalm of David, indicates that it properly belongs to David as the author. “Moreover, the introduction of the author, poet, &c., by this Lamed auctoris is the customary idiom also in the other Semitic dialects, especially in Arabic.”

In Biblical Hebrew when “to, unto, or toward” the Lord is expressed, it can be done with the full preposition Ɂel, e.g., “Cain said unto the Lord [Ɂel-Yahweh]” (Genesis 4:13); “mine eyes are ever toward the Lord [Ɂel-Yahweh]” (Psalm 25:15); priests “came near to the Lord [Ɂel-Yahweh]” (Exodus 19:22). When the preposition Ɂel “to” is accompanied by an active verb, it denotes “motion to or direction toward.” Likewise, when the prefixed lamed has the meaning of “to, unto, or toward” there is an active verb in the grammatical construction.

The l-Yâh construction does not occur in the Masoretic Text, but the other prefixed preposition bet does, as in b-Yâh (Psalm 68:4[5]; Isaiah 26:4). The l-Yahweh construction is the one that occurs in the Masoretic Text. When l-Yahweh is accompanied by a passive verb, it denotes that the Lord is the originator or agent, e.g., Saul said to Samuel, “blessed be [bârûḵ] thou of the Lord [l-Yahweh].” (1 Samuel 15:13). When the l-Yahweh phrase is accompanied by a noun, it also signifies that the Lord is the originator or agent, e.g., l-Yahweh hayâšûʕāh (Psalm 3:9[8]), literally “l-Yahweh the salvation.” How is this to be understood? The
KJV has “salvation belongeth unto the Lord,” where l- is translated with a possessive significance, in that the Lord owns or possesses salvation. If l-Yahweh means that Yahweh is the originator (subjective genitive), then l-Yahweh hayǝšūʕāh can be translated “Yahweh is the originator or author of salvation.” The NIV translates l-Yahweh hayǝšūʕāh “From the Lord comes deliverance.” The NIV translation indicates that deliverance comes from or originates (lamed auctoris) with the Lord; this is more in line with the concept that the Lord [l-Yahweh] is the originator or author of deliverance or salvation.

The prophet Jonah, after being swallowed by the great fish, prayed to the Lord and promised to complete his mission, then he said: yǝšûʕāṯāh l-Yahweh “Salvation is of the Lord” (KJV Jonah 2:9[10]); “Salvation comes from the Lord” (NIV). The subjective genitive interpretation of l-Yahweh denotes that Yahweh is the originator or author of salvation in this verse.40

If we apply the subjective genitive interpretation to the first part of the name Liahona, we get a better understanding of what l-Yāh-signifies, i.e., that Yāh is the originator of *ʔōnā, “the compass.” The Book of Mormon plainly explains what the interpretation of l-Yāh- is, but unless we have the correct understanding of the Hebrew phrase it won’t be recognized. Alma gives us the name of the ball or director — “our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass — and the Lord prepared it” (Alma 37:38). “Our fathers” surely refers to Lehi and Nephi, the first possessors of it, who likely gave it the name Liahona. There are two parts to the name Liahona and two parts to its interpretation. The second part of the name is *ʔōnā, the interpretation is “a compass,” and the first part of the name is l-Yāh, the interpretation is “the Lord prepared it.” It is important to understand that in Hebrew syntax (word order) the modifier follows the head noun, while in English the modifier precedes the head noun; therefore, the last part of the name is interpreted first in English, and the first part is interpreted last. The first part of Liahona, as discussed above, is l-Yāh, which signifies that the Lord is the originator or the one who made the object; to paraphrase the words of Alma, the Lord was the one who prepared it. The semantic similarity between originator, author, and preparer is recognizable. The originator is the source of the product, an author produces a written product, and a preparer produces a finished product that is ready for use.

In the writings of Nephi, the Liahona is referred to by its interpretation not by its name, i.e., “the compass [*ʔōnā], which had been prepared of the Lord [l-Yāh]” (1 Nephi 18:12).41 This clause is semantically equivalent to
Alma’s statement, “a compass — and the Lord prepared it” (Alma 37:38). The only difference is which is added before prepared. In Biblical Hebrew the relative pronoun which can precede the prefixed lamed, e.g., ʿāšer l-. The ʿāšer l- construction “may be used instead of l in some cases in order to give more precision or more emphasis.” An example is the first line in Song of Songs: šīr haššîrîm ʿāšer lišlōmōh “The song of songs which is Solomon’s” (Song of Solomon 1:1). Here in KJV āšer l-išlōmōh is translated as possessive genitive, Solomon’s, i.e., the songs belong to Solomon. But if āšer l- is translated as a subjective genitive then Solomon is the originator or author — the one who produces the songs, i.e., “Song of Songs which are authored by Solomon.” Solomon is accredited for three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:32). If we use the Book of Mormon phraseology we would get, “Song of Songs, which had been prepared of Solomon.” I believe the phraseology in Song of Solomon 1:1 is equivalent to this Book of Mormon phrase: “the compass, which had been prepared of the Lord” *hāʿōnā ʿāšer l-Yāh.

There are other statements involving the compass that may not have included the l-Yāh expression, but conveyed its intended meaning with a verb. These expressions are even more explicit in crediting the Lord for its manufacture, such as: “and also the ball or compass which was prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:12); “and the ball or director which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:16). The phrases “prepared by the hand of the Lord,” and “prepared of the Lord” are semantically equivalent, the first statement leaves no doubt as to who prepared it. The preposition of in this case is an expression of the subjective genitive, where the subject is the agent, the originator, the doer, the maker. The most likely interpretation of the first part of the name Liahona, l-Yāh, based on the Hebrew and scriptural evidence discussed above, is not “to the Lord,” but is “prepared of/by the Lord,” i.e., “the Lord prepared [l-Yāh] a compass [*ʔōnā]” to guide Lehi and his family to the promised land.

**The Prefix Lamed in Epigraphic Sources**

I believe that it is important to look at extra-Biblical sources to see how the information from the epigraphic record can illuminate our understanding of the nuanced meanings of the prefixed preposition l- that occurs on a name followed by a noun. This is the same syntax as the segments in Liahona, i.e., l- (prefix), + Yāh (name), + *ʔōnā (noun). This same grammatical construction is found in many epigraphic
sources from the pre-exilic period (before 586 BC). Inscription #1 in tomb I from Khirbet El-Kôm (Qôm), dates to the mid-seventh century BC, and contains an inscription with a prefixed lamed before a name: ḫwpy bn ntnyw ḥhdr ḥzh, and is translated: “Belonging to ŠOphai, son of Nethanyahu, (is) this tomb-chamber.”\(^{46}\) The noun in the inscription, “this tomb-chamber,” occurs last in the phrase following l-ŠOphai and his father’s name. “The accepted principle in Hebrew epigraphy is the lamed prefixed to a proper noun not preceded by a verb should be considered possessive.”\(^{47}\) However, if ḫwpy (l-ŠOphai) is interpreted as subjective genitive, then ŠOphai was the agent or originator, the one who made or produced the tomb-chamber. If we use the interpretation in the Book of Mormon, then l-ŠOphai means that ŠOphai prepared the tomb-chamber. ŠOphai may have hewed the tomb-chamber out of the stone, and left his name on the wall, indicating that he had made the tomb. Compare this to NIV translation of Isaiah 22:16: “What are you [Shebna] doing here and who gave you permission to cut out a grave for yourself here, hewing your grave on the height and chiseling your resting place in the rock?” ŠOphai may have hewed out the burial place in the soft rock just like Shebna, and wrote his name on the rock, becoming either the preparer (subjective genitive) or the owner (possessive genitive) of the burial chamber or both, the interpretation being ambiguous.

Tomb II at Khirbet El-Kôm contains a memorial inscription (#3) that leaves a blessing on the deceased and was apparently written by the person who is named last, his name being prefixed by the lamed, l-ʔOniyahu “(written by) ʔOniyahu.” This is interpreted as a lamed auctoris (subjective genitive) signifying that the named person is the originator or author of the inscription and not the owner or occupier of the tomb.\(^{48}\) The lamed in Tomb II inscription #3 of Khirbet El-Kôm refers to the person who wrote the inscription. The lamed in Tomb I inscription #1 could refer to ŠOphai as the owner of the tomb-chamber, or it could refer to ŠOphai as the one who prepared or hewed the tomb-chamber.

Some inscriptions on Samaria ostraca employ the lamed before personal names that are “receipts written in the royal storerooms, when the delivery arrived.” The receipts are for wine or oil that was delivered to the royal storehouse by the individuals named on the pot sherd. The word order is, l- + name + noun, e.g., ostracon No. 10: lʔḥnŠm . nbl . yn . yšn “(belonging) to AḥinoŠam. A jar of old wine;” and ostracon No. 18) lgdyw . nbl . šmn . ḥṣ “(Belonging) to Gaddiyau. A jar of fine oil.” Yadin suggests that the named individuals were the owners of big estates, and are “the producers of the wine or oil sent to the palace.”\(^{49}\) If
Yadin’s suggestion is correct, then the inscription should be translated as subjective genitive and not possessive genitive, i.e., “produced by Aḥinoʿam, a jar of old wine” and “produced by Gaddiyau, a jar of fine oil.” The lamed on these ostraca identifies the person as the one who produces or prepares the oil or wine.

A decanter from the Hebron district dating to the eighth or seventh century BC records “both the name of the owner and the contents: ‘Belonging to Yahzeyahu, wine of Kḥl.’ Kohel is probably the place after which the wine was named.” If this phrase is translated with the subjective genitive, it means that Yahzeyahu produced the wine of Kohel.

Incised jar-handles from wine jars that were found at Gibeon record the site name gbʿn along with the lamed on personal names. “It is believed that these were wine-jars for commercial use and that the inscriptions record the name of the vineyard where the wine was produced and the name of the owners.” If the lamed is seen as subjective genitive, then the lamed identifies the owners as the ones who produce (prepare) the wine.

Many hundreds of jar handles dating to the seventh century BC have been found that bear royal seal impressions that include the prefixed lamed on the word for king l-mlk, which is interpreted as possessive genitive, “belonging to the king.” It is believed that these lamelek vessels either had a capacity guaranteed by the crown, or that the vessels were manufactured at a royal pottery factory in a city whose name also appeared on one of the handles. “A jar from Lachish is incised bt lmlk, ‘royal bāt,’ indicating the royally approved measure of capacity.” The lmlk impressions on jar-handles could mean that they were the personal property of the king, or if interpreted as subjective genitive, it would mean that the king was responsible for manufacturing them through his loyal subjects to be used as the royal standard for trade, taxes or tribute. This interpretation is supported by the NIV translation of 1 Chronicles 4:23: “They were the potters who lived at Netaim and Gederah; they stayed there and worked for the king.” The potters were apparently making pots (jars) for the king in those places, which probably had good clay for making pottery, and they would stamp them as a product of the king lmlk, a royal jar.

An impression of a seal or signet ring appears on small pieces of clay called bullae (plural) or bulla (singular) that are used to seal papyrus documents. The papyrus has a written message, and it is folded or rolled up and tied with cord or string, and then a small piece of clay is placed on the cord to which an impression is made with a signet ring or a seal
that bears the name of the individual sending the document. The bulla usually breaks when the document is opened. Most of the bullae contain the name of a person prefixed with the lamed. This was like sealing the letter or document; if the cord were untied the clay seal would break, since it is very fragile. The backsides of the bullae show the impressions of the cords and/or fibers of the papyrus. Some edges of bullae even show the fingerprints of the one making the impression. Many hundreds of these seal-impressions have been found giving an “eloquent testimony to the widespread use of papyrus for letters and documents in the time of the Monarchy.” The seal-impressions on the bullae with the prefixed lamed are usually interpreted as possessive genitive, meaning that the papyrus letter belongs to the person. However, if the subjective genitive interpretation is employed, then the named person is the agent, the one responsible for it, i.e., the one who “prepared” it. This is equivalent to lamed auctor (the author or originator), e.g., the psalms (of/by) l-David.

The lamed on personal names or titles on jar-handles is ambiguous meaning that the wine or oil either belonged to the person or to the king, or that the wine or oil was prepared or produced by the person or by the king. Similarly, the lamed on the ostraca from Samaria that is prefixed to the names of the owners of big estates designates them as the producers of the wine or oil that was sent to the palace. The dates of all of these examples of the prefixed lamed are from the time of Lehi or earlier in the pre-exilic period, and were written with the Old Hebrew alphabet. If the lamed is translated as the subjective genitive in these examples, then the interpretation of l- as an agent, originator, author, or preparer matches the interpretation of l-Yāh in Liahona, i.e., the Lord is the agent, originator, or preparer of the compass *ʔōnā.

The lamed prefixed to a proper name or title in the above epigraphic examples is an abbreviated phrase. When all that is available is the space on a signet ring or on a stamp, the message has to be short and simple. As a result, the lamed carries the semantic load, it’s meaning being determined by the context and by the thing (noun) it refers to. The ambiguity is to know if it is possessive genitive or subjective genitive to arrive at the intended meaning. The main take away of this discussion is that there are three components to these phrases: 1) the prefixed lamed, 2) the name, and 3) the product. The product may be an inscription, a papyrus letter, a psalm, a prayer, a tomb-chamber, wine, oil, or any other thing including a compass.

If the lamed prefixed on a proper name was only interpreted as ownership (possessive genitive) in Lehi’s day, then it is very likely that
the l-Yāh of Liahona would signify “belonging to Yah.” However, this interpretation does not fit the interpretation given in the Book of Mormon. The text reads: “Liahona, which is being interpreted a compass — and the Lord prepared it” (Alma 37:38). The interpretation in Alma is not that the compass “belonged to” the Lord, but that he “prepared” it. The Lord was the originator, the one who prepared and provided the Liahona for Lehi, so the first segment l- is interpreted here as subjective genitive to agree with the narrative in the Book of Mormon.

A Possible Semitic Origin and Meaning for *ʔōnâ

If the analysis that *ʔōnâ is the final segment in Liahona is correct, then the assumption is that there should be a Semitic noun *ʔōnâ in Biblical Hebrew. However, this noun is not found in the Hebrew Bible, thus the difficulty begins. In Modern Hebrew ʔônâ (plural ʔônôt) is a “deed of purchase.” A deed of purchase isn’t suitable, since it doesn’t match the description of a round brass ball with pointers that can direct one to the promised land, so this is likely not a meaning that makes much sense as a compass. If the noun *ʔōnâ is not found in the Hebrew Bible or any other ancient Hebrew texts, that does not mean that there never was such a word in the language. Ancient written Hebrew texts only contain a fraction of the actual words of the language. Since *ʔōnâ is not known to exist in early Hebrew writings, it may be possible that a cognate (a word with the same linguistic derivation) to *ʔōnâ exists in another Semitic language. To find a cognate, it is necessary to postulate what the Proto-Semitic word might have been, and then to look for possible cognates in other Semitic languages. Each Semitic language would have slightly different changes in their consonants and vowels, so the proto form of *ʔōnâ would develop differently in related languages.

The first step is to identify the original consonants and vowels of a Proto-Semitic (PS) word that could develop into *ʔōnâ. To do this requires some knowledge of the sound changes that occurred in the historical development of words from PS to Biblical Hebrew. The original PS vowel system consisted of three vowels: short and long /i/-/ī/, /a/-/ā/, and /u/-/ū/\(^{58}\). The Hebrew vowels o and ō were not part of the PS vowel system, therefore, the vowel ō in *ʔōnâ must derive from another PS vowel. The Hebrew vowel ō derives from at least three sources: 1) the PS long vowel *ā raises to ō when stressed, this is called the Canaanite Shift for it occurs early in the development of the language;\(^{59}\) 2) the diphthong *aw changes to ō,\(^{60}\) and 3) PS *u changes to ō by two paths, a) in a stressed closed syllable,\(^{61}\) and b) pretonic *u changes to ō in an unstressed open
syllable. The most likely origin of ő in l-Yāḥ-ʔōnā is from the third option, Proto-Semitic *u, since it is an open unstressed syllable.

Most Hebrew word stems have three consonants and one or two vowels. The variation of vowel quality and how they relate to the consonants determines the meaning of the word. The “sequence of vowels [is] called a melody, … and the arrangement of consonants and vowels [is] called a template.” Different arrangements of vowels and consonants form patterns that define word classes. In Semitic literature, the three consonants q-t-l are used as substitutes for the true stem consonants, whatever they may be, and the vowels retain their original quality. It is a convenient way to discuss the various template patterns and vowel melodies in Semitic languages without writing the true consonants for each word separately.

The final vowel in Liahona likely derives from PS *a. There is no apparent consonant following the final vowel; this may indicate that the final third root (III) consonant is a weak consonant like *w or *y that either deletes or contracts with the vowel. The vowel melody with *u in the first syllable and *a in the second syllable forms the PS qutal noun pattern. From PS, “The expected regular development to Hebrew is qutal > qōtāl. This pattern is almost unattested” in Hebrew. The qutal noun pattern is more evident in Arabic. Arabic has some verbal nouns with a qutā pattern that lacks a final consonant, “which may be considered the III-weak reflex of qutal, found with both III-w and III-y roots.” In other words, III-weak is the third consonant of the stem that is either *w or *y. “In [Classical Arabic] III-weak roots … with a before the final radical, the stem ends in -ā.” In other words, the third consonant w or y deletes or contracts with the vowel causing it to lengthen, i.e., qutaw or qutay > qutā. Qutā is the expected template and vowel pattern that would develop from PS *ʔunaw or *ʔunay > *ʔunā. The resultant *ʔunā develops into *ʔōnā when u changes to ő.

The final (III-w) Proto-Semitic consonant *w changes to *y in Central and Northwest Semitic languages, including Arabic, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Canaanite and Hebrew among others. The reconstruction of *ʔōnā would be *ʔunāy in the Northwest Semitic languages, but for Proto-Semitic it is likely *ʔunaw. In the development of Hebrew, the final stressed -ay of *ʔunāy changes to -ā, for example, Šarāy (Sarāi in Genesis 11:29) changes to Šarā (Sarah) by this sound change. The unstressed pretonic open *u of *ʔunā changes to ő by natural sound change rules resulting in *ʔōnā.
The Cognates of *ʔunaw and *ʔunay

The ancient Semitic language that has the largest corpus of words is Akkadian, an East Semitic language. The name derives from the third millennium BC kingdom of Akkad. The language is also called Assyrian or Assyro-Babylonian from the latter kingdoms of Mesopotamia. The language was written in cuneiform script that wrote syllables containing both consonants and vowels. The later Semitic alphabetic scripts did not write the vowels, but only wrote the consonants. The best source for Akkadian or Assyrian words is The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago that is usually referred to as the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary or CAD with some twenty-one volumes.\(^{71}\)

The PS word *ʔunaw would not look like this in Akkadian. The first consonant aleph ʔ- is “lost in most environments,”\(^{72}\) so ʔ would not be written in Akkadian. The final -aw also changes; “the Akkadian diphthong *aw became ū.”\(^{73}\) As a result, we would need to look for a word like unū in the Akkadian dictionary. In volume twenty, there is a noun ūnūtu that is both masculine and feminine signifying “1. merchandise, goods (OA), 2. Equipment, gear, tools, 3. Utensils, furnishings, vessels, belongings.”\(^{74}\) The -t- in ūnūtu is the feminine marker, and final -ū is a case ending.\(^{75}\) The PS feminine form of the noun would likely be *ʔunawt- that develops into Akkadian ūnūt-. The *aw > ū sound change happens with PS *mawt- that changes into Akkadian mūt- “death.”\(^{76}\) The feminine form of the noun prevails over the masculine form, possibly because it has two consonants. The Akkadian stem ūnūt- derives from PS *ʔunawt- by established sound change rules, and it signifies, “merchandise, equipment, tools, utensils, vessels or belongings.” The Liahona is a piece of equipment or a vessel made of brass that contains spindles and writing that gives direction to Lehi on his journey to the promised land.

The Cognate *ʔunay in Aramaic

An Aramaic cognate of Akkadian ūnūt- shows up on the ninth century BC Tell Fekherye inscription. A bilingual inscription is engraved on the front and back of a basalt statue of a standing man. There are thirty-eight lines of Akkadian text in cuneiform script on the front, and there are twenty-three lines of Aramaic in alphabetic script on the back.\(^{77}\) The Akkadian noun ū-nu-te is on line 27. “It is uncertain whether the noun ū-nu-te should be considered as a Babylonian form.” “This word often designates ‘vessels’, but its semantic range is wider and it can be used for any ‘movables’, even the statue.”\(^{78}\) Lipinski translates the Akkadian
in line 27, “movables of the temple of Adad, my lord.” The translation of ṭunūte into Aramaic is m’ny’ (vowels are not written in this script. The aleph or glottal stop ’, I write with ?). Lipinski translates m?ny? as movables rather than vessels. “The word m’ny’ is generally translated by ‘vessels’, but it can designate all kinds of implements and utensils in clay, wood, leather, stone, copper, iron, silver, gold, also weapons, musical instruments, pieces of furniture, even garments in linen or wool.” … “The [Aramaic] expression m’ny’ ṣy bt Hdd is exactly paralleled in Ezra 5,14 by m’ny’ ḏy ṣyt ‘lh’. The Aramaic of Ezra 5:14 transliterates and vocalizes as: māʔnayyā? di-ḥēt-?=ēlāḥā? “the vessels of the house of God.” I see the Aramaic word māʔnayyā? parsing into three parts: mā- is a noun prefix; -ʔnay- is the triconsonantal stem or root; and the suffix -yā? indicates a plural emphatic that denotes a determinate or definite noun. The Aramaic construct form of “vessels” develops from the absolute maʔnay that loses stress; the final syllable -ay “in a closed secondary-accented syllable it becomes -ēy.” This results in the construct form māʔnēy ḇēt-?=ēlāḥā? “vessels of the house of God” (Ezra 6:5). The Aramaic stem ʔnay is the semantic core of the word. This stem has the three consonants of the proposed proto word for *ʔōnā, which is *ʔunāy in the Northwest Semitic languages and *ʔunaw in Proto-Semitic. The original first vowel *u is pretonic in an open syllable, and the phonetic rule of Aramaic is: “Short vowels in a pretonic open syllable become shewa, and are not lengthened as they often are in BH [Biblical Hebrew].” We know that the deleted pretonic vowel is *u from the Akkadian cognate; the first consonant is ?; and the last syllable is -ay, i.e., ʔnay, a perfect match for the proposed proto noun. Therefore, the reconstructed *ʔunay is a reasonable possibility based on ancient texts and historical linguistic principles of sound change.

Koehler and Baumgartner discuss Aramaic *māʔn “receptacle, vessel” and its possible cognates in other Semitic languages. They include Canaanite anayi “ship” (El-Amarna 245:28; CAD A/I: 106a), Akkadian unūt- “equipment”, Ugaritic ʔnyt [the feminine form] and ḥny “ship,” Arabic ṭinā? “receptacle, eating dish,” and Hebrew ṭōnî and ṭōniyā “ship.” They write: “the underlying root of the sbst. [substantive] is uncertain; it could be Hebrew II ʔnh [originally ḥny (see p. 70)] … with the meaning ‘to grasp, contain’, or perhaps even *un ‘to be strong, be massive’. The triconsonantal ḥny shows up as a cognate in Classical Arabic. This evidence, I believe, increases the possibility that the proto
form *ʔunay was a real word that developed into Hebrew *ʔōnâ by regular sound change rules, and was a word in pre-exilic Hebrew.\(^88\)

*ʔōnâ may have been more commonly spoken in the Northern Kingdom, where Lehi’s tribe (Manasseh) lived, being closer to Aramaic and Ugaritic speakers. In the Southern Kingdom, *ʔōnâ possibly was displaced by kēlî that has the same meaning, i.e., “article, utensil, vessel.”\(^89\) The plural is kēlim. Klî has a broad range of meaning including objects made of any material. It is translated as “jewels” (Genesis 24:53), “weapons” (Genesis 27:3), “stuff” and “household stuff” (Genesis 31:37), “sacks” (Genesis 42:25), “vessels” (Genesis 43:11), “instrument” of cruelty (Genesis 49:5), “furnishings” of Tabernacle (Exodus 25:9; 31:7), “utensils” on a table — dishes, pans, bowls, jars (Exodus 37:16), “a thing” (garment) of skin (Leviticus 13:52), earthen “vessel” (Leviticus 14:50), wooden “vessel” (Leviticus 15:12), “instrument” of iron (Numbers 35:16), “weapons” (Deuteronomy 1:41), “armour” (1 Samuel 14:1), and “bag” (1 Samuel 17:40). If klî became the common expression for “things,” then it likely superseded or displaced the more restrictive word *ʔōnâ that had earlier been used for sacred temple vessels of precious metals or movable (portable) royal objects in the king’s palace. The simplest explanation, in my opinion, is semantic overlap. Klî replaced *ʔōnâ and became the word of choice for all the above-mentioned things, thus *ʔōnâ fell out of favor and was not written in the Masoretic Text. Lehi knew that the Lord had provided the Liahona, so why would he use klî, the common term for any household object, rather he would use the older Semitic term for sacred metal objects associated with the temple.

Languages are always changing both phonetically and semantically. Some words in a language may last for thousands of years, while other words may last a century or two or even a few decades before passing out of favor. Just because *ʔōnâ does not show up in the Bible or in any Hebrew epigraphic records doesn’t mean it never existed in pre-exilic Hebrew, especially if closely related languages had cognates of that word. The presence of cognates in closely related languages suggests the possibility that such a word may have existed in early Hebrew. We don’t have enough information, and we may never get confirmation of this word’s existence in Hebrew unless someone wrote it down, and it has been preserved in some record that has not come to light.

Etymological explanations, comparative linguistics, and philological arguments are very complicated. There are no easy answers, and conclusions are always tentative. If *ʔōnâ had existed in the Bible then Reynolds and Sjodahl would have solved the problem long ago. My attempt
here has been to use the principles of historical linguistics to approach the etymology of Liahona from a new perspective, and to arrive at a reasonable translation of Liahona. Translating the last part of Liahona, -ona or *ʔōnâ, as a vessel, a portable metal object (a noun) makes more sense to me than translating -ona as ρων the “sun city” that represents “light;” –(o)na as “whither,” an adverb; -na as Egyptian imperative “look!,” a verb; or -nā? as an exclamation point. I propose that the translation of Liahona is: “a vessel prepared of the Lord,” and the interpretation is: “a compass prepared of the Lord” (Alma 37:38).

**Translation vs. Interpretation**

It is important to distinguish the difference between translation and interpretation. There is semantic overlap in these terms. Interpretation is explaining, making clear or explicit the meaning of a word so it can be understood within a language or culture, while translation transfers the meaning of a word from one language or culture to a word in another language or culture with comparable meaning. A translation is an interpretation, but an interpretation is not necessarily a translation. For example, the translation of the final segment in Liahona, *ʔōnâ, is proposed to be “a vessel,” since that was a word they likely had in their language. However, *ʔōnâ is interpreted into English as “a compass,” because of what the instrument (vessel) was able to do. The interpretation compass is the closest meaning in the English language that describes how the ball or director functions, but compass falls short of conveying the full functional range of the *ʔōnâ “the vessel.”

Nephi was able to ascertain the exact direction they were traveling by means of the ball or director, not only in reference to the four directions, but in reference to sixteen directions on the compass. The ball or director was more than a compass. A compass has one magnetic needle that points north-south. The director has two spindles, one likely was a magnetic spindle that pointed north to establish a reference point, while the other spindle pointed to the direction they should travel. The second spindle operated by another spiritual force that was connected to their “faith, and diligence and heed” (1 Nephi 16:28–29). There was also writing on the ball that “changed from time to time” (16:27–29). The Liahona was a marvelous vessel (*ʔōnâ) prepared of the Lord (L-Yāh) to guide Lehi and his small group to the promised land.

The concept of an instrument with a magnetic spindle that pointed toward the north was unknown to Lehi and his contemporaries, therefore, they would not have had a word for it in their language. Lehi
and Nephi called it *rōnā that denotes “a vessel,” and it was prepared by the Lord, l-Yāh. The prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery during the translation likely never knew, as most readers of the Book of Mormon, that the phrase “prepared of the Lord” [l-Yāh] was the first part of the name. Most readers probably assume that the name Liahona only refers to the instrument, the “ball or director,” and they would not associate the phrase “prepared of the Lord” as part of the name. The general assumption is that the phrase “the Lord prepared it” was there because the Lord provided the instrument not that this phrase was part of the name.

Alma explains to his son Helaman “concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director — or our fathers called it Liahona, which is being interpreted a compass — and the Lord prepared it” (Alma 37:38). The name Liahona is only used once in the Book of Mormon, and it is in this verse.92 “Our fathers” likely refers to Lehi and Nephi since they are the ones who found it and used it in their journey through the wilderness and on the sea to the Promised Land. The everyday language of Lehi and Nephi was Hebrew, and this increases the likelihood that the term Liahona derives from Hebrew for that is what they called it (qārāʔū), i.e., the name that they gave it.93 The interjection “being interpreted a compass — and the Lord prepared it” defines the term Liahona for a modern reader, but who is responsible for this insertion? Did Alma insert this phrase to clarify to Helaman, who may not have known what the archaic word meant?94 Or, did the redactor Mormon insert the interpretation of Liahona as a compass prepared of the Lord for the benefit of those who would receive his abridgement? Or, did the insertion “being interpreted a compass — and the Lord prepared it” happen in the divinely assisted translating process? The answer as to who inserted the interpretation is important to know, since it would help us understand what the definition of “compass” is.95 If Alma or Mormon inserted the interpretation of Liahona as a “compass prepared of the Lord,” then the word “compass” would refer to its round or circular shape, or an instrument to draw circles, for that is what the KJV word translated as “compass” signifies in Biblical Hebrew.96 It is unlikely that the Nephites or Lamanites would have manufactured an instrument like a magnetic compass, and they would not have had a word for such an instrument. Neither Alma nor Mormon likely had a word in their language comparable to English compass that meant an instrument with a magnetic spindle that pointed to the north; therefore, they would not be responsible of the insertion of the interpretation. Furthermore, Mormon and Alma had the Liahona in
their possession, as it was part of the sacred relics and records. They knew its name and how it functioned. Alma used the Liahona as a teaching prop to explain to Helaman the importance of faith and following the direction of the Lord (Alma 37:40–47). There would be no motivation for them to explain its meaning in the record; it was part of their culture. However, the translator would have to give an explanation of its name by using comparable words that could be understood in English.

If the insertion “being interpreted a compass — and the Lord prepared it” is part of the divinely assisted translation process by Joseph Smith to help us understand the meaning of Liahona, then the word “compass” is not the literal translation of a Nephite word, but it is an interpretation into a modern English word that best defines the instrument. Royal Skousen might call this a “cultural translation.” Brant A. Gardner points out that some Book of Mormon expressions “necessitate some conceptual distance between the plate text and the translation.” “The idiomatic phrase makes sense in Joseph’s time but had no referent in ancient America. It cannot be a literal translation of a plate text idiom using Mesoamerica as the plate text culture.” His final conclusion is: “Although the meaning of the language might have been on the plates, the form of the resulting translation cannot represent a literalist translation of the plate text.” I believe that compass is a cultural and not a literal translation from the plate text. It is an interpretation of its function that we understand, and not a word in the Nephite language. The Nephites and Lamanites likely never had a magnetic compass or a word for it, but they had the word vessel, so the proposed literal translation of Liahona is, L-Yāh-ʔōnā “prepared the Lord, a vessel;” and its literal interpretation is “prepared the Lord, a compass.” The word compass is the most appropriate English word that describes the function of the Liahona, and the Lord, as the agent, prepared it.

Summary

Previous explanations of the origin and meaning of Liahona have not given a satisfactory account of its fuller meaning as an object that the Lord prepared. The interpretation of the lamed prefix l- as “to, toward” is not suitable in the grammatical construction of a prefixed l- attached to a name followed by a noun. The lamed prefix more likely designates the following name as the agent or originator or the person who is providing or producing the object (a noun). These types of grammatical constructions have been identified in the Hebrew Bible and by examples from extra-Biblical epigraphic texts. The general interpretation of
the prefixed *lamed l-* in this type of grammatical construction is that it designates the possessor of the object (possessive genitive), i.e., “belonging to.” However, in many of these grammatical constructions, l- is best interpreted as subjective genitive, where the named person is the agent, originator, author, or producer of the object. This is more in line with the interpretation given in the Book of Mormon that the Lord is the one who prepared (produced) the round ball made of fine brass.

The second segment in *Liahona* is -iah-, the short form of the divine name Yahweh or Yāh. Yāh occurs many times in the Bible as a shortened Yahweh. It can stand alone as a name, or it can serve as a suffix on a name. On the other hand, the yhw short form is only used as the prefix yehô or the suffix yāhû as part of a name, therefore, it is highly unlikely that -yaho- is the second segment of *Liahona*. The origin and meaning of the third segment of *Liahona* has been the most difficult to ascertain. There is no appropriate word in the Hebrew text that fits the description of a round ball made of fine brass with spindles. Reynolds and Sjodahl pick the Hebrew name of an Egyptian city Ùôn, based on the phonemes, as the likely source of -ona, but it lacks final a, and a city is not a round brass ball and neither is light. Curci combines the final o of yaho- with Ùanâh, the adverb indicating direction toward, to get Ùona “whither,” but whither is an adverb not an object that is round like a ball and made of fine brass. Bowen and Spendlove focus on the final syllable -na, and search for its meaning. Bowen goes to Egyptian and finds an imperative verb that somewhat matches the phonetics, but an imperative verb doesn’t describe the round brass ball with spindles. Spendlove picks the Hebrew particle nā? as the final syllable that he says is not translatable and is an exclamation, but this doesn’t describe the ball or director that has two spindles and is made of fine brass. These explanations inadequately define the interpretation given in the Book of Mormon that the Liahona is a compass prepared by the Lord.

Since the word *Ùônâ* is not found in Hebrew texts, my approach is to reconstruct the word as it might have been in Proto-Semitic by using established sound change rules of historical linguistics, and to look for cognates in related languages to see if any of them might shed light on this problem. The word *Ùônâ* can be reconstructed in Northwest Semitic as *ûnay-, and as *ûnaw- in Proto-Semitic. The Akkadian cognate unût-signifies “equipment, tools, utensils or vessels.” The Aramaic cognate mûny signifies “vessels” of the temple and other portable objects. The Arabic cognate Ùinâ? signifies “vessel, container, receptacle, or kitchen ware.” The Ugaritic cognate Ùnyt, Ùny signifies “a ship;” they were close
to the Mediterranean Sea, so a vessel of the sea is a likely adaptation. The related Hebrew word ṭōnîyā, ṭōnî signifies “a ship,” a vessel of the sea. The presence of cognates in closely related languages increases the likelihood that *ʔōnā was a legitimate word in pre-exilic Hebrew. The word *ʔōnā probably fell out of favor in the language and was displaced by klî that covers the same semantic range, thus *ʔōnā does not occur in the Masoretic Text.

The structural sequence of the segments in the name Liahona follow typical Hebrew word order (VSO), where the prefixed lamed represents the verb, l- “prepared” + the subject, Yāh “the Lord” + the object -ona [ʔōnā] “a vessel,” i.e., “prepared the Lord a vessel.” Normal English word order would be “the Lord prepared a vessel (SVO).” Alma’s explanation places the object first that is a Hebrew technique to give more emphasis to the object, “Liahona, which is being interpreted a compass — and the Lord prepared it” (Alma 37:38). It is proposed that *ʔōnā “vessel” is an appropriate Semitic word for the physical object; it is portable; it is a container with spindles; it indicates directions; it is made of fine brass; and it is interpreted “a compass.”

If the above explanation of the etymology of Liahona is correct, then this unusual word derives from the Semitic languages of the Ancient Near East, the Book of Mormon is truly an ancient record whose underlying language is a dialect of Hebrew, and Joseph Smith Jr. had to receive divine assistance to be able to translate the plates of Mormon into the Book of Mormon. As the three witnesses testified, the plates “have been translated by the gift and power of God, … wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true.”

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Endnotes

1 The asterisk /*/ represents a reconstructed word or one that does not exist in the Hebrew text.


4 Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4:178.


7 Ibid., 63.

8 Ibid., 63, 65. Curci writes ܢܢ (ʔnʔ) for ʔona; aleph is the first consonant only and not the third consonant. This may be an oversight or a typographical error.

9 The adverb ʔān “where” derives from an earlier form *ʔayn, where the diphthong ay under stress changes to ā, resulting in ʔān (Gary A. Rendsburg, “Monophthongization of aw/aw > ā in Eblaite and in Northwest Semitic,” in *Eblaitica: Essays on the Ebla Archives and Eblaite Language*, ed. Cyrus H. Gordon, Gary A. Rendsburg [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 103, 105, 112). The Proto-Semitic short vowel *a lengthens to ā when the diphthong ay contracts or monophthongizes. Biblical Hebrew has long and short vowels. They are traditionally distinguished in transliterations by adding a macron ā or a circumflex ă to the short vowel; ă is sometimes used in final position to represent -āh.

The short vowel \( a \) (\( \text{pataḥ} \)) was likely a low central vowel. There were originally three short vowels in Proto-Semitic or Common-Semitic: high/close front palatal \( /i/ \), high/close back velar \( /u/ \), and low/open back \( /a/ \), and three corresponding long vowels \( /ī/ \), \( /ū/ \), and \( /ā/ \) (Edward Lipinski, *Semitic Languages: Outline of A Comparative Grammar*, 2nd Edition [Leuven, BE: Peeters Publishers, 2001], 158.) If the short vowel \( a \) were a low central vowel, then the long vowel \( ā \) (\( \text{qameṣ} \)) would likely be a low back open vowel—this is the Sephardic tradition of pronunciation. In the Tiberian system of pronunciation, the short \( a \) (\( \text{pataḥ} \)) is a low back open vowel, and the long vowel \( ā \) (\( \text{qameṣ gadol} \) “big \( \text{qameṣ} \)” ) is a low back rounded vowel \( ɔ̄ \) (Joshua Blau, *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010], 105). The \( \text{qameṣ} \) in the Tiberian system not only indicates the long \( ā \) or \( ɔ̄ \), but it also indicates a short vowel \( ɔ \) in an unstressed closed syllable called \( \text{qameṣ ḥaṭuf} \) “shortened or quickened \( \text{qameṣ} \)” or \( \text{qameṣ qaṭan} \) “little \( \text{qameṣ} \).” The \( \text{qameṣ qaṭan} \) derives from Proto-Semitic \( *u* \), while \( \text{qameṣ gadol} \) derives from Proto-Semitic \( *a* \). The merger of the two historically distinct phonemes occurs in the Tiberian pronunciation, but the Sephardic pronunciation preserves the historical distinction: \( \text{qameṣ gadol} \) is low, back, unrounded \( ā \), while \( \text{qameṣ qaṭan} \) is the back rounded vowel \( ɔ \). The Qumran orthography of the Dead Sea Scrolls preserves the historical distinction, since \( \text{qameṣ qaṭan} \) is sometimes written with \( \text{waw} \), this indicates that \( ɔ \) derives from Proto-Semitic \( *u* \) (Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed. [Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011], 37n2).


Ibid., 279.

Ibid., 277.

Ibid, 276.


18 Ibid., 80. One would expect that an Egyptologist would recognize if the original language of the Book of Mormon were Egyptian. However, he determines that the original language is a dialect of Hebrew.

19 Ibid., 96.


21 “The most economical historical explanation of his statement is that the system of writing known to Lehi 1 and Nephi 1 was in use in the Near East for at least 1,000 years — from the origin of the brass plates in Egypt (Joseph 1, the probable person who adapted it to write Hebrew, dates nominally to around 1600–1700 BC) through the early sixth century BC. The system then was transferred to Nephi 1’s/Lehi 1’s Mesoamerican land of promise, where it continued being used to the fourth century AD.” John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 226.


25 The l- when added to a word creates a CC consonant cluster, which in normal speech requires a slight vocalization ǝ, a schwa, to give salience to the *lamed*. If the word already begins with a CC, then an epenthetic short vowel i- inserts, e.g., šmûʔêl “Samuel” (1 Samuel 1:20) > lišmûʔêl “unto/to Samuel” (1 Samuel 3:9). If the epenthetic vowel is pretonic and the word is under full stress, the vowel has more sonority and is ā. If it is before a guttural with a composite schwa, the epenthetic vowel takes the full value of the composite schwa. For more rules see Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 309–11, 444–46, 454–55, 458; and J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 26–28.

26 Some Book of Mormon theophoric names that have -iah or Yāh as the final syllable are: Amalickiah, Mosiah, Sariah, and Zedekiah. The formation of these names parallels Hebrew names such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Obadiah, and Zechariah.


28 The j is equivalent to the consonant y, thanks to European spelling. Abijah is also spelled with the suffix -iah, Ɂăḇîyāh “Abiah” (1 Samuel 8:2). There is a third short form of Yahweh, yw that comes mainly from the Northern Kingdom. (Angel Sáenz-Baldillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. John Elwelde [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 65.) Yw is vocalized as yaw. As a prefix yaw- changes to yô- being unstressed, e.g., yôʔâhâz (2 Chronicles 36:2), and as a suffix yw is vocalized -yaw or -yau. This form occurs mainly in the epigraphic texts.

29 Curci, “Liahona ‘The direction of the Lord’: An Etymological Explanation,” 64. The deletion or lengthening of vowels depends on the location of the stress, not the location of the segment. The stress, then, must be on the o, and not on the final vowel. Therefore, the vowel a of -yaho- would lengthen, i.e., l-yâhônā. The final vowel ā has to be long or it would delete by the sound change rules.

30 Ibid., 65.

Bowen assumes that there is an active verb in the name *Liahona* and chooses -nw from the Egyptian imperative verb *ʔɪnw* to represent the final syllable -na. In Hebrew sentence structure the verb normally appears first VSO. This is why Bowen calls the fronting of the prepositional phrase “a kind of hyperbaton, which denotes a ‘departure from ordinary word order,’ or hysteron proteron, a ‘form of hyperbaton’ with ‘syntax or sense out of normal logical or temporal order.’” The problem is that an active verb is not always necessary in association with *lamed* prefixed to a name.

Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 114. In the following example, the Qal passive verb is *bārûḵ* “blessed be.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “of” as a preposition in about sixty ways. Example #14: “Introducing the agent after a passive verb. The usual word for this is now *by*, which was prevalent by the 15th cent.; *of* was used alongside *by* until c1600. Of is subsequently found as a stylistic archaism in biblical, poetic, and literary use.” Example #15: “Following a noun, as the head of a postmodifying noun phrase. Sometimes called the subjective genitive. … ‘the sonatas of Beethoven’ or Beethoven’s sonatas.” #15a “Expressing the relation of agent (doer or maker).” #15b “Indicating the creator of a work: made, written, painted, etc., by.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “of, prep,” last updated March 2022, https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.slcpl.org/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/130549.


When the lamed is used in this structure the head noun is not in the construct state. In Biblical Hebrew the subjective genitive can be expressed in the construct state as well, without adding the prefixed *lamed*. See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 142–44. The construct state expresses a genitive relationship between two nouns; the first or head noun is unstressed and may experience vowel changes. When lamed is prefixed to the name
it functions as a paraphrase for the genitive possessor or author (Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, §119c, 129c); compare construct *ben-yišay* “the son of Jesse” (1 Samuel 20:27) with absolute *bēn lyišay* “a son of Jesse” (1 Samuel 16:18), and construct *tp̄ illāt-SAḥdēkā* “the prayer of thy servant” (1 Kings 8:28) with absolute *tp̄ illāh lḏāwîd* “a prayer of David” (Psalm 86).

The phrase, “the book of the chronicles of the kings [l-malkê-] of Israel” (1 Kings 14:19), suggests that the writings were prepared by or for the kings. Likewise, “the account of the chronicles of king [la-mmélek] David” (1 Chronicles 27:24). The expression of in these translations is ambiguous. Similarly, the phrase *Book of Mormon*, was it written with the *lamed* as in, *sēpher l-Mormon* or was it written in the construct state *sēpher-Mormon*? In either case, Mormon is the agent or originator of the book — “I made this record out of the plates of Nephi” (Mormon 6:6). He is also the owner of the record (plates), which he gave to his son Moroni. Likewise, the *plates of Nephi*, *(lûḥōṯ l-Nepî or lûḥōṯ-Nepî)* have their origin with Nephi, son of Lehi. Nephi was the original owner and producer of the plates (1 Nephi 9:2), thus *of* is interpreted both ways, i.e., the originator and the possessor of the plates. The interpretation doesn’t have to be either – or, it can be both.

Some examples where *l-* is interpreted as “to, unto” (note the associated verb): “Ye shall keep … a feast to the Lord [l-Yahweh]” (Exodus 12:14). “We will … sacrifice to the Lord [l-Yahweh]” (Exodus 8:27). “I will sing unto the Lord [l-Yahweh]” (Exodus 15:1; Psalm 13:6). “Thou hast said unto the Lord [l-Yahweh]” (Psalm 16:2). A psalm “of David [l-dāwîḏ] who spake unto the Lord [l-Yahweh]” (Psalm 8:1 heading). In the Masoretic Text the pointing of the prepositional prefix is *la-. The tradition is that the name of God is not spoken so they substitute *ḥādônâ* “lord” for Yahweh, and the prefixed preposition becomes *la- in this environment, thus la-*ḥādônâ* refers to the Lord. See Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, §102m and Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 310.

This agrees theologically with several scriptures: “And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Hebrews 5:9); and “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2); and “relying alone
upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith” (Moroni 6:4). If we substitute the Book of Mormon interpretation, we get — “Salvation is prepared of/by the Lord.” This sounds familiar in many scriptures, e.g., “Then shall the king say … inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34); “for he is the same yesterday, today, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world” (1 Nephi 10:18); “and the way is prepared from the fall of man, and salvation is free” (2 Nephi 2:4); “they shall inherit the kingdom of God, which was prepared for them from the foundation of the world” (2 Nephi 9:18); “the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord” (Mosiah 4:6); see also Mosiah 18:13; Ether 3:14; Doctrine and Covenants 128:5, 8.

41 The separation of *ʔōnā “compass” from the phrase l-Yāh “prepared of the Lord” is an indication that they are two distinct nouns, where the nouns may occur in any order the same as mizmôr l-ḏāwîd or l-ḏāwîd mizmôr “a psalm of David” (Psalms 23, 24). In the interpretation they are separated, but in the written name they are conjoined, i.e., l-Yāh-ʔōnā — Liahona.


43 The Hebrew verb hēḵîn means, to establish, set up; and to fix, make ready, prepare (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon, 466), and may have been used to express the actions of Yahweh when he prepared the compass for Lehi. For example, “which was prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord” ḥăšer-hēḵîn lĕʔāḇî bĕyaḏ-Yhwh (compare Esther 7:10).

44 The “ball or director” is substituted for “compass” in this phrase. The description ball designates its form or shape, while director indicates its function or how it worked.

45 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “of,” #15. “Following a noun … sometimes called the subjective genitive.” #15a “Expressing the
relation of agent (doer or maker).” #15b “Indicating the creator of a work: made, written, painted, etc., by.”


49 Avigad, “Hebrew Epigraphic Sources,” 26–27. The older interpretation is that the items were sent from a place *l-*“to” a named official, this interpretation is defended by Aharoni and Rainy. However, there is no verb *sent* that precedes the *lamed* in these inscriptions, so “to” may not be the most appropriate interpretation of *l*-

50 Avigad, “Hebrew Epigraphic Sources,” 35.

51 Ibid., 35.

52 Ibid., 36.

53 Ibid., 35. A “bath” is a liquid measure (*Bible Dictionary* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979], 789).


56 Ibid., 38.


60 Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 40, 43; e.g., the construct noun “death of” *mawt* > *mōṯ* and *yawm* > *yōm* “day,” and Hiphil verb “he begat” *hawlī ḏ* > *hōlī ḏ* (Genesis 11:27), *hawšīḇ* > * hôšīḇ* (Kautzsch, Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar*, §69i).

61 Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 39–40. Qal Jussive verb “may he arise” *yaqūm* > *yāqṓm*, and noun “whole, all” *kull* > *kōl*. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 177 *gadul* > *gāḏōl* “great.”.

62 Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 39–40, e.g., f.sg. adjective *qaruba* > *qərōḇā* “near.” This sound change is most evident in Pual verb forms, whose first vowel is PS *u*, followed by a geminate consonant (CC), but some consonants don’t double, like *r* and the gutturals; in this case PS *u* > *ō*, e.g., *burrāḵ* > *bōrāḵ* “he was blessed;” *yəḇōrāḵ* “he shall be blessed” (2 Samuel 7:29). Some other examples from the gutterals are: *dōḥû* “they are cast down” (Psalm 36:13); *dōʕăḵû* “they are quenched” (Psalm 118:12); *ṭōhar* “be cleansed,” participle *mǝṭōhārā* “she is cleansed” (Ezekiel 22:24).

63 In Biblical Hebrew “the primary stress occurs most commonly by far on the ultima, i.e. the last syllable” (Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 57). The last heavy syllable generally takes the stress, unless there are prosodic reasons otherwise.

64 Joshua Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 41.

Some Hebrew masculine nouns with the qōtāl vowel pattern (many with dubious etymologies) are: ʕōlā́m (Genesis 9:12) “long time, duration, futurity” (Samaritan Pentateuch has ūlām, this suggest PS *u) (Koehler and Baumgartner, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, 798); šōpā́r (2 Samuel 6:15) “horn, trumpet;” kōḇā́ʕ (Ezekiel 38:5) “helmet;” hōṯā́m (Exodus 28:11) “signet-ring, seal;” dōnā́g (Psalm 22:15) “wax;” gōrā́l (Leviticus 16:8) “lot” such as a stone or other object used in casting lots; ʔōṣā́r (Proverbs 15:16) “treasure;” and ʔōpā́n (Ezekiel 1:16) “wheel,” (the Syriac or Aramaic emphatic is ʔufnā that also suggests PS *u, see Koehler and Baumgartner, Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, 23). The qōtāl vowel pattern though rare does exist in Biblical Hebrew for masculine nouns. Many of these examples are manufactured objects. The Liahona was a manufactured object.


Rendsburg, “Monophthongization of aw/ay > ā in Eblaite and in Northwest Semitic,” 110. The final /h/ is epenthetic, it is added to indicate that the final vowel should be stressed. The same thing occurs on III-h verbs that were originally III-y/w verbs. The epenthetic /h/ indicates final stress no matter what the vowel is (Kautzsch, Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar, §75c).


Ibid., 588.

*CAD*, 20:172.

Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 6–7. “Most feminine singular nouns have -t or -at after the base, -t if the base ends in a single consonant or in a vowel, -at if the base ends in two consonants.”

Ibid., 588. Fox, *Semitic Noun Patterns*, 77–79, lists PS *qaww > Akk qû- “thread, line,” *ṯawr > Akk šûr- “bull,” *yawn > Akk ūm- “day,” and *qawl > Akk qûl- “voice.” All these examples show the *aw > ū sound change.


Lipinski, *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*, 45; Lipinski transliterates the second u as short, instead of ū. Greenfield and Shaffer transliterate it long unūte, and translate it as “objects” rather than more usual ‘vessels’ since the statue seems to be included (>). They also reference unūt bûtim “temple vessels” in Hittite contexts (AHw, 1423, 6 and 9a). Jonas C. Greenfield and Aaron Shaffer, “Notes on the Akkadian-Aramaic Bilingual Statue from Tell Fekherye.” *Iraq* 45, no. 1 (1983): 112, 115.


Ibid., 49.

Ibid., 64–65.


Some may say the m- is the first root consonant, but this is not compatible with Akkadian that likely has a deleted n- as the first root consonant. If m- were the first radical, we would expect the cognates in related languages to have m- as the first radical. The aleph n- is the second consonant in the noun m?ny?-, but it is the first radical of the three consonantal stem ?ny. The final emphatic plural is usually -ayya, but I see the final root syllable -ay merging with the plural suffix, therefore, I interpret -ay as the final syllable of ?nay a three consonant word. Cad, 1A2:106, lists anaya as a West Semitic word (probably *?ny) that means “ship,” a type of vessel.


Ibid., 6.


The Central Semitic root √?ny likely developed two nominal stems *?unây and *?üny. The early Semitic noun *?uny developed into the Hebrew masculine noun ?ōnî “ship,” and early Semitic noun *?unây developed into the proposed Hebrew noun *?ōnâ “a vessel.” The development of *?üny > *?üni as final *y changes to the vowel i. After PS *y changes to i, the stress shifts to the final long vowel i. The open *u reduces to ð, a ḫatef qames, that functions the same as a vocal shewa, but derives from PS
*u resulting in ḥōnî “ship, fleet” (1 Kings 9:26). The feminine form of this noun is ḥōniyā. The feminine morpheme */-at that later becomes át, attaches to the noun stem */ʔuny > */ʔuny-át. The final vowel prevents the original */y from changing to a vowel. An epenthetic */i inserts to separate the consonant cluster ny, and then the pretonic epenthetic vowel lengthens. The propretonic first stem vowel */u is replaced by the haṭef qameṣ ō, e.g., */ʔunyát > */ʔuniyā > ḥōniyā “a ship” (Proverbs 30:19). The feminine plural is ḥōniyôt “ships” (Genesis 49:13). There is one example in the Biblical text where “ships” is written with a w following the p aleph, which may refer to the o sound that derives from the original */u, ḥōwniyôt (2 Chronicles 8:18). Other III-y nouns with similar developments are */θaby > */ṣábī > ṣəḇî “gazelle” (Deuteronomy 12:15); */gady > */gádî > gəḏî “kid” (Genesis 38:17); and */laḥy > */lāḥi > ləḥi “jaw, cheek” (Judges 15:15). The unstressed, open PS */a reduces to ō, shewa, when the stress shifts to the final long vowel. These PS forms are found in Fox, Semitic Noun Patterns, 75–78. Some examples where PS */u develops into stressed ō and unstressed ō are: */qdš > qōدهěs “holiness” (Exodus 28:36), plural */qudašām > qōḏāšim “holy things” (Exodus 28:38); */ḥudš > ḥōḏēs “month” (Genesis 7:11), pl. ḥōḏāšim “months” (Genesis 38:24); */ʕupr > ʕṓpeř “fawn” (Song of Solomon 2:9), pl. ʕĕp̄ārîm “fawns” (Song of Solomon 4:5); */gurn > góren “threshing floor” (Genesis 50:10), pl. górānōṯ “threshing floors” (1 Samuel 23:1); see Joüon and Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, 274.


90 Nephi was able to describe their direction of travel within the sixteen parts of the compass, i.e., “nearly a south-southeast direction” (1 Nephi 16:13); “following the same direction … in the borders near the Red Sea. … we did travel for the space of many days” [likely in the same direction day after day parallel to the shore of the Red Sea] (16:14–15); “traveling nearly the same course as in the beginning” (16:33); and “we did travel nearly eastward from that time forth” (17:1). The coastline of the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia runs in a south-southeast direction according to our compass or directional system. Why didn’t Nephi just say they followed the shore of the Red Sea? Why did he have to give the exact direction? The fact that the word nearly is used three times suggests that Nephi knew what the exact direction was. An
instrument like a magnetic compass would be required for him to know in fine detail the exact direction they were traveling. One English definition for *compass* is: “An instrument for determining the magnetic meridian, or one’s direction or position with respect to it” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “compass.”)

Alan Miner (in *The Liahona, Miracles by Small Means* [Springville, UT: Cedar Fort Inc., 2013], 29) makes this observation: “Lehi and Nephi oriented themselves to a specific *direction* (‘south-southeast’) — a direction that is found written on modern-day compasses …. If the working of the Liahona were completely miraculous, would Nephi have even cared to repeatedly note such a specific direction as south-southeast? And if the aim of Lehi’s party was to just follow the direction where the Lord caused the spindle to point, why would there be any need for Nephi to record and repeatedly refer to such a specific direction as south-southeast? Wouldn’t it have been more practical under such a situation for Nephi to refer to any direction as either ‘northward,’ or ‘southward,’ or ‘eastward,’ or ‘westward’? There would be no reason to get any more specific. … It seems to me that without any magnetic spindle pointing north as a reference, and without an adjustable 360-degree set of marking for directions—directions which were also divided into sixteen divisions—it would be very difficult for any person traveling through the desert to claim that they were traveling in a south-southeast direction.”

One may wonder why the name Liahona only shows up in Alma’s account some five hundred years later but does not show up in the translation of Nephi’s writings where it is referred to as the *compass* (1 Nephi 18:12, 21; 2 Nephi 5:12). Jonathan Curci (“Liahona ‘The direction of the Lord’: An Etymological Explanation,” 97) suggests that the chronology of the translation provides the answer. The Book of Alma was translated before the writings of Nephi. Since the interpretation of Liahona was given in Alma, it was not necessary to give the name again, only the English interpretation as “the compass, which had been prepared of the Lord” (1 Nephi 18:12).

The Hebrew term for “call, called” is *qārā?* that has six nuanced meanings: 1) to call, cry, utter a loud sound; 2) to call unto someone; 3) to proclaim; 4) to read aloud; 5) to summon; and 6) call=name. (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 894–96). For example, “Adam called his wife’s name Eve” (Genesis 3:20),
“And my people would that we should call the name of the place Nephi; wherefore, we did call [name] it Nephi. And all those who were with me did take upon them to call [name] themselves the people of Nephi” (2 Nephi 5:8–9); and “the people who were now called [named] Lamanites” (2 Nephi 5:14).

Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textural Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Four, Alma 21–55* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2007), 4: 2371. Skousen attributes the insertion “Liahona, which is, being interpreted a compass” to Alma, “because the particular name for the object, (namely, *Liahona*) was no longer current in Alma and Helaman’s time, it was necessary for Alma to provide the interpretative language for his son Helaman.” On the other hand, if Alma knew the name and function of the Liahona, who told him? It was in the plates of Nephi, and Helaman had access to these plates, so he would know these things. However, would either Alma or Helaman know what *compass* meant in this context?

These same questions could be asked of Irreantum (1 Nephi 17:5), Rabbanah (Alma 18:13), Rameumptom (Alma 31:21), deseret (Ether 2:3), and Ripliancum (Ether 15:8). Is it the author or the translator that inserts the interpretation of these unfamiliar names? I believe the most reasonable answer is the translator, since he is responsible for conveying the meaning of the ancient text into understandable English. The author of the record knows these words for they are part of his language and culture. They are natural expressions in his language that are included in the ancient text, so he would not need to define them with other terms. These words are strange to us, so the translator included the words and then provided their interpretation in English. Some words like *curleloms* and *cumoms* were likely not translatable in English, so they were not interpreted. Moroni was concerned about the translation of the records with its imperfections, and he comments: “But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written and also that none other people knoweth our language. And because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof” (Mormon 9:34). It seems reasonable to conclude that it was the Lord who provided the English interpretation of these foreign names to Joseph Smith Jr. as he dictated the record to his scribes.
The KJV translation of *compass* refers to something round or circular *yāsōḇ sāḇîḇ* (1 Kings 7:23–24, 35); to encompass *hassōḇēḇ* (Genesis 2:11); “set a compass” *ḥûḡ* (Proverbs 8:27); to compass (go around) *lisḇōḇ* (Numbers 21:4); or an instrument to draw a circle *məḥûḡāh* (Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 295). None of these words have any phonemic similarity with the last part of the name *Liahona*, and they have nothing to do with a magnetic compass.

Royal Skousen, “The History of the Book of Mormon Text: Parts 5 and 6 of Volume 3 of the Critical Text,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 109–10, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4988&context=byusq. “Word examples like *bar* and *Bible* argue that the English translation of the Book of Mormon depends on words that first showed up in medieval English. This finding implies that these words did not appear as such on the plates themselves and were therefore introduced into the text during the translation process. But this does not mean that the entire translation of the Book of Mormon is paraphrastic or that it was a fiction created by the Lord. My own personal experience with the text has convinced me that the Book of Mormon is the history of real people and describes real events that occurred in their lives, but at the same time the text also shows the direct influence of the translation process. It is important to realize that the overall text of the Book of Mormon proper … could very well represent a literal translation despite various cases of cultural translation.”

Skousen uses the word *Bible* (2 Nephi 29:3–6) as an example of a word that is a cultural translation; the word *Bible* dates to medieval times or later and would not have been written by Nephi on the plates. The Old French word *adieu* (Jacob 7:27) is such a translation. It connotes a farewell to beloved friends commending them to God, but *adieu* was not written on the plates; there must have been a Hebrew phrase or word that conveys the intended meaning of *adieu*. The name *Mary*, the mother of Jesus Christ (Mosiah 3:8; Alma 7:10) may be a cultural translation, and was likely written *maryām*, an early form of Miriam (before the first *a* attenuated or raised to *i*). The Septuagint has Μαρία (iota = yod) (Exodus 15:20). The last syllable -ām may or may not have been on the plates. The name *Jesus Christ* may also be a cultural translation, as is *baptism* and other so-called anachronisms.
I believe that *compass* is a cultural translation, since it is an instrument that we understand. The Nephites likely never had the word *compass* that was a directional finding device with a magnetic spindle that pointed toward the north, but they had the word *ʔōnā* “a vessel,” and incorporated it into the name *Liahona*, a vessel prepared of the Lord.


99 Ibid., 188.

100 Ibid., 195.


102 Arnold and Choi, 170. See also Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §142.
Khor Rori: A Maritime Resources-Based Candidate for Nephi’s Harbor

George D. Potter

Abstract: Khor Rori, which forms the mouth of Wadi (Valley) Darbat, is the largest inlet along the Dhofar coast of southern Arabia. The khor was excavated into a harbor by the erosive action of the river that flows through Wadi Darbat. In ancient times, Khor Rori was the only harbor in the Dhofar Region that could accommodate large sailing ships. The first colonizers of Khor Rori, who arrived around the ninth century BC, must have realized that this particular khor, because of its morphology, was an ideal natural port for trading their frankincense with other seafaring nations. Because Khor Rori has long been considered an important candidate for Bountiful and offers the advantage of not only the rich vegetation in Wadi Darbat and good sources of flowing water, it is also a safe harbor where a ship could have been built — indeed, the harbor would later become a busy port noted for building ships and much trade. This article provides updates since the original publications about Khor Rori, better documenting its advantages and exploring the possibility that essential raw materials for shipbuilding and shipwright expertise might have already existed at Khor Rori in Nephi’s day.

In 2003, Richard Wellington and I put forward the idea in our book Lehi in the Wilderness that the ancient frankincense harbor of Khor Rori (Khor means “inlet”) in Oman is the probable place where Nephi built his ship.1 At the time, we both lived in Saudi Arabia, and our research on Nephi’s harbor constituted the last phase in our five-year effort to locate qualified candidates for sites described in the book of 1 Nephi. We were the first to propose that Wadi Tayyib al Ism is a candidate for the Valley of Lemuel, that Wadi Sharma is a candidate for Shazer, that
the villages along the frankincense trail between Wadi Ula to Medinah are candidates for the fertile parts, and that Khor Rori is a candidate for Nephi’s harbor. Since that time, I have continued my research on Khor Rori and now wish to share further information.

The central event of the Old World Bountiful in the Book of Mormon is the building of Nephi’s ship. As I search for the locations mentioned in the Book of Mormon, I appreciate that we will probably never know exactly where Nephi built his ship, unless the Lord reveals it. However, we are directed to “seek learning even by study, and also by faith” (D&C 109:14), so I feel it not amiss to use what scholarship is available to us to attempt to show that what Nephi described in the first book of the Book of Mormon was in keeping with what one would have probably found at Khor Rori at the turn of the sixth century BC.

Two other candidates have been proposed for Nephi’s harbor, namely Khor Kharfot by Warren Aston, and Wadi Mughsayl by W. Revell Phillips. This paper approaches the subject of the location of Nephi’s harbor in five parts:

- Part One: What is reasonable to discern about the nature of Nephi’s ship?
- Part Two: What were the geological features Nephi needed to build, outfit, and successfully launch his ship?
- Part Three: Where is Khor Rori, and what are the attributes of the land Bountiful?
- Part Four: Could Khor Rori have had the maritime resources Nephi required to build and sail a ship?
- Part Five: What are some additional speculations about Khor Rori?

**Part One: What Can We Discern about Nephi’s Ship?**

Nephi provided no definitive description of his ship. Nevertheless, from the text of the Book of Mormon, we can conjecture the type of his ship and why it was different from other ships of its day.

First, the ship appears to have had a hull with a covered deck. Nephi wrote, “we did go down into the ship, with all our loadings and our seeds, and whatsoever thing we had brought with us” (1 Nephi 18:6). They did not go down to the ship, but into the ship with their provisions. The implication appears to be that the ship had a sizable storage hull. Later Nephi notes that there was room for dancing, suggesting a covered deck. Nephi guided and “sailed” his ship, an implication that it was a sailing ship with a rudder (1 Nephi 18:13, 22). From this limited information, it
appears that Nephi’s ship, with the exception of an added deck, was rather conventional for the period. It must have been a large vessel, capable of supporting an extended family of several dozen members on a prolonged transoceanic journey. Nephi’s vessel needed to carry food and water for a sustained voyage, bedding, a cooking box and cooking items, seeds for planting in the Promised Land, tools for sowing and harvesting plants, several sets of sails, bulky ancient tents (1 Nephi 18:23), materials for repairing the ship, at least one stone anchor, the brass plates, and at least one sword (probably more weapons). The ship had to be strong enough to withstand the powerful forces of pounding seas, including at least one “great and terrible tempest” (1 Nephi 18:13). In combination, these clues provide a possible model for Nephi’s ship, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The proposed dimensions of Nephi’s ship are 120’ long by 30’ wide.

Navy-hull expert Frank Linehan, who has built and commissioned ships, calculates that Nephi’s ship had an approximately length of 120 feet and a width of 30 feet. Of course it can be argued that Nephi’s party was smaller. Maritime archaeologist Tim Severin built and sailed a replica of a medieval Omani ship. His ship had a crew of 20 people and required a length of 80 feet.

Warren Aston has suggested that Nephi’s ship was possibly a large raft. Substituting Nephi’s great achievement of building an ocean-going sailing ship of exceeding fine workmanship (1 Nephi 18:4) with that of roping together logs to form a raft implies a dangerous supposition — that Joseph Smith made errors in his translation of the Book of Mormon. The prophet repeatedly translated the word describing
Nephi’s vessel as a “ship” (1 Nephi 17:8, 17, 49, 51; 18:1, 2, 4–6, 8, 22). The prophet certainly knew the difference between a ship and a raft. Sailing ships are maneuverable, having keels, rudders, adjustable riggings, and narrow hulls that allow the ships to be sailed in a specific direction. A raft does not have the same capabilities. A brief reminder of the fate of Thor Heyerdahl’s raft is enlightening, since it highlights the crew’s inability to steer the raft. The journey commenced with the Kon-Tiki having to be towed by a tug into the Humboldt Current, which Heyerdahl knew would drift the raft directly into the path of the islands of eastern Polynesia. When his crew finally spotted an island after 101 days at sea, they tried to steer the raft to the island but could not land because the current pushed the raft farther out to sea.8 When they approached a second island, the crew could not steer the raft safely.9 The raft smashed into a reef at Raroia in the Tuamotu Islands on August 7, 1947, and was destroyed.

Nephi made it clear that he built a ship that he could steer (1 Nephi 18:13), “guide,” and “sail” (1 Nephi 18:22). He also recorded that his ship survived a four-day “great and terrible tempest” (1 Nephi 18:13). Yet it was only after the third day in the terrible storm that Laman and Lemuel became afraid. It is hard to imagine how the family, resting low
in the water on a raft and exposed to the waves and winds of the terrible storm, would have survived more than a few hours. Avoiding Antarctic gales and hurricanes was the reason Thor Heyerdahl intentionally launched the *Kon-Tiki* raft during the calm period of the year. Indeed, steering the raft was a major problem faced by Heyerdahl and his crew.\(^10\) It is unimaginable to sailing experts that a large family aboard a raft could have navigated, let alone survived, a crossing of the Pacific Ocean (15,000 nautical miles) or a passage around Cape Good Hope.\(^11\)

I will continue my discussion by assuming that Nephi’s ship was a sailing vessel somewhere between 80 and 120 feet long, with a hull weighing in excess of 100 tons. Phillips writes, “During my last time at Sur (Oman), workers were building a large, beautiful *dhow* for His Majesty the Sultan of Oman. I, and those with me, calculated that Nephi’s ship must have been about the same size. I stood under the huge hull in awe and amazement and with new respect and understanding for the monumental task which Nephi would undertake.”\(^12\) Such a ship would have required a harbor with specific features for building it, launching it and maneuvering it safely into the Indian Ocean. Severin wrote about his replica ship, “It required a place to build her, a port to fit her out, and a large crew to sail her.”\(^13\)

**Part Two: Nephi Needed Specific Geological Features to Build, Outfit, and Successfully Launch His Ship**

There were two primary geological features that Nephi needed in order to be successful in his ship building and launching efforts. These features are addressed in the following two sections.

**A Protected Harbor with Ways (Ramps)**

What does Nephi tells us about the party’s departure from Bountiful? He wrote that the family went “down into the ship, with all their loading and seeds, and whatsoever thing we had brought with us” (1 Nephi 18:6). The most likely meaning of this verse is that they entered a moored ship via a gangplank, i.e., they were in a harbor and Nephi or his family members stored their provisions, personal items, and bedding below deck, i.e., they were in a ship with a decking and not a ship at anchor beyond the surf line. After the family went down into the vessel, they “did put forth into the sea” (1 Nephi 18.8).
They could only do this if they were already moored in the water, or else they would have had to push the ship into the sea, in which case they would climb *up* into the ship. The fact that they put forth into the sea implies considerable control of the ship and tells us that the water they were in was not yet the sea, i.e., they were in a harbor. This implies a harbor as a necessary element to Nephi’s narrative and an essential feature of Bountiful. When completed and fully laden with supplies, rigging, tons of ballast, water, and at least one anchor, Nephi’s ship could have weighed more than 100 tons. As such, it could only have been built on a cradle (wooden platform) above the tide line and lowered into calm water using gravity. In an age void of cranes and even pulleys, it is implausible to consider other means to launch a heavy vessel. What is required for constructing a large ship is a sizable flat area of ground adjacent to deep water and protected from strong winds, high tides and breaking surf. Nephi’s narrative suggests an ordered departure from Bountiful on a completed ship already in the water and seaworthy (1 Nephi 18:5–8). This would be consistent with Nephi having used the age-old practice of building a ship above the waters of a protected harbor and launching it from a dry-dock using ways (ramps). Resting the hull in safe water would provide the crew the essential time to allow the plank timbers to expand to seal the hull (the Hebrew word is *tzaref*) and then caulk any remaining leaks (see Ezekiel 27:9). This was the construction
method used by both the Hebrews and the Egyptians.\textsuperscript{15} Once the hull was verified as being watertight, the deck and riggings could be added; the ship then loaded with ballast and put to sea for sea trials prior to embarkation. All these maritime fundamentals required a protected shipbuilding yard above the calm waters of a harbor. This has been the case throughout history, even until today. One can travel from San Diego to Anchorage and not find a single shipyard on an exposed inlet or beach.

In antiquity, Khor Rori was the harbor of the famous Frankincense trade. Ships from throughout the ancient world set anchor in her waters. Today, Khor Rori is a large waterway extending over 1.5 miles inland. The khor (inlet) has several natural places where large ships could moor, making it the likely reason that Khor Rori and Taqah (the settlement two miles to the west) were in ancient times called Merbat (“the moorings”). Saeed al-Mashori, the Omani Supervisor of Excavations at Khor Rori, showed us eight clearly defined remains of ancient shipyard “ways-ramps” from which ships were launched into the calm waters of Khor Rori. The ramps are located just south of the Sumhuram fortress and include moorings where ships were finished and loaded.\textsuperscript{16} Even if these ramps were not available in his day, Nephi could have prepared
his own building site and dug his own ramp. Excavations adjacent to
the ways have uncovered a complete wharf and bollards (wooden post)
used to tie up boats.\(^{17}\) Again, Linehan estimates that Nephi’s ship was
at least 100 feet long, and further noting that “the draft, the depth of
water that a ship reaches when loaded, of Nephi’s ship would equal one
fifteenth (~\(1/15\)) the length of the waterline. These are the basic rules
which from antiquity to today hold true and are used by modern-day
naval architects.”\(^{18}\)

![Figure 5. Natural harbor of Khor Rori. Photograph by the author.](image)

In 1995, Jana Owen of UCLA, who made a study of inlets of southern
Oman as part of the “Trans Arabia Expedition,”\(^{19}\) assured us that the
only natural harbor that could accommodate large sailing ships was
Khor Rori. It is reasonable to assume that Nephi’s ship would have taken
several years to construct, thus requiring a sheltered place to protect
the work-in-progress from the annual monsoon storms. The cliffs that
run the entire length of both sides of the Khor Rori provide a sheltered
shipyard.

Although today there is no inlet at Khor Kharfot, Aston has
presented an illustration showing what a harbor might have looked like
in Lehi’s time.\(^{20}\) There is no archaeology or historical record to support
his idea. Further, the illustration Aston offers presents a small inlet with
no protection from the tidal surges and winds of the monsoons, and no
breakwater to allow safe access through breaking surf to the open sea.
The same eliminations would have been true for Wadi Mughsayl.
Safe Access to the Indian Ocean

Bountiful required a harbor with calm waters in order for the family to enter the ship while moored, and then “set forth into the sea,” as Nephi explains. Furthermore, it would have been impossible for Nephi’s ship and crew to sail anywhere without first conducting sea trials to test and adjust the ship and to allow the crew significant practice sailing. Shipbuilders know that any sailing vessel requires sea trials to trim the sails, to set the correct amount and position of the ballast to balance the hull, and to train the crew.\textsuperscript{21}

These necessary tasks would have required Nephi’s ship to have exited and reentered its mother port many times without wrecking in the high surf and rocky cliffs common to the Omani coast. What is required in rough seas, like Oman’s Indian Ocean shoreline, is a formable breakwater. Today a sand bar closes off Khor Rori. However, the port is known to have been open anciently, the sand bar forming only circa AD 1646–90.\textsuperscript{22} Guarding both sides of the entry to Khor Rori are great granite cliffs. The cliffs reach a height of 100 feet and project out into the deep water a length of 400–450 meters, thus providing a natural breakwater for a safe passage to the sea far beyond the breaking surf zone. Phillips describes this remarkable passage into the deep water:
“At Khor Rori two elongated monoliths of rock flank the entrance to the khor and defy an obvious geological explanation.”

Building a ship strong enough to carry Lehi’s family to the New World was the primary reason the Lord directed Lehi to Bountiful. This premise makes the natural harbor at Khor Rori a logical candidate for Nephi’s harbor. The long, wide, and deep harbor would have provided Nephi a protected building site, calm waters for launching, mooring sites for outfitting and loading the ship, still waters for practice sailing her, and safe access to the open seas through a remarkable breakwater.

**Part Three: Khor Rori and the Attributes of the Land Bountiful**

The natural harbor of Khor Rori forms the mouth of the amazing Wadi (valley) of Darbat. Nephi’s harbor was located in the land his family called Bountiful, so named for its much fruit and wild honey (1 Nephi 17:5). Bountiful also featured a shoreline, a mountain where Nephi received instruction from the Lord (1Nephi 17:7), a deposit of ore (1 Nephi 17:11), flint to start a fire (1 Nephi 17:11), wild game (1 Nephi 18:6), and a place where Nephi could have been thrown into the depths of the sea (1 Nephi 17:43).
**Much Fruit and Wild Honey**

While it is possible that Nephi referred to wild fruits, the young prophet was from the land of Jerusalem, a culture renowned for its orchards, vineyards and its appreciation for fruit (Proverbs 8:19). In describing Bountiful, Nephi distinguished between honey and “wild honey,” but only “fruit,” not “wild fruit.” It is reasonable then that Nephi referred to cultivated crops, and not the wild vegetation that grows throughout the monsoonal region of Dhofar. Near the Bronze Age settlements at Khor Rori are found Iron Age remains of irrigated farms. Zarins notes, “At Khor Rori we found traces of long walls, many at right angles, placed in the context of diverting water from either springs or wadis.”

Nevertheless, we can only speculate on what Lehi would have found at Khor Rori around 587 BC. That said, excavations continue at Khor Rori, and archaeologists have so far confirmed that as far back as the third century BC, the harbor had “traces of irrigation works in alluvial deposits and stone alignments that bordered and protected the arable lands and herding practices. All this archaeological evidence is fully in line with the palaeobotanical and archaeozoological results which point to the population of Sumhuram [Hadhrami ruins at Khor Rori, circa 300 BC] as having a rich and varied availability of food.”

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*Figure 8. River in Wadi Darbat. Photograph by the author.*
Of course it could be argued that Nephi’s reference that “all these things were prepared of the Lord that we might not perish” (1 Nephi 17:5) suggests that the fruit Nephi saw was not cultivated by the locals. Warren Aston has used this argument to propose Khor Kharfot as a possible candidate for Bountiful: The “uncultivated fruit near the ocean as Nephi indicates, [is] the prime factor giving rise to the descriptive name Bountiful.” While this might have been the case, “uncultivated fruit” cannot constitute a “prime” or specific locator for Bountiful in the Dhofar region of Oman. If uncultivated vegetation is what Nephi meant by much fruit, this attribute for Bountiful would apply to the entire monsoonal zone in Dhofar, and not exclusively to either Khor Kharfot or Khor Rori. Furthermore, the wild vegetation in Kharfot grows in a very small area and is minuscule when compared to the amount and variety of native vegetation growing at Wadi Darbat, the valley in which Khor Rori is located. The beautiful Wadi Darbat is an Omani National Park with impressive waterfalls, five fresh-water lakes, a year-round river, and perhaps the most abundant wild fruit varieties found anywhere in Oman. Wadi Darbat is known locally as the “valley of the big trees.”

Professor Samir Hanna of Sultan Qaboss University describes this valley: “majestic views of lakes, waterfalls and wildlife [see 1 Nephi 18:6]; all of this, coupled with the surrounding vegetation and the tranquillity of the place, provides a vision of Paradise.” To this day, wild honey is still collected in Wadi Darbat. By foot or by camels, access to Wadi Darbat’s lakes above the tall waterfalls from Khor Rori would have been easy. The author has observed camels and their herders ascending from the harbor to the lakes, while using both the modern road and beaten camel paths.

Today the harbor area of Wadi Darbat (Khor Rori) appears barren of significant vegetation. However, that was not the case in antiquity. Within living memory, Khor Rori was heavily forested; and the Botanical Mission from Florence states that overgrazing has resulted in the harbor’s current state. An archaeologist concludes that around 300 BC the harbor of Khor Rori “was fairly rich in cultivation.” Either blessed with cultivated or wild fruits, Khor Rori/Wadi Darbat would have been a land of “much fruit,” even a land described as a paradise.
Wild Game

As Professor Hanna notes, Wadi Darbat is known for its wildlife. In the mountains surrounding the wadi are found the Arabian leopard, mountain gazelle, Blanford’s fox, hyrax, hyena, and the Nubian goat. Ancient cave art in Wadi Darbat portrays large wild animals.

A Mountain, Ore, and Flint

As for a nearby mountain at Khor Rori, there are numerous choices. To the immediate west of Khor Rori is Jabel Taqa, just two and a half miles from the natural harbor and its ancient ramps. Since antiquity, the mountain on the east of Khor Rori has been called Edahk A-Solot. Edahk Al-Solot, traditionally called “the mountain of prayer,” is also the mountain where William Revell Phillips of Brigham Young University found ore and where a Neolithic flint quarry is located below its slopes and just four miles east of Khor Rori. It is interesting to speculate the reason why the Lord requested Nephi to go to the mountain (1 Nephi 17:7) instead of just showing him how to build a ship where he was sleeping. Might the Lord have known that Nephi would ask him where to find ore to make tools (1 Nephi 17:9), and that the answer had
already been provided – the very mountain he was praying on? Aston has suggested that a distinguished mountain at Bountiful was located “nearby” the sea. Clearly, this attribute would have existed at Khor Rori, Khor Kharfot, Wadi Mughsayl, and all the other inlets along the Salalah coastal plain. The Book of Mormon gives us no details about the mountain on which Nephi prayed, only that he went there often. We can only conjecture where the mountain was located in reference to where the family camped. How tall was it? How close was it to the seashore? Or how long did it take Nephi to reach it on foot or by camel? The entire Dhofar seashore is bordered by mountain ranges within easy walking distances from the beach.

A Place to Throw Nephi into the Depths of the Sea

The cliffs that form the breakwater at Khor Rori are 100 feet tall. The cliffs reach over 400 meters into the depths of the Indian Ocean. Since it is known that people were living atop these cliffs anciently and possibly in Lehi’s time, perhaps the family was camped among them, and that the argument between Nephi and his brothers took place near the edge of the cliffs. If Laman and Lemuel had successfully thrown Nephi from these towering cliffs into the deep waters of the Indian Ocean, Nephi’s ship would never have sailed (see Figure 6 and footnotes 60 and 61).

Combining the above attributes that would have marked Khor Rori in 600 BC, and all within a short six-mile walking radius, the natural harbor makes Wadi Darbat and its natural harbor of Khor Rori a formidable candidate for the land of Bountiful. In his book *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Aston proposes twelve criteria for the land of Bountiful. With its natural harbor of Khor Rori, Wadi Darbat would have met all of Aston’s criteria, except for the criterion, questioned herein, that Bountiful was a place with little or no population.

Part Four: Could Khor Rori have had the Maritime Resources Nephi Required to Build and Sail a Ship?

While still camped in the valley of Lemuel, Nephi received the revelation that he would be given a promised land across the many waters (1 Nephi 2:20; 13:10, 12–13, 17, 29). Nephi must have been quite young when he understood that he needed to build a great ship capable of taking a large family across the many waters. Nephi must have realized that he needed to learn dozens of shipwright and seamanship skills, as well as acquire a long list of raw materials for his ship’s construction. Due to the fame of the frankincense trade, his father likely knew that Khor Rori
was one of the few places in the ancient world that possessed these vital resources. While in the valley, Nephi, being young and inexperienced, the challenge must have seemed overwhelming. According to the *Jewish Encyclopaedia*,

The first positive commandment of the Bible, according to rabbinic interpretation (Maimonides, “Minyan ha-Miẓwot,” 212), is that concerning the propagation of the human species (Gen. 1. 28) … it is thus considered the duty of every Israelite to marry as early in life as possible. Eighteen years is the age set by the Rabbis (Ab. v. 24); and anyone remaining unmarried after his twentieth year is said to be cursed by God Himself (Ḳid. 29b). Some urge that children should marry as soon as they reach the age of puberty, *i.e.*, the fourteenth year (Sanh. 76b); … A man who, without any reason, refused to marry after he had passed his twentieth year was frequently compelled to do so by the court.  

If Nephi had three unmarried older brothers and presumably one or more older sisters, how old was he when he knew he needed to build a large and stout ship? He must have been in his early teens. At that age, what could Nephi have known about the complicated multi-skills he needed to master to construct an ocean-going ship, or for that matter the other skills he would eventually master in order to build swords like Laban’s or to construct an ore smelter, to build a temple like Solomon’s, and to hammer ore into gold plates? It should be remembered that Nephi came from an elite family. He was highly educated for his time, knowing how to read and write in more than one language. His father was wealthy, having inherited lands and possessing gold, silver, and precious things (2 Nephi 2:4). One could suggest that Nephi could have been the son of a metal artisan, but that seems unlikely. Since Lehi was wealthy, Nephi was a master writer in more than one language, and it is estimated that in ancient Israel only 3% of Jews were even literate. In this context, it is doubtful that young Nephi knew any of the manual skills of the servant or a member of the craftsman-class. Who was there to teach him these multiple skills? Perhaps finding a place where young Nephi could learn from master shipwrights and experience seamen was the very reason Lord led Nephi to Bountiful.

Even if Nephi had access to the best shipbuilders during his time, he still needed guidance from the Lord on how to make his ship strong enough to reach the New World. It is doubtful that any Omani ship in that day could have reached the Promised Land. The Lord counselled
Nephi, “Thou shalt construct a ship, after the manner which I shall show thee, that I may carry thy people across these waters.” (1 Nephi 17:8). So how could his ship have been stronger and otherwise different from how other ships were constructed in 600 BC? US Navy hull expert Frank Linehan believes that since the earliest known Omani ships were sewn together using coconut rope, they did not have the structure strength to reach the Americas. In our book *The Voyages of the Book of Mormon*, Linehan proposes several improvements the Lord could have made to the ships of that day to make Nephi’s ship strong enough to survive a transoceanic voyage, including reinforcing the hull with iron or wooden pegs.41

Even with divine guidance, there remain many questions relating to Nephi’s account in the Book of Mormon. Where did Nephi find the raw materials necessary to build a large and stout ship? How could a young man with no shipwright skills construct a large vessel of “exceedingly fine workmanship”? (1 Nephi 18:4). Moreover, who taught Nephi and his crew the multitude of skills required to navigate and safely sail a large vessel?

Of course, one could simply dismiss these questions by resorting to a mythological explanation, that is, an all-powerful God provided a long list of building materials for the young man and a host of angels to mentor him. However, Nephi only wrote that the Lord “showed him great things,” and that he, Nephi, did the work (1 Nephi 18:1–3). This latter explanation seems to be the natural manner in which the Lord develops his disciples. My proposition is that even though the Lord inspired Nephi on how to build a ship, Nephi still had to actually acquire the raw materials for constructing the ship, find master shipwrights to mentor him on how to fabricate a ship, and experienced seamen to teach him and his crew how to sail a large ship. I concur with Brigham Young University’s Wm. Revell Phillips, who wrote, in reference to Nephi constructing a ship: “I do not limit God’s ability to do whatever he wishes by whatever means he wishes to do it, but if we chose the supernatural explanation there is no meaning or purpose to all our logic and speculation.”42

We are not at the point where Khor Rori can decisively provide answers to all the questions critics of the Book of Mormon might raise about the building and sailing of Nephi’s ship. Nevertheless, recent discoveries at Khor Rori are providing rational answers to the doubters. Indeed, one of the strengths of Khor Rori is that the more that is discovered about the ancient harbor, the stronger it becomes as a scholarly defense for the Book of Mormon, as explained in the following section.
Khor Rori was Populated before Lehi’s Time, and the Harbor was Probably an Active Trading Port

A distinguishing attribute of Khor Rori, which is not the case for Khor Kharfot or Wadi Mughsayl, is that it is likely to have been populated in Nephi’s time. It is also possible that the inlet was an active trading port in that era. It would then follow that if Khor Rori was a trading port in Nephi’s time, the port could have provided Nephi the tangible and intangible maritime resources he needed to construct and sail a ship.

Based on Nephi’s text, whether Bountiful was a wilderness or populated can be argued either way. On the one hand, before reaching Bountiful, Nephi continually referred to their journey “in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:4, 5; 16:9–16,35;17:1–4). Yet, after reaching their camp on the seashore, Nephi ceased using the term “wilderness” in reference to Bountiful. A population at Nephi’s harbor provides a reasonable explanation of how Nephi, through daily observation, knew his ship was different from those built by other shipwrights (1 Nephi 18:2). Further, it is highly probable that wherever Lehi camped along the Indian Ocean, his family would have been in contact with locals. On the other hand, Warren Aston promotes the paradigm that Nephi built his ship in an area that had no or little population; thus few or no maritime resources. However, the entire Dhofar region was populated well before Lehi’s arrival, including the area surrounding Khor Kharfot. Neolithic sites are found in Khor Kharfot. Newton and Zarins describe the features of the Bronze Age: “Small scale Bronze Age settlements of the uplands, foothills and coast of Dhofar participated in this international trade as evidenced by the recovery of Bronze Age tools and weapons, the domestication of plants and animals, trade in frankincense, and perhaps copal.”

Iron Age sites have been found at Raysut, just five miles from Khor Kharfot. An assessment of ancient manmade structures in Kharfot by archaeologist Paolo Costa indicates that the wadi was inhabited at some period. Believing that Lehi settled in an area void of people seems out of context with what is known about the history of the area. Wm. Revell Phillips notes, “On this point, I differ sharply with Warren Aston. Lehi would have searched with difficulty to find a suitable site on the seashore that was completely unpopulated. … Wherever he reached the sea, Lehi had neighbors, and if he tried to avoid them and was not curious about them, they were certainly curious about him. In a short time, he must have become aware of significant population centers along the coast and of a major commercial port at Khor Rori, where a wide variety of supplies and amenities were probably available.
Surely some members of Lehi’s extended family must have made friends among the local people and must have traded with them, learned from them, and given and received help in a wide variety of endeavors.” The question begs to be asked, if members of Nephi’s family were interacting with locals, why would he have chosen to construct his ship at a remote site when he could have simply moved to Khor Rori with its excellent harbor, vital maritime resources, abundant fresh water, and plentiful food sources?

What Do Archaeologists Tell Us about Khor Rori in Nephi’s Time?

Excavations at Ras Al-Jinz indicate that Oman had been involved in a sea trade with India from great antiquity (2500–900 BC). Excavations at other sites in Oman indicate that Oman was involved in maritime trade with India perhaps as far back as the mid-fourth millennium BC. Bronze Age findings of carnelian at Khor Rori indicate that the harbor was trading with northwest India centuries before Nephi’s time. It is well documented that Khor Rori was the harbor for the exportation of Omani frankincense, a trade that dates to prehistory. The fact that Oman was trading frankincense with Mesopotamia and India as early as the mid-third millennium BC strongly suggesting that the port of Khor Rori was involved in some level of maritime trading well before Nephi set sail. Archaeologist Lynne S. Newton and Juris Zarins write, “Thus, the maritime experience along the Indian Ocean appears to have linked a number of distinct cultural traditions from the Arabia Gulf, India and the Indian Ocean.”

While noting that Khor Rori “has much to recommend it as a possible Bountiful” in at least some aspects, Aston has argued that Khor Rori’s role as a port had not begun in Nephi’s day and that the ruins at Sumhuram date to no earlier than the beginning of the third century BC. However, the use of Khor Rori as a port may have begun well before the invasion of the Hadhramis in Khor Rori ca. 300 BC, which may have been motivated by a desire to control and benefit from an already existing frankincense trade that centered in the harbor. The Hadhrami settlement did not exist at Nephi’s time; however, based on recent work, we now have evidence that it was settled well before 300 BC. In a 2021 publication that discusses finds made in 2016, University of Pisa archaeologists suggest that Sumhuran was built in an area that was already heavily populated, with settlements possibly extending back to and beyond Lehi’s day:
The discovery, at the end of 2016, of the HAS1 settlement on the Inqitat promontory [at Khor Rori] partly upset the previous hypotheses by bringing forth numerous new questions. Unlike what we imagined, Sumhuram was founded in an area that was already heavily populated, as shown by the presence of settlement HAS1. HAS1 was indeed inhabited since the 4th century BC to 1st/2nd century AD, but some older dates from an area used as a dump suggest that there was already a settlement context around the 8th century BC.

Newton and Zarins conclude: “The colony in the Dhofar region at Khor Rori, was constructed in stages and the layout resembles a typical South Arabic period settlement. … The site, built ca. 300 BC, juts out over the lagoon and sits on top of earlier shell-midden Iron Age sites. The site sits at a prime location: the lagoon served as a harbor or protected port from the southwest monsoon. Both sides of the lagoon have promontories that not only provided natural lookout post, but also were distinctive landmarks on the coast for sailors.” Zarins indicates that another Iron Age site is located “on the terrace immediately below the Hadhrami outpost.”

The data so far cannot confirm that the port was being used as a port in Lehi’s day, but it was likely inhabited; and given its advantages as a port and its later rise as a major port, the proposal that Khor Rori functioned as a port with at least some maritime skills in Lehi’s day seems plausible.

While there is no way of knowing the exact place where Lehi might have camped at Khor Rori, there are several Iron Age possibilities, including Khor Taqah, Wadi Darbat, an earlier settlement on the site where Sumhuram was later built, or on Inqitat, the promontory on the east entrance to the Khor Rori. If camped atop Inqitat, it provided a possible site for where Nephi argued with his brothers, who tried to throw him to his death in the depths of the sea. Artifacts found on the promontory indicate that Inqitat was continually inhabited from 800 BC to the Islamic period. Newton and Zarins conclude: “It is likely that merchants from Shabwa arriving long before the actual colony [Sumhuram, ca. 300 BC] was established, found contemporary inhabitants throughout the area, including those at Khor Rori.”

Maritime archaeologists concur that Khor Rori was probably an active trading port during the first millennium BC, perhaps even featuring moorings for loading and unloading the timber and other items Nephi would have needed. Jana Owen (UCLA), director of the Transarabia Coastal Survey, concluded, “We know about the
Hadhrami invasion, but I believe that it [Khor Rori] would have been used [as a port] previous to that invasion. Again, around the settlement we have surveyed a good deal of Iron Age lithics; this is earlier than the work that is now being done by the Italians from Pisa. We also did a dive survey of the lagoon where we found evidence of modification on the northeastern edge of the lagoon; and the size is clearly indicative of large ship dockings.

Furthermore, there is tentative evidence that sailing ships were constructed at Khor Rori as far back as 1000 BC.

The Office of the Advisor to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs reported on Khor Rori in 2008:

There is a Bronze Age settlement indicated by round, stone, megalithic-style structures at the top end of the al-Hamr al-Sharquiya promontory on the eastern side of the mouth of wadi Darbat [Khor Rori]. A surface survey of the settlement unearthed some flint tools and fragments of copper attributable to the late 3rd millennium BC. …

The emergence of this kind of settlement, which marked a cultural shift in the region of Dhofar, coincides in time with the appearance in written Mesopotamian sources of an increasing use of ritual fumigation with aromatic substances, which could be interpreted as frankincense.

It is therefore probable that these Bronze Age people [at Khor Rori] were already exploiting and trading in the principal resource of the area, namely frankincense. Trade would have had to be by sea, probably by coastal navigation and by stages reaching Mesopotamian and the Indus valley.

The Omani Ministry of National Heritage and Culture states that Dhofar, whose ancient harbor was Khor Rori, “grew from obscure beginnings before 1,000 BC. … Its growth was the major stimulus to the reopening and expansion of Indian Ocean maritime routes.”

Five Resources Nephi Needed to Build and Sail a Ship

In order to build and sail a ship, there are five elements to which Nephi needed access: hardwoods, fabric, ore and metal workers, shipwrights, and seamanship skills. The following sections examine the availability of these resources in the area.
Access to Long, Straight Hardwoods
There is no evidence that shipbuilding timber ever grew in Oman, yet Nephi needed long straight hardwood to build a ship strong enough to survive an ocean crossing. Phillips notes in a précis that “Timber appropriate for building a conventional, ocean-going ship does not grow anywhere along the Omani coast and probably did not in the past. Trees are very scarce in the Dhofar, and those of significant size tend to yield gnarly, punky wood.”67

Phillips could have added that the short and gnarly trees that do grow in Dhofar are pervious soft woods which, when placed in the water, will become waterlogged and sink. The Omani Ministry of National Heritage and Culture notes: “Teak and coconut wood were used exclusively for building hulls. Teak had to be imported from India.”68 Jeff Lindsay suggests, “it is reasonable to argue that if locals relied in imported wood for key ships’ components, Nephi may also have needed to.”69 For example, maritime archaeologist Tim Severin constructed in Oman a replica of Sindbad’s sailing ship, which would have been smaller than Nephi’s. He noted, “The problem was that the keel piece to my replica needed to be 52 feet long, 12 inches by 15 inches in cross-section, and dead straight.”70 Severin had to import from India all the timbers for the replica. The main spar, the timber that holds the main sail, required
a straight tree 81 feet long. The mast required another timber 65 feet
long.\textsuperscript{71} Since such trees never grew in Oman, Nephi, like Severin, needed
access to imported wood. Ample evidence witnesses to the contact
between southern Oman and India and the Horn of Africa from as early
as 1950 bc,\textsuperscript{72} which timespan could have allowed access to hardwoods
from India, the source from which shipbuilders in the Arabian Peninsula
and Mesopotamia historically obtained their hardwoods.

Tom Vosmer, director of the Traditional Boats of Oman Project, noted
of ancient ship building in Oman, “Most, if not all, planking timber had
to be imported: teak (\textit{Techona grandis}), venteak (\textit{Lythracea lanceolata}),
mango (\textit{Mangifera indica}), as did spar timber.”\textsuperscript{73} Phillips adds: “If
the ship were built at Khor Rori or even at Salalah, teak lumber from
India was almost certainly available for purchase on the docks at Khor
Rori.”\textsuperscript{74} Severin added, “The timber for building Omani ships is brought
nearly 1300 miles from the Malabar coast of India. It is a trade which
goes as far back as the earliest records, because Oman lacks trees large
enough to provide first-class boat timber.”\textsuperscript{75} However, would this timber
imported from India have been available to Nephi at Khor Rori in the
sixth century bc? In the year 2000 the World Heritage Committee of
the United Nations’ Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO) designated Khor Rori as a World Heritage site, noting that
trade in frankincense was “one of the most important trading activities
of the ancient and medieval world.”\textsuperscript{76} German maritime archaeologist
Norbert Weismann, who specializes in Oman, writes of Khor Rori,
“Certainly it was involved in the traffic to India in Greco-Roman times,
but there was trade with India much earlier.”\textsuperscript{77} Nephi’s description of
working “timbers of curious workmanship” hints that the timbers were
possibly pre-cut woods (workmanship) from a foreign location. An
example for pre-cut timbers being exported was “Almug” (1 Kings 10:11),
a hardwood used for building the temple. Almug was shipped from
Ophir but was believed to have originated in India. Almug appears in
the plural form, which Biblical scholars have taken to mean that the
wood was delivered in planks.\textsuperscript{78} When it was written, the Periplus of the
Erythraean Sea noted that India was importing beams and rafters to
Oman.\textsuperscript{79} How could the timbers have been curious to Nephi if he had
logged and cut the lumber himself?

**Fabric for Sails**
Nephi’s ship was powered by sails (1 Nephi 18:22). Therefore, fabric for
sails would have been another resource for the construction of Nephi’s
ship. Traditionally, the sails on Arab ships were woven from coconut
or palm leaves or were made from cotton cloth. These materials stretch with time and need to be replaced within weeks. Nephi needed sails appropriate for strong stormy wind conditions, as well as, larger sails for calm winds. Thus, his ship needed several sets of sails requiring a considerable amount of fabric. Cotton would have been available at Khor Rori either as a locally grown product or as an import from India. According to the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, written in the early Christian centuries, perhaps as late as the fourth century, cloth was one of the products that the inhabitants of Dhofar imported in return for their frankincense. An unlikely, but possible material for sails could have been fabric woven from goat hair. Such sails would have been thick, heavy and less capable of catching wind. Perhaps Nephi could have fabricated sails from the heavy goat hair tents the family brought from Jerusalem. Nautical archaeologist Tom Vosmer studies the possibility that third-millennium BC sailors used sails fabricated from goat hair to propelled reed ships from Oman to India. However, his replica of a 5,000-year-old Omani ship with goat hair sails sank within hours of launching.

**Iron Ore and Metal Workers**

As noted earlier, researchers from Brigham Young University discovered iron ore in Dhofar, their “most exciting and significant discovery” only six miles east of Khor Rori. Other recent findings have relevance to the Book of Mormon narrative. Bronze blades, a knife, and hooks were found in Dhofar dating to 4000 BC. Excavations by a team from the University of Pisa discovered at Khor Rori iron axes, iron nails, an iron knife, an iron razor, well-crafted swords, and iron-smelting slag from four iron smelters and slag from one bronze smelter dating from the first century BC. According to the Omani Office of Cultural Affairs, “The excavations in Sumhuram have produced a significant quantity of artefacts in metal – bronze and iron. These are mostly utensils for everyday use, mainly in iron: nails, chisels, hooks, needles, razors, various blades, clips, weights, locks, lamps, sickles and mattocks. … Many of these bronze objects seem to have been cast with a lost wax technique and finished by hammering and engraving. The premises discovered in the residential area that were used by artisans for working metal, especially iron, the discovery of numerous small crucibles in glazed terracotta bearing races of bronze casting as well as the great quantity of bronze and iron slags — all indicative that Sumhuram produced most of the metallic objects found there.” Furnaces for smelting iron and bronze objects were located round the Sumhuran’s market square. In all, the
Pisa archaeologists collected 50 kilos of smelting slag, mostly from the iron production chain at Khor Rori. In 2013, a large bronze plate with writing on it was also excavated in Khor Rori. Although the plate dates to the Sumhuram period, it hints that recording written text on metal plates was a technology that might have existed at Khor Rori even before that period. Vittoria Buffa notes: “The text with its allusion to bronze (objects/material) is evidence of metalworking in the port. The numerous furnaces excavated by IMTO are clear evidence of the various industrial activities of the inhabitants of the port. The tablet was certainly forged at Sumhuram; moulds for bronze inscriptions were found at Sumhuram. Within the community there were, therefore, specialized craftsmen able to produce artefacts not only of daily use.” Phillips of Brigham Young University has suggested that Nephi’s metallurgy “may have been learned from the local smiths of Dhofar or from the Indian traders that passed through nearby trading ports.”

Figure 11. Model of temple at Khor Rori (Khor Rori Archaeological Park Museum) and bronze plate from in the temple (Land of Frankincense Museum). Photographs by the author.

But what of the statement in 1 Nephi 17:9 about Nephi seeking revelation on where to find ore so that he could make his own tools to build the ship? Doesn’t this undermine the proposal that a vibrant community of shipbuilders was already present at Bountiful who could have provided the tools Nephi would need? Why would Nephi have had
to find his own ore and forge his own tools? Metal tools would certainly have been in high demand by the shipbuilders, and the valuable ore deposits may have been guarded. It is reasonable to assume that Nephi’s finances were limited and metal tools very expensive. If Nephi was shown by the Lord where to mine his own ore and learned from local smelters on how to forge his own tools, Nephi’s remaining finances could be used to acquire the necessary imported hardwoods and sail fabric.

Expert Shipwrights

Hugh Nibley suggests that Lehi “and his sons knew a good deal about caravan techniques is obvious, and yet we are explicitly told that they knew nothing at all about shipbuilding (1 Nephi 17:17, 18:2). Why should they? Shipbuilding was the jealously guarded monopoly of the coast people.” Nibley explains, “Members of the family laugh contemptuously when Nephi proposed to build a ship (1 Nephi 17:17–20), and might well have quoted the ancient proverb, ‘Do not show an Arab the sea or to a Sidonian the desert, for their work is different.’ It is likely that when Nephi arrived at Bountiful, his knowledge of shipbuilding was nil. John L. Sorensen concludes: “No hint can be found in the text that anyone in Lehi’s party had any knowledge whatever of nautical matters.” Maritime expert Frank Linehan, who has built his own small ships, believes that to build a ship stout enough to reach the New World, Nephi needed access to the best shipwrights of his day. While the Lord gave Nephi the instructions on how to build the ship, he did not give him the lifetime of experience that shipwrights need to perform their particular craft. Besides metalwork, here is a shortened list of some of the essential competencies Nephi needed to master to construct a ship: (1) forming a hull by preshaping planks and knowing exactly where to place the ship’s ribs so the hull could withstand the forces of the sea; (2) woodworking, for example, tapering a mast, shaping perfectly fitted joints, or preventing leaks by carving planks to within 1/64 of an inch in exactness; (3) rope-working and sewing timber, since ship needs miles of rope, and attaching the ropes to the timbers needs the exact number of strings and at the correct tension; (4) bending the planks into exact shapes using steam boxes; (5) caulking the ship and knowing how to mix the caulking compounds to prevent leaks; (6) oiling the ropes so they do not fail; (7) antifouling the ship by mixing a coating compound that can protect against shipworms; (8) outfitting the ship by knowing how and where to anchor the mast and how to install a complicated set of riggings and sails. So who mentored Nephi in these essential competencies? As noted earlier, Khor Rori was a major economic center in the ancient
world, and maritime archaeologists believe that shipbuilding probably took place there hundreds of years prior to Lehi’s arrival. Ancient shipyard ramps (ways) can still be observed at Khor Rori, attesting to the fact that shipwrights built and repaired ships there to support the ancient frankincense sea trade.

**Seamanship Skills**

Nephi needed a competent crew and the seamanship skills to train them. It takes years to learn and practice the skills needed to control a sailing ship at sea. Historian Maurizio Tosi writes of the ancient Arabian captains: “For the first navigators it was like venturing into outer space and only a body of accumulated experience ensured their survival at sea.”

![Figure 12. Ancient ship entering Khor Rori, from the Khor Rori Interpretation Center. Photograph by the author.](image)

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea mentions that Khor Rori was a safe haven for ships held up in the winter: “The place goes by the name of Moscha — where ships from Cana (Yemen) are customarily sent; ships come from Dimyrike (southern India) and Barygaza (modern-day Broach in India) which cruise nearby [and] spend the winter there due to the lateness of the season.” Undoubtedly, the later Greek captains learned from the earlier Arabian sailors the advantage of mooring in the protected waters of Khor Rori during the winter northeast monsoon.
Perhaps during the winters at Khor Rori, Nephi had access to idle captains who knew how to sail large ships across the open seas of the Indian Ocean and other experienced seamen who could have instructed Nephi and assisted in training his crew. Nephi’s ship had to have been manned by a crew with a basic knowledge of how to raise and taper the sails while adjusting the riggings, steer the ship, sail with and against the wind, including how to quickly change the sails if a storm approached, and how to repair the ship. During all hours of the night and day, a ship the size of Nephi’s would have required at least a three-man crew, two men aft at the tiller and one man forward as a lookout.

Another strength to the populated Khor Rori paradigm is that the harbor was at the end of the only known trail to the Indian Ocean from the interior trade route.99 The famous incense trail would have provided Lehi an existing caravan trail for access to the Indian Ocean. The trade route turned eastward at what Book of Mormon scholars believed was Nahom (1 Nephi 17:1) but eventually turned south for a short distance to traverse the roughed shoreline mountains of Dhofar. Camels are top heavy. Whenever possible, caravans avoided mountains; and when impossible to avoid, level trails were cut through the mountains to allow camels to climb and descend steep slopes. Laden with heavy tents (1 Nephi 17:6) and provisions, Lehi’s family would have required camels to haul their heavy loads and thus needed an established trail through the steep and highly vegetated mountains of Dhofar. The ancient frankincense caravan trail cut through the mountains of Dhofar and descended to the harbor of Khor Rori. Without a known trail from the interior to Khor Kharfot, Phillips made the following observation: “Wadi Sayq today is a narrow canyon for most of its length and is clogged with huge boulders and unfriendly vegetation, making it almost impossible to bring a caravan down the wadi.”100

Part Five: Additional Speculations on Khor Rori

In the following sections I offer a series of questions and possible answers to those questions relative to Khor Rori.

Was Khor Rori Actually Named Bountiful?

Any proposed answer is necessarily speculative. Nevertheless, I believe that speculation is of sufficient interest to the reader and should be presented.

I was introduced to Omani historian and author Ali Al-Shahri by S. Kent Brown of Brigham Young University. Ali has written eleven books
on the history and language of the Dhofar region where Khor Rori is located. His epigraphical research has been quoted by archaeologist Juris Zarins, the former director of the Land of the Frankincense Museum in Salalah.\textsuperscript{101} Al-Shahri has been a guest speaker at Brigham Young University. Ali Al-Shahri’s book \textit{The Language of Aad} contains the genealogy of his family, indicating that they are direct descendants of Ophir,\textsuperscript{102} the man whose name was given to the famous harbor that is mentioned in the Old Testament. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon states that Ophir is the name of an Arabian tribe.\textsuperscript{103} Rev. Charles Forster, B.D., of the Cathedral of Canterbury wrote that “Ophir, like all his elder brethren, settled in Arabia, and that his chief seat lay in the mountains of Oman.”\textsuperscript{104} It also interesting to know that Ophir had a brook running through it (Job 22:24) and that the only continually running river in southern Oman is found in Wadi Darbat/Khor Rori.

Of his ancestors Al-Shahri writes, “Ophir in the Bible and the Torah is the name of one of Joktan’s sons, and his sons lived between Mesha and Sephar, which is thought to extend from Hadramaut to the East of Dhofar. So Ophir is the name of one of the three brothers who shared ancient Dhofar between them. They were Uz, Ophir and Jerah”\textsuperscript{105} (see Genesis 10:26–30). Khor Rori is located in the Omani region of Dhofar. While Al-Shahri’s written genealogy is based on the oral tradition of tribal elders, during my visit to Khor Rori in 2019, two representatives from LDS Family Search joined me to meet with Ali for the purpose of obtaining his permission to digitize his genealogy.

If Ali Al-Shahri’s genealogy can be verified as authentic, it will provide an important clue in our search for Nephi’s harbor. An obvious qualification for Nephi harbor is that it was located in a land that people would refer to as “fruitful” or “Bountiful.” While there continues to be debate as to the location of ancient Ophir, it is reasonable to hypothesize that Khor Rori is a candidate for ancient Ophir.\textsuperscript{106} The \textit{LDS Bible Dictionary} states of Ophir: “probably a port of southern Arabia.” Strong’s \textit{Bible Dictionary} states that Ophir was “a land or city in southern Arabia in Solomon’s trade route where gold evidently was traded for goods.”\textsuperscript{107} Ali Al-Shahri grew up at Khor Rori in its beautiful upper section of Wadi Darbat. Included in his book is a map that shows the tribal lands of the Ophir people. The tribe’s lands of Ophir start at the harbor of Khor Rori and run west for about ten miles, commencing at the sea and reaching to the coastal mountains.\textsuperscript{108} Therefore, Al-Shahri’s genealogical record and tribal traditions provide tentative evidence that the ancient name for the natural harbor of Khor Rori is “Ophir.”\textsuperscript{109}
So what does Ophir mean? According to Smith’s Bible Dictionary (1863), Ophir means “abundance.” The same definition is given in Jones’s Dictionary of Old Testament Proper Names (1990).^10 If you place “Bountiful” in the Microsoft Word Thesaurus, you will find “abundant” as a synonym. Thus, an accurate translation of the name Ophir into English and a possible proper name for Khor Rori is “Bountiful.” Potts’ Bible Proper Names^11 states that Ophir means “a fruitful region,” and we know Nephi named the land where he built his ship Bountiful because of the land’s “much fruit and also wild honey” (1 Nephi 17:5). According to Ali, Wadi Darbat has some 400 flowering plants that make its wild honey highly prized.\(^112\)

Discovering possible evidence that Khor Rori was Ophir is significant for two reasons. First, it supports the assertion that the khor (inlet) was one of the ancient world’s trading ports and that it functioned as a harbor well before Nephi’s time. Indeed, King Solomon sent his navy to Ophir to acquire gold, silver, ivory, apes and peacocks – all likely items that were traded for frankincense at Khor Rori by civilizations bordering the Indian Ocean (see 1 Kings 10:11, 22). During Pliny’s time, Oman was still famous for trafficking in native gold.\(^113\) According to Meseu Julian in his book Ophir is Dhofar, during the Queen of Sheba’s reign, Dhofar
had the biggest goldmine in Arabia. Second, if Khor Rori is the precise location of the harbor of Ophir, we can use Al-Shahri’s tribal lands map to narrow the location for Ophir, namely Bountiful, to an area of only a few squares miles that are at and adjacent to Khor Rori.

The Sword Connection

Nephi forged many quality swords that were comparable to Laban’s high-quality weapon (2 Nephi 5:14). As previously noted, Nephi was a young lad when he left the land of Jerusalem. His family was wealthy and he was highly educated for his time, reading and writing at a remarkable level and in more than one language. It is unlikely in his era that the young son of an elite family would have toiled in manual labor, let alone having been a master blacksmith before leaving Jerusalem. What are the skills young Nephi would have had to master to make a sword of highest quality? What is certain, he could not have mastered such complex competencies while casually observing others forging swords. As one sword smith told me, “Nephi had to have worked beside a master sword maker for months in order to make even a crude sword.” For example, even before refining steel, Nephi would have to have known the art of making charcoal “without oxygen.”

Wm. Revell Phillips of Brigham Young University writes:

Nephi struck stones together to make fire, built a presumably simple pit furnace, and constructed a bellows of animal skins to blow air into the glowing mass of charcoal and ore (see 1 Nephi 17:11). ... Nephi’s smelting furnace almost certainly never reached the melting point of iron (1535° C or 2795° F), but it didn’t need to. When air is introduced into a hot mixture of iron oxides and charcoal, carbon from the charcoal combines with oxygen from the air to form carbon monoxide, which is a reducing gas. This gas filters upward through the charcoal-ore mixture, removing oxygen from the iron oxides to form carbon dioxide and tiny crystals of iron, freed of its oxygen, filter downward to accumulate at the base of the fire pit as a gray, spongy mass called a “bloom” or “sponge iron.” This form of iron reduction, called the “direct process,” begins at about 1200° C (2192° F), which is possible in a simple charcoal furnace. Although the bloom is not molten, silicate impurities in the ore form a molten slag (see 1 Nephi 17:16) that floats to the top to shield the hot bloom from the oxygen and cooling effect of the air above. The white-hot bloom can be withdrawn
from the furnace and hammered (“forged”) to squeeze out remaining slag and to weld, or compress, the iron crystals into a solid mass called “wrought iron.” Iron produced by this direct process is quite pure (99.5 percent). It is softer and more malleable than good bronze and cannot be hardened by any amount of additional forging. Wrought iron is not suitable for tools or weapons, and added forging drives more slag from the iron, making it even more malleable. Long heating of the wrought iron in direct contact with glowing charcoal, however, causes carbon atoms to diffuse into the outer layers of the iron, creating a simple form of steel (martensite). This process is called “carburizing,” and repeated carburizing and forging produce an outer layer of steel that can be very hard and sharpened to a fine edge. The iron is said to be “case hardened,” and repeated sharpening will remove the carburized steel. In antiquity, all swords were not created equal. Common soldiers fought with inferior weapons that might dent and bend, but kings wielded swords of special steel, each created by a skilled smith after days or months of hard, hot work at his forge (e.g., Excalibur). The sword of Laban, said to be of “most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9), was perhaps one of those special swords.\textsuperscript{115}

Figure 14. Smelting and sword making at Khor Rori, courtesy of Interpretation Center UNESCO World Heritage Site Khor Rori. Photograph by the author.

Nephi would have needed several years to construct his large ship. Steel refining and sword making were active at Khor Rori in the first millennium BC. Knowing that his family would be voyaging to a promised
land, and not knowing if they would face hostile inhabitants or wild animals there, Nephi must have sensed the need for weapons. Mentoring under master sword smiths and practicing sword making at Khor Rori during the time he was building his ship seems a likely possibility. The smelters and sword smiths of Khor Rori present a possible explanation of how Nephi became a master sword smith and an experienced refiner of metals.

Summary

As stated at the beginning of this article, unless the Lord reveals it, we will probably never know the exact location where Nephi built his ship. While the data so far cannot confirm that the Khor Rori was being used as a port in Lehi’s day, it was likely inhabited and given its advantages as a protective harbor, its later rise as a major port, and the existence of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean prior to Lehi’s time, the proposal that Khor Rori functioned as a port with at least some maritime skills in Lehi’s day seems reasonable. At present, Khor Rori provides a pragmatic theory for how a young man, with no maritime knowledge, could, with divine guidance, construct and sail a large ship stout enough to reach the Americas. So important were the tangible and intangible resources that were possibly available at Khor Rori that these scarce ancient assets provide a rational explanation for why the Lord led Lehi’s family through the hellish desert of Arabia to reach a place where Nephi could learn how to construct, launch, and captain his ship. Even if it is later proven that these assets were not available to Nephi at Khor Rori, Wadi Darbat’s outstanding protected harbor, abundant vegetation, and amazing breakwater for safe passage to the Indian Ocean make Khor Rori a favorable candidate for the site where Nephi built and launched his ship. Khor Rori certainly is a feasible candidate for Bountiful and warrants further research.

George D. Potter graduated with high honors from U.C. San Diego and, two years later, earned a master’s degree from U.C. Berkeley and became a certified public accountant. He lived in Arabia for 27 years and, during that time, produced many films and books on his Book of Mormon and biblical discoveries. His articles on the “Valley of Lemuel” (1999) and “Lehi’s Trail” (2007) were published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies. His books include Lehi in the Wilderness (2003), Nephi in the Promised Land (2009), The Voyages of the Book of Mormon (2011), and

Endnotes


2 Warren P. Aston, Lehi and Sariah in Arabia (Gordon, NSW, AU: Xlibris, 2015).


5 George Potter, Frank Linehan, and Conrad Dickson, Voyages of the Book of Mormon (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2011), 67–89.


7 Aston, Lehi and Sariah in Arabia, 204–206.


9 Ibid., 239, 248–50.

10 Ibid., 102–104.
Conversations with Frank Linehan and Conrad Dickson, both competitive sailors who have sailed over one million miles each, and are co-authors of *The Voyages of the Book of Mormon.*

Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 55.


Frank Linehan, the Western Region Marine Surveyor for United States Maritime Administration, an authority on the performance and construction of deep-water sailing vessels, estimated that Nephi’s ship would have been of a “light tonnage of no less than 100 tons” (personal communications with authors, June 1999).


Frank Linehan, personal correspondence to author, July 2009.


Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia,* 133.

The events of the storm after leaving Bountiful suggest that Laman and Lemuel had had some sailing experience and considered themselves capable of captaining the ship. During the storm Laman and Lemuel seemed too relaxed for people who had never practiced sailing before (see 1 Nephi 18:8, 11). In fact, they seem to suffer from an arrogance borne of a little knowledge, like teenage boys who have just passed their driver test! Years later the Lamanites considered that their fathers were wronged in the wilderness and while crossing the sea (Mosiah 10:12), as well as in the land of their first inheritance (Mosiah 10:13). These are all times that Laman and Lemuel complained that Nephi took the
lead (see 1 Nephi 16:38 and 2 Nephi 5:3) and implies that Laman and Lemuel felt accomplished enough sailors, and had practice enough, to consider that they should have captained the ship.

22 Dr. Eduard G. Rheinhardt, personal communication to author, April 12, 2001. At that time Dr. Rheinhardt was Assistant Professor, School of Geography and Geology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

23 Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 56.


25 Khor Rori (Sumhuram) (Oman: Office of the Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan of Cultural Affairs, 2008), 55.

26 Aston, Lehi and Sarian in Arabia, 135.

27 Ahmed Mussalam Al-Kathiry, interview with author, September 1999.


29 Al Shahri showed the author and his party where men collected wild honey in caves in Wadi Darbat just two miles from Khor Rori.

30 The Botanical Mission of Florence University reported: “Today the archaeological excavations at Sumhuram [Khor Rori] lie in an area heavily exploited by man, in a plain rendered sterile by over-grazing by dromedaries and goats that has been going on for centuries.” Mauro Raffaelli, Marcello Tardelli, and Stefano Mosti, “Scientific Activity in Dhofar, 2000-2004,” in A Port in Arabia between Room and the Indian Ocean, ed. Alessandra Avanzini (Rome: L’Erma di Breitschneider, 2008), 673–79. Also in multiple conversations with the author, Dhofar historian Ali Al Shahri claims that in his youth Khor Rori was forested.

31 Khor Rori (Sumhuram), 56.

32 Hanna and Al-Belushi, Caves of Oman, 103.


34 Hanna and Al-Belushi, Caves of Oman, 100, 103.


37 Aston, Lehi and Sariah in Arabia, 102–106.


40 Noel Reynolds proposes that Nephi could have been a trained scribe and perhaps even produced metal plates in scribal workshops. The hypothesis, though interesting, lacks archaeological support that scribal workshops worked in metals. It also seems unlikely that Lehi acquired his wealth by working as a scribe. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 50 (2022): 161–216, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes/.

41 Potter, Linehan, and Dickson, Voyages of the Book of Mormon, 39, 67–69.

42 Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 52.

Newton and Zarins, *Dhofar Through the Ages*, 16.

Ibid., 22

Ibid.

Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, 177.

Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 56.


Newton and Zarins, *Dhofar Through the Ages*, 22.

Ibid., 21.

Ibid., 6.

Ibid., 22.

Ibid.


Newton and Zarins, *Dhofar Through the Ages*, 25.


Newton and Zarins, *Dhofar Through the Ages*, 27.
Jana Owen was the director of the Transarabia Coastal Survey under the guidance of Juris Zarins. The survey was part of the Transarabian Expedition that was sponsored by the Oman Ministry of Information. See Owen, “Do Anchors Mean Ships? Underwater Evidence for Maritime Trade Along the Dhofar Coast of the Southern Indian Ocean” in Profumi D’Arabia, Atti Del Convegno, Alessandra Avanzini (Rome: L’erma di Bretscheider, 1997), 351, https://books.google.com/books?id=3zOlYZmJiiAC&pg=PA351&lpg=PA351. With Zarins, Owens conducted a survey of Graeco-Roman period, Pre-Islamic, and Iron and Bronze Ages sites in Dhofar. Owens also provided guidance for the Brigham Young University team Terry B Ball, S. Kent Brown, Arnold H. Green, David J. Johnson, and W. Revell Phillips, authors of “Planning Research on Oman,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 7, no. 1 (1998): 17,18. Owen was a member of the Trans Arabia Expedition staff from 1991–1995, according to Zarins, Land of Incense, 158.

With Juris Zarins, Jana Owen surveyed the Iron and Bronze Ages settlements in Dhofar. See Ball et al., “Planning Research on Oman,” 57.

Jana Owen, personal communication with author, August 14, 2000.

Several kinds of ancient ships are depicted in rock art drawings found in caves in sight of Khor Rori just two and a half miles from the harbor (Ali Al-Shahri took George Potter to see the rock art in 2000). The stick figure representations of humans in the ships provide a rough dating of the art to 1000 BC. For dating of rock art in Arabia, see Muhammed Abdul Nayeem and Majeed Khan, The Rock Art of Arabia (India: Hyderabad Publishers, 2000), 447–554. The depiction of ships in the rock art at Khor Rori is unique from ships built at northern Oman, Nayeem 445). Dr. Muhammed Abdul Nayeem is a professor of Archaeology and Museology at King Saud University, Riyadh. A possible implication is that the unique style of ships means that the ancients who lived at Khor Rori built ships as far back as 1000 BC in their own style. Dating rock art is problematic. Zarins believes the same depictions of ships could date to the Iron Age B (325 BC to AD 650), Juris Zarins, The Land of Incense (Oman: Sultan Qaboos University Publications, 2001), 134. However, the author believes
the rock art depicting ships in Wadi Darbat will prove to be much older, since the rock art there has not been scientifically dated. In neighboring Saudi Arabia the first scientific dating of similar petroglyphs has shown, through radiocarbon dating, microerosion analysis and OSL analysis, that the rock art dates from Pre-Pottery Neolithic up to the historical period. See Robert Bednarik, “Scientific Investigations into Saudi Arabian Rock Art: A Review,” Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry 17, no. 4. (Jan. 2017): 43–59, https://www.academia.edu/39946178/SCIENTIFIC_INVESTIGATIONS_INTO_SAUDI_ARABIAN_ROCK_ART_A_REVIEW.

65  *Khor Rori (Sumhuram)*, 57.


67  Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 55.


69  Jeff Lindsay, co-editor of *Interpreter*, personal correspondence with author, Sept. 26, 2021.


71  Ibid., 43.


74  Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 56.


79  *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century*, trans. and ed. W.H. Schoff,

Cotton was introduced in southern Arabia in antiquity, possibly as early as 4000 BC. See Zarins, Land of Incense, 60.

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, chapter 32.

Michael Ryder, “The Use of Goat Hair, an Introduced Historical Review,” Antropozoologica 17 (193): 40.


Khor Rori (Sumhuram), 32.


94 Ibid., 78.


96 Frank Linehan, multiple personal conversations with the author. Linehan is a hull expert for the U.S. Navy, a licensed chief engineer in the U.S. Merchant Marines, and co-author of *Voyages of the Book of Mormon*.


99 Zarin, *Land of Incense*, 102, showing a map of Trade routes across Arabia from Neolithic to the Islamic Period.

100 Phillips, “Mughsayl, Another Candidate for Land Bountiful,” 51.


105 Al Shahri, *The Language of Aad*, 34.

106 Bertram Thomas, *The Arabs* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1973), 262. Although Nigel Groom believes Ophir was in Africa, he notes the similarity between the names of Zufar (Dhofar) and Ophir, “Zufar is sometimes proposed as a likely word etymologically close to Ophir, while the nineteenth-century traveler Vod Wrede observed that the Mahra of south Arabia, who lived adjacent to Zufar and whose language has very ancient origins, used the word ‘ofir’ to mean ‘red’ and called themselves the tribe of ‘Ofir’, meaning the ‘red country.’” Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh, A study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman, 1981), 49–50.


112 Al-Shahri, conversation with George Potter, September 23, 2018, wherein he stated that there are 400 different kinds of flowering plants in Wadi Darbat, and because of the great variety of plants the wild honey gathered in the Wadi is used for medicine and is extremely expensive.

113 Forster, *Historical Geography of Arabia*, vol. 1, 168.


“Believe All the Words”: A Key to Spiritual Outpouring

Mark Campbell

Abstract: In the Book of Mormon, many people received a remarkable spiritual outpouring following a declaration or demonstration of full belief in what they had already received or were about to receive. This paper examines nine examples of this that exhibit strong similarities in both language and substance. These examples demonstrate that the key to receiving a spiritual outpouring is to “believe all the words” of God that one has already received or is about to receive, after which great blessings will follow. However, such full belief must be thoughtful and inspired, not merely credulous. The findings of this paper provide another example of the rich narrative and doctrinal patterns in the Book of Mormon.

In the Book of Mormon, many people received a remarkable spiritual outpouring following a declaration or demonstration of full belief in what they had already received or were about to receive. In this paper, I examine the following nine examples of this process:

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<th>Person</th>
<th>Declaration or Demonstration of Full Belief</th>
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The approach taken here is rooted in the study of narrative and doctrinal patterns in the Book of Mormon. Such patterns illustrate the book’s rhetorical power and internal consistency. The nine examples listed above are presented and compared to show that the Book of Mormon employs a unique narrative pattern to teach and reinforce the doctrinal point that full belief in what one has already received from God, or is about to receive, leads to additional spiritual outpouring. The Book of Mormon’s teachings on this matter are relevant for our day and are reinforced by the teachings of modern prophets and apostles.

Narrative and Doctrinal Patterns in the Book of Mormon

Many writers have noted the presence of narrative and doctrinal patterns in the Book of Mormon. These patterns serve to reinforce key messages for the reader, increasing the convincing power of the book and fulfilling the divine “law of witnesses.”1 The presence of these recurrent threads also demonstrates that later authors had access to prior authors’ work, with later authors drawing therefrom for narrative and doctrinal purposes.

Scholars have observed many narrative and doctrinal patterns in the Book of Mormon. For example, Louis Midgley observed that recurrent “language about remembrance in the Book of Mormon turns out to be rich and complex, conveying important, hidden meaning.”2 Specifically, Book of Mormon exhortations to remember are not given merely to promote mental recall, but rather are inducements to act and particularly to act in accordance with past covenants with God. According to Midgley, “The point is that one remembers by actually doing something, not by merely recalling the past out of curiosity or for any other reason than to serve God.”3 This narrative pattern in the use of “the language of remembrance” reinforces a key doctrinal point that Book of Mormon prophets apparently wanted their readers to understand.

Richard Dilworth Rust, in his study of recurring patterns in the Book of Mormon, stated, “It seems that every important action, event, or

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3. Ibid., 171.
character is repeated in the Book of Mormon. These repetitions emphasize the law of witnesses at work within the book (e.g., ‘in the mouth of three witnesses shall these things be established;’ Ether 5:4).”

According to Rust, these narrative patterns serve “as a principle of reinforcement and witness,” “underscore the relevance of one character or action to people living in a different time,” “bring a narrative intensity as well as a sense of divine direction of events,” “instruct and convince,” and “emphasize and define the book’s major themes or concerns.”

Noel Reynolds noted that the Book of Mormon consistently “presents the gospel as a six-point formula or message about what men must do if they will be saved.” Although the language used to describe the six points varies throughout the Book of Mormon, there is remarkable consistency in the doctrinal message that is presented — and thus reinforced — by various prophets.

David Bokovoy highlighted parallels in the experiences of Nephi, King Benjamin’s people, and the brother of Jared, which “suggests the possibility of a Book of Mormon ‘type scene’ for a spiritual exchange between witness and worshiper.” He quotes the explanation of R.L. Fowler regarding the rhetorical utility of such an approach:

A type scene is a literary convention employed by a narrator across a set of scenes, or related to scenes (place, action) already familiar to the audience. The similarities with, and differences from, the established type are used to illuminate developments in plot and character. The technique of the

5. Ibid., 40.
6. Ibid., 41.
7. Ibid., 43.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 50.
type-scene offers the poet a basic scaffolding, but it also allows the poet to adapt each scene for specific purposes.\textsuperscript{12}

Several of Bokovoy’s examples of type-scenes overlap with the examples in the present paper, though not entirely.

Rich allusions to other writings are another hallmark of the Book of Mormon. John Hilton III opined that “the Book of Mormon makes it clear that individuals who lived in later time periods had access to the teachings of earlier prophets.”\textsuperscript{13} After making a careful comparison between the words of Alma\textsuperscript{2} and Abinadi, Hilton observes, “[Alma\textsuperscript{2}] has paid a price to be so conversant in Abinadi’s words that he can weave them into a conversation as though they were his own.”\textsuperscript{14} He concludes, “The consistent patterns of allusions in Alma 39–42 argue for textual intentionality. This was not something Joseph Smith made up.”\textsuperscript{15}

An example of a Book of Mormon passage that was heavily alluded to by other writers was pointed out by Matthew L. Bowen: “Nephi’s autobiographical introduction and conclusion proved enormously influential on subsequent writers who modeled autobiographical and narrative biographical introductions on 1 Nephi 1:1–2 and based sermons — especially concluding sermons — on Nephi’s ‘good’ conclusion in 2 Nephi 33.”\textsuperscript{16} This narrative pattern is subtle yet pervasive throughout the Book of Mormon.

Bowen also demonstrated that “the theophanies experienced by Lamoni and his wife, servants, and father followed professions of ‘faith’ or ‘belief.’”\textsuperscript{17} As with the Bokovoy paper cited above, Bowen’s examples overlap with the present paper, but again not entirely. Bowen’s examples highlight the importance of a profession of belief, while the present paper expands the examples and highlights the importance of the fullness of that belief.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 59.
These examples of narrative and doctrinal patterns found in the Book of Mormon could be multiplied. John Hilton III has called for “a fast-growing study of textual echoes in the Book of Mormon.” The present paper aims to contribute to that “fast-growing study” as we now consider the patterns related to the theme of receiving more by “believing all the words.”

Nine Examples of People Who Fully Believed and Then Received a Spiritual Outpouring

The Book of Mormon contains many instances where individuals or groups received a spiritual outpouring of knowledge, sanctification, authorization from God, healing, theophany, conversion, or forgiveness. For each of the nine examples considered here, a key passage from the Book of Mormon is quoted in which one or more individuals declare or demonstrate full belief in what they have received, and then the resultant spiritual outpouring is summarized.

1. Nephi: “I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father.” (1 Nephi 2:16)

Before Nephi performed any of the valiant deeds for which he is known, he heard his father Lehi recount a vision about the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the eventual coming of the Messiah (1 Nephi 1). Nephi then had the following experience:

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; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. (1 Nephi 2:16)

Following this experience, Nephi tried to persuade his brothers to believe also. Sam accepted Nephi’s (and Lehi’s) testimony, but Laman and Lemuel would not (1 Nephi 2:17–18). When Nephi prayed for his elder brothers, “the Lord spake unto [Nephi]” and made a series of important promises to him (1 Nephi 2:19–24). The remainder of this paper will show that this example — of Nephi first declaring his full belief in all the words he has already heard and then subsequently receiving

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a remarkable spiritual outpouring — typifies a pattern followed in the other cited examples.

2. Nephi: “Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father.” (1 Nephi 11:5)

Later, Lehi recounted his vision of the Tree of Life to Nephi, and other family members (1 Nephi 8) and prophesied concerning the future of the House of Israel and the coming of the Messiah (1 Nephi 10). Nephi, “was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things” (1 Nephi 10:17) and consequently received a vision of his own (1 Nephi 11–14). During that vision, Nephi had the following exchange with “the Spirit:"

And the Spirit said unto me: Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?

And I said: Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father. (1 Nephi 11:4–5)

This declaration was followed by Nephi’s own vision of the Tree of Life, the ministry of Jesus Christ and his twelve apostles, and much more (1 Nephi 11:6–14:30). Note that Nephi’s declaration in 1 Nephi 11:5 appears to be an allusion to his earlier statement of full belief found in 1 Nephi 2:16.

3. King Benjamin’s people: “Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us.” (Mosiah 5:2)

Near the end of his life, King Benjamin preached the gospel to his people, recounted a vision of the coming of Jesus Christ, and expounded on the Atonement (Mosiah 2–4). King Benjamin then asked for the reaction of his people to these messages. He received the following response:

And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually. (Mosiah 5:2)

Just as Nephi said, “I believe all the words of my father,” King Benjamin’s people declared, “Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us.” It seems significant that Mosiah 5:6 says, “And now, these are the words which King Benjamin desired of them.”
That is, King Benjamin wanted exactly this sort of declaration of full belief, perhaps as an echo of the original declaration of Nephi himself.

In any event, like Nephi, this declaration resulted in a remarkable spiritual outpouring upon King Benjamin’s people, including sure knowledge, changed hearts, and the ability to “prophesy of all things” (Mosiah 5:2–7).

An alternate reading of Mosiah 5:2 could suggest that the spiritual outpouring was the very thing that caused the people to “believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us.” However, the cited verse states first that the people “believe[d] all the words,” and then adds that “we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us.” That is, full belief preceded the spiritual outpouring that resulted in sure knowledge and a change of heart, not the other way round.

4. Alma: “And he being concealed for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken.” (Mosiah 17:4)

The prophet Abinadi preached to the people of King Noah (Mosiah 11:20–12:8) and then subsequently to the king and his priests (Mosiah 12:9–16:15). There is no indication that anyone in the king’s entourage believed Abinadi’s preaching, except for Alma:

But there was one among them whose name was Alma, he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a young man, 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.

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 that they found him not. And he being concealed for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken. (Mosiah 17:2–4)

In the italicized phrases, it is not explicitly stated that Alma “believed all the words” spoken by Abinadi. However, it is stated that “he believed the words” and “did write all the words,” and then he preached to the people using those words (Mosiah 18:1). Alma described this process of believing when he rhetorically asked:
Behold I can tell you — did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believe them? (Alma 5:11)

Following Alma’s demonstration of full belief, he received “authority from the Almighty God” to baptize (Mosiah 18:13) and “authority from God” to ordain priests (Mosiah 18:18), and was “commanded of God” about how to administer the church (Mosiah 18:27–29). Also, Alma was the “high priest” and “founder of their church” (Mosiah 23:16) and received revelation in that capacity (Mosiah 23:1).

5. Zeezrom: “Yea, I believe all the words that thou hast taught.” (Alma 15:7)

Initially, Zeezrom led the opposition to the preaching of Alma and Amulek among the people of Ammonihah (Alma 10:31–11:46). However, Zeezrom was caught lying (Alma 11:22–25, 34–37) and realized that Alma and Amulek knew “the thoughts and intents of his heart” (Alma 11:25; Alma 12:1–7). These experiences led Zeezrom to become an earnest seeker of truth (Alma 12:8), to confess his sins (Alma 14:6–7), to be filled with regret (Alma 15:3), to become desperately ill (Alma 15:3–5), and to seek healing by Alma and Amulek (Alma 15:5). This resulted in the following exchange between Alma and Zeezrom:

And it came to pass that Alma said unto him, taking him by the hand: Believest thou in the power of Christ unto salvation?

And he answered and said: Yea, I believe all the words that thou hast taught.

And Alma said: If thou believest in the redemption of Christ thou canst be healed.

And he said: Yea, I believe according to thy words. (Alma 15:6–9)

In this case, Zeezrom’s declaration of full belief was followed by his dramatic healing (Alma 15:10–11). Afterward, he became a missionary alongside Alma and Amulek (Alma 15:12).

6. Lamoni: “I believe all these things which thou hast spoken.” (Alma 18:33)

King Lamoni reigned with cruelty, killing his subjects if they failed him (Alma 17:28–29). When Ammon defended the king’s flocks successfully (Alma 17:31–39), Lamoni began to have a crisis of conscience about
his past actions (Alma 18:4–5). Eventually, he and Ammon had the following exchange:

Now Ammon being wise, yet harmless, he said unto Lamoni: Wilt thou hearken unto my words, if I tell thee by what power I do these things? And this is the thing that I desire of thee. And the king answered him, and said: Yea, I will believe all thy words. And thus he was caught with guile. (Alma 18:22–23)

[Ammon preaches to Lamoni.]

And king Lamoni said: I believe all these things which thou hast spoken. Art thou sent from God? (Alma 18:33)

[Ammon expounds further.]

And it came to pass that after he had said all these things, and expounded them to the king, that the king believed all his words. (Alma 18:40)

This example features repeated, almost formulaic, expressions of full belief within a single narrative. The resultant spiritual outpouring was consistent with earlier examples: Lamoni entered a spiritual trance, received forgiveness of his sins, and saw his “Redeemer” (Alma 18:41–43; 19:12–13).

7. Lamoni’s wife: “And she said unto him: I have had no witness save thy word, and the word of our servants; nevertheless I believe that it shall be according as thou hast said.” (Alma 19:9)

While Lamoni lay in his spiritual trance, his wife summoned Ammon and had the following exchange:

And she said unto him: The servants of my husband have made it known unto me that thou art a prophet of a holy God, and that thou hast power to do many mighty works in his name;

Therefore, if this is the case, I would that ye should go in and see my husband, for he has been laid upon his bed for the space of two days and two nights; and some say that he is not dead, but others say that he is dead and that he stinketh, and that he ought to be placed in the sepulchre; but as for myself, to me he doth not stink. …
And he said unto the queen: He is not dead, but he sleepeth in God, and on the morrow he shall rise again; therefore bury him not.

And Ammon said unto her: Believest thou this? And she said unto him: I have had no witness save thy word, and the word of our servants; nevertheless I believe that it shall be according as thou hast said.

And Ammon said unto her: Blessed art thou because of thy exceeding faith; I say unto thee, woman, there has not been such great faith among all the people of the Nephites.

And it came to pass that she watched over the bed of her husband, from that time even until that time on the morrow which Ammon had appointed that he should rise. (Alma 19:4–5, 8–11)

Nowhere in this exchange did the queen use the “believe all” formulation seen in earlier examples. Yet Ammon’s statement that her faith was greater than “all the people of the Nephites” shows that it had a superlative quality. She clearly had complete trust and confidence in his words, as manifested by her waiting patiently by the bedside of her husband for the promised miracle to take place.

The result was a great spiritual outpouring to the queen, temporarily overpowering her (Alma 19:13), filling her with praise (Alma 19:29–30), and resulting in her (and others) declaring that “their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:33). Note that this heart-changing result echoed the outcome for King Benjamin’s believing people (see example 3 above).

8. Lamoni’s father: “Yea, I believe that the Great Spirit created all things, and I desire that ye should tell me concerning all these things, and I will believe thy words.” (Alma 22:11)

Initially, Lamoni’s father was as prone to violence as his son. Lamoni’s father hotheadedly engaged Ammon in a swordfight, lost, but was spared by Ammon (Alma 20:13–27). This experience softened the heart of Lamoni’s father and whetted his curiosity to learn more about the gospel (Alma 20:27; 22:1–6). When Aaron entered his kingdom, Lamoni’s father and Aaron had a conversation that included the following exchange:
And Aaron answered him and said unto him: Believest thou that there is a God? And the king said: I know that the Amalekites say that there is a God, and I have granted unto them that they should build sanctuaries, that they may assemble themselves together to worship him. And if now thou sayest that there is a God, behold I will believe. (Alma 22:7)

[Ammon expounds the existence of God to Lamoni’s father.]

And [the king] said: Yea, I believe that the Great Spirit created all things, and I desire that ye should tell me concerning all these things, and I will believe thy words. (Alma 22:11)

The old king’s declaration of full belief — remarkably, in “all these things” that he had not even been told yet — was followed, once again, by a spiritual outpouring (Alma 22:15–18), much like the experience of his son Lamoni and Lamoni’s wife. Lamoni’s father eventually became a champion of the gospel (Alma 22:23–27; 23:1–3).

9. The Brother of Jared: “Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie.” (Ether 3:12)

The early chapters of the Book of Ether make clear that the brother of Jared was a man of great faith. Through his prayers, the Lord granted that the people of Jared could retain their language (Ether 1:35–37) and be led to a land of promise (Ether 1:38–43). Also, the Lord subsequently spoke many times to the brother of Jared, both for guidance and for chastisement (Ether 1:40; 2:4, 6, 14–15, 20, 23). The last-recorded of these audiences with the Lord included the following exchange:

And the Lord said unto him: Believest thou the words which I shall speak?

And he answered: Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie. (Ether 3:11–12)

What followed was a great theophany (Ether 3:6–28) and a prophetic revelation of all peoples from the beginning to the end of the world (Ether 3:25; 2 Nephi 27:7–8). Similar to the other examples, there was a sincere declaration of full belief in the words which will be spoken, followed by a remarkable spiritual outpouring. The phrasing is not exactly the same as “believe all the words” but is functionally equivalent to it. Similar to the faith of Lamoni’s wife (see example 7 above), the Lord
declared to the brother of Jared that “never has man believed in me as thou hast” (Ether 3:15).

A Consistent Pattern

The similarities among these examples are striking in both language and substance. In each case, there was a declaration or demonstration of full belief, with either the descriptor “all” employed or something equivalent (e.g., affirming that the Lord “canst not lie”), followed by a remarkable spiritual outpouring. For different persons, this spiritual outpouring took different forms: revelation, prophecy, change of heart, conversion, healing, tremendous joy, and so on. Nevertheless, the key message was that believing all the words that one has already received, or is about to receive, leads to profound blessings.

Furthermore, in all nine cited examples, the declarations of full belief appear to be verbatim quotes from the person(s) involved or, in the case of Alma₁, a verbatim quote from Alma₂ attesting that Alma₁ was fully believing (Alma 5:11). So, the pattern in these examples does not appear to be merely an artifact of an overarching editorial process by Mormon₂, Moroni₂, or anyone else.

This leads to the question: is the cited narrative pattern found universally in the Book of Mormon and other scriptures? Put differently, is every spiritual outpouring preceded by a declaration or demonstration that someone “believes all the words?”

In the Book of Mormon, the Cited Narrative Pattern Is Found Often, but Not Always

There are numerous instances of spiritual outpouring in the Book of Mormon without any report of a prior declaration or demonstration of full belief. For example, Nephi₁ reported that his brother Jacob₁ had seen “my Redeemer” (2 Nephi 11:2–3), but Nephi₁ did not disclose the circumstances under which this event occurred. Alma₂ certainly had a transformative spiritual experience when he was confronted by an angel (Mosiah 27:11–17), but this event was preceded by a complete disbelief in the words of God (Mosiah 27:8). Aminadab and other Lamanite prisoners were surrounded by a “pillar of fire,” received “the Holy Spirit of God,” and were filled with joy that was “unspeakable and full of glory” (Helaman 5:43–45), yet their initial faith was modest: “You must repent, and cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ” (Helaman 5:41). Nephi₃ was reported as enjoying the daily ministration of angels and hearing “the voice of the Lord”
(3 Nephi 7:15, 18), but the precise circumstances were not described. Mormon was a great prophet who was “visited of the Lord,” but the only quality he ascribed to himself was being “somewhat of a sober mind” (Mormon 1:15).

Yet, in other passages, there are echoes of the cited narrative pattern. For example, Enos stated:

> Behold, I went to hunt beasts in the forests; and the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my heart. (Enos 1:3)

It is not explicitly stated that Enos believed all these words, and that is why this episode is not listed among the foregoing examples. However, Enos’s strong belief is certainly implied by the fact that, in response to what he often heard, he prayed all day and into the night (Enos 1:4). This is similar to the night-long vigil of Lamoni’s wife (see example 7 above).

The immediate result for Enos was the following:

> And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed.

> And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore my guilt was swept away. (Enos 1:5, 6)

Again, there is an echo here, but this time the language parallels that of the brother of Jared, who likewise affirmed that God “canst not lie” (Ether 3:12; see example 9 listed above). I could continue with this analysis of the story of Enos, observing that he repeatedly expressed confidence in God (Enos 1:11, 15–17), received great blessings and promises (Enos 1:5, 8, 10, 16, 18), and had his faith lauded by God (Enos 1:8, 12, 18). My conclusion is that this episode from the life of Enos is at least an echo, if not a further example of the cited narrative pattern.

Another echo is found in Helaman’s interview with his father Alma just before being entrusted with the Nephite records. That interview began as follows:

> And it came to pass in the nineteenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, that Alma came to his son Helaman and said unto him: Believest thou the words which I spake unto thee concerning those records which have been kept?

> And Helaman said unto him: Yea, I believe.
And Alma said again: Believest thou in Jesus Christ, who shall come?

And he said: Yea, I believe all the words which thou hast spoken. (Alma 45:2–5)

This language echoes previous examples of the cited narrative pattern and, again, seems formulaic. While a powerful spiritual outpouring didn’t immediately follow, we learn that Alma then “blessed” Helaman and his brothers (Alma 45:15). Thus, Helaman’s belief in “all” of his father’s words immediately preceded a special father’s blessing; in addition, his father’s church leadership mantle subsequently fell upon him and his brothers (Alma 45:22).

In summary, the Book of Mormon contains many clear, recurrent instances and echoes of the cited narrative pattern, but the pattern is not found universally.

The Cited Narrative Pattern Appears to Be Unique to the Book of Mormon

The Bible is written in a far different manner than the Book of Mormon. Many books of the Old Testament prophets dive right into the prophets’ visions, doings, and sayings, usually with relatively little backstory regarding their initial prophetic call. Even where a backstory is provided (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses), the cited narrative pattern of a profession of full belief followed by a dramatic spiritual outpouring is not found as a point of emphasis. Indeed, in the case of Moses, his initial call by Jehovah includes instances of initial disbelief and reluctance (Exodus 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13). Of course, the concept of miracles following faith or acts of faith is illustrated in many accounts, such as the story of Elijah and the widow in 1 Kings 17, where the widow’s faith in feeding Elijah results in rich blessings for her.

Turning to the New Testament, I again find no direct evidence of the cited narrative pattern. For example, the twelve apostles were chosen but with no indication of a prior, fully believing attitude, although some were described as accepting theirs calls readily (e.g., Matthew 4:18–22; 9:9). Like Alma, we have the story of Saul receiving a vision of Jesus when previously Saul had been emphatically a disbeliever in Him (Acts 9:1–22). There are, of course, instances of revelations or visions being received by New Testament apostles (e.g., Acts 7:55–60; 10:9–16; 23:11; Revelation). However, none of these revelations or visions was preceded by a declaration of full belief in what the apostles had already received.
This does not mean the apostles were less than fully believing, only that the cited narrative pattern — “believe all the words” and then receive a spiritual outpouring — is not clearly found in this book of scripture.

The situation is the same in the Doctrine & Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, where the cited narrative pattern appears to be absent. The closest I can find to the “believe all the words” pattern of the Book of Mormon is the story of the First Vision found in Joseph Smith—History. There, Joseph Smith was struck forcefully by his reading of James 1:5. Clearly, Joseph believed in this verse’s promise of wisdom from God:

I at length came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally and not upbraid, I might venture. (JSH 1:13)

What followed (JSH 1:14–20) shows a pattern of Joseph first believing in the Biblical promise and then receiving a great revelation in the form of the First Vision. While this incident echoes the general pattern, it lacks the “believe all the words” formula found in the Book of Mormon.

In conclusion, among the scriptural canon of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the cited narrative pattern of a spiritual outpouring coming after an expression of fully believing what one has already received, or is about to receive, appears to be found uniquely in the Book of Mormon.

**Confirmations From Ancient and Modern Prophets**

Although the cited narrative pattern may not be clearly found outside the Book of Mormon, the importance of being fully believing is taught widely in ancient and modern scripture. Notably, the Savior himself said the following just before beginning his earthly ministry:

It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. (Matthew 4:4, referencing Deuteronomy 8:3)

Almost as a bookend, the Savior said this to his disciples on the road to Emmaus toward the end of that ministry:

O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. (Luke 24:25)

It is not surprising, then, that the ninth Article of Faith states:
We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

Similarly, the thirteenth Article of Faith states:

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul — We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

Joseph Smith exemplified the open-minded believer, readily accepting and promulgating revelations from God that were at odds with prevailing opinions, and then receiving a continuing flood of revelation. Of his own belief posture, Joseph Smith said:

When things that are of the greatest importance are passed over by weak minded men without even a thought, I want to see the truth in all its bearings, and hug it to my bosom. I believe all that God ever revealed, and I never hear of a man being damned for believing too much, but they are damned for unbelief.

In this, he was following in the footsteps of Father Abraham, whom Joseph Smith quoted in language strikingly similar to the examples discussed in this paper (spelling per original):

Abram, says to Melchisedec, I believe all that thou hast taught me concerning the Priesthood, and the coming of the Son of Man; so Melchizedeck ordained Abram and sent him away. Abram rejoiced saying, now I have a Priesthood.

The prophet Alma explained to Zeezrom the process by which full belief leads to further revelation:

19. The thirteenth Article of Faith’s referenced “admonition of Paul” is found in 1 Corinthians 13:7, and a similar admonition of Mormon, is found in Moroni 7:45.


And now Alma began to expound these things unto him, saying: It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. (Alma 12:9–10)

Mormon described the same process when he stated:

And when they shall have received this, which is expedient that they should have first, to try their faith, and if it so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them.

And if it so be that they will not believe these things, then shall the greater things be withheld from them, unto their condemnation. (3 Nephi 26:9–10)

Should We Always “Believe All the Words” That We Hear?

The foregoing discussion begs the question: does God want us to be naively credulous, simply accepting all that we hear? If we consider the first example given in this paper, of Nephi believing all Lehi’s words (1 Nephi 2:16), the answer is clearly “no.” Nephi attained his full belief by “cry[ing] unto the Lord,” which resulted in a “visit” by the Lord and a softening of Nephi’s heart so that he “did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father.”

Later, Nephi acknowledged to his brothers that Lehi “spake many great things unto them, which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord” (1 Nephi 15:3). That acknowledgement was followed by this exchange between Nephi and his unbelieving brothers:

And they said: Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree, and also concerning the Gentiles.

And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?
And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us.

Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts?

Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said? — If we will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you. (1 Nephi 15:7–11)

Here, then, is a formula for dealing with situations where a prophet’s words are hard to understand or accept. The formula is simple: open-minded inquiry, faith in God’s ability to reveal, and continued obedience to His commandments.

This does not mean that our own intellectual and spiritual faculties should play no part in the achievement of a state of full belief. Moroni’s concluding chapters to the Book of Mormon include this caution from his father Mormon:

Wherefore, take heed, my beloved brethren, that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil.

For behold, my brethren, it is given unto you to judge, that ye may know good from evil; and the way to judge is as plain, that ye may know with a perfect knowledge, as the daylight is from the dark night.

For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him.
And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge ye shall also be judged. (Moroni 7:14–18)

That is, mankind is to examine purported truth in “the Spirit of Christ,” judging whether it leads to good or to evil; only that which induces to good should be accepted as truth.

It may be significant that the small plates of Nephi₁ include a strikingly similar caution from Amaleki₁, who was the last prophet to write on the small plates before Mormon₂:

And it came to pass that I began to be old; and, having no seed, and knowing king Benjamin to be a just man before the Lord, wherefore I shall deliver up these plates unto him, exhorting all men to come unto God, the Holy One of Israel, and believe in prophesying, and in revelations, and in the ministering of angels, and in the gift of speaking with tongues, and in the gift of interpreting languages, and in all things which are good; for there is nothing which is good save it comes from the Lord; and that which is evil cometh from the devil. (Omni 1:25; see also Words of Mormon 1:3–5)

With these cautions in place at the end of both the small and large plates of Nephi₁, Moroni₂ echoed the caution one last time in his own concluding remarks:

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.

And whatsoever thing is good is just and true; wherefore, nothing that is good denieth the Christ, but acknowledgeth that he is. (Moroni 10:5–6)

The reader may have noted that these cautions from Amaleki₁, Mormon₂, and Moroni₂ form a narrative and doctrinal pattern of their own. In any event, this triple caution confirms that believers should be discerning and not merely credulous. The tools we should use to discern truth are our own intellect (does what I have heard induce to good?), the Spirit of Christ (does this inner light confirm my own assessment?), prayer (ask of God), and the Holy Ghost (does the Holy Ghost confirm what I have heard, and does what I have heard affirm Christ?).
Conclusion

In the Book of Mormon, Nephi was the prototype for the full believer. He believed all the words of his father Lehi, and also the words of the Spirit, whereupon remarkable spiritual outpourings followed. This pattern was repeated over and over for other full believers at other times and in other situations. The language that all the cited examples used to declare (or demonstrate) their full belief is strikingly consistent, from Nephi, to King Benjamin’s people, and from Zeezrom to Lamoni, including the latter’s wife and father. Likewise, the brother of Jared, whose experience predated them all, followed the pattern.

The resultant spiritual outpourings included stunning revelations and miraculous changes of heart and behaviour. There is great power in being fully — rather than selectively — believing in all the words of God and his prophets. As John W. Welch has written:

[W]e learn from Nephi’s words that it doesn’t work to be a “cafeteria believer” and just pick and choose certain doctrines and principles that you’d prefer to believe. Nephi says, “The Lord did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father,” not just some of the words which he had spoken, but all of his words. Once you truly believe in God, you believe all of his words. At this point Nephi became a full-fledged believer.22

This commitment to full belief is no less important and powerful today. It will bring the spiritual outpouring of which the Book of Mormon testifies, as well as other blessings promised by modern prophets. President Harold B. Lee has said:

Now the only safety we have as members of this church is to do exactly what the Lord said to the Church in that day when the Church was organized. We must learn to give heed to the words and commandments that the Lord shall give through his prophet, “as he receiveth them, walking in all holiness before me; ... as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.” (D&C 21:4–5) There will be some things that take patience and faith. You may not like what comes from the authority of the Church. It may contradict your political

views. It may contradict your social views. It may interfere with some of your social life. But if you listen to these things, as if from the mouth of the Lord himself, with patience and faith, the promise is that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name’s glory.” (D&C 21:6)

… Your safety and ours depends upon whether or not we follow the ones whom the Lord has placed to preside over his church. He knows whom he wants to preside over his church, and he will make no mistake.  

The present paper confirms an earlier conclusion and exhortation from Matthew L. Bowen:

I believe we can say with certainty that every word counts in the translation text of the Book of Mormon and that Mormon and Moroni included no idle words or phrases in its vorlage. Thus, one important task of future Book of Mormon scholars and exegetes will be to unpack the richness of meaning in each word and phrase.  

This paper asserts that to “believe all the words” of God and his prophets is indeed a key phrase with rich meaning that is used repeatedly and emphatically in the Book of Mormon in a powerful narrative and doctrinal pattern. We, too, should give heed and “believe all the words.”

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**Abstract:** Blaire Ostler attempts to show how “Mormon theology is inherently queer” and may be expanded to be fully “inclusive” of LGBTQ+ members. Unfortunately, Ostler conflates God’s love with indulgence for behavior that he has described as sinful. She offers a pantheistic/panentheistic conception of deity that collapses any differences between men and women in sharp contrast to the Latter-day Saint understanding that men and women are complementary and require one another for exaltation and eternal life. Many of this book’s arguments are sophistry and the philosophies of men mingled with scripture. None of it is compatible with revealed truth contained in The Family: A Proclamation to the World and consistently taught by prophets, seers, and revelators.

Blaire Ostler’s book *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* was published with much fanfare. The publisher announced that *Queer Mormon Theology* “is the kind of book that BCC Press was born for.” Since publication, it has received a lot of attention and praise, including

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1. Despite their similar names, Blaire Ostler should not be confused with Blake Ostler. Blake is a philosopher and practicing attorney who has written orthodox and expansive books of philosophy. As discussed in this review, Blaire Ostler’s theology is far from orthodox.

gushing reviews in the Association of Mormon Letters and *Exponent II*, official congratulations and commendation by Affirmation, and positive reviews in numerous podcasts.

This attention is largely unsurprising. Ostler’s book has a provocative thesis that appeals to those who view themselves as erudite and socially progressive. She argues that “Mormon theology is inherently queer” and “Mormon theology holds the building blocks for an orthodoxy of love and inclusion beyond what is discussed in Sunday School” (p. 4). Ostler claims to offer an expansive vision of doctrine while still holding firm to “Mormon beliefs, testimony, doctrine, theology, culture, and heritage” (p. 2). Indeed, she assures the reader she is “not suggesting a change to the fundamental principles in Mormon theology and doctrine, but rather advocate[s] for a more robust vision of what Mormon theology and doctrine already includes” (p. 17).

Can Ostler successfully navigate this tightrope between Mormon doctrine and queer theology? Unfortunately, the book falters under the weight of its own sophistry.

As someone who is not a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I cannot speak as to whether Ostler offers a compelling book of queer theology. But judging Ostler’s book from the perspective of orthodoxy and the revealed truths of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I can say that the book fails spectacularly as an example of Latter-day Saint theology. Indeed, every page and almost every paragraph is filled with things that are directly contrary to truth revealed from heaven through modern-day prophets, seers, and revelators.


6. A note on pronoun usage: Ostler identifies as queer, bisexual, and intersex, but I asked the author about her preferred pronouns and was told that the use of she/her was acceptable.
Red Flags
From the start of the book, an observant reader is likely to see red flags. The purpose of Ostler’s book is to “explor[e] the ways that The Church can adapt to the queerness of our theology” (p. 2). Ostler believes she is “called by the Spirit to … share the queer gospel of Christ through Mormon theology” (p. 4). With this framing, Ostler squarely identifies as a queer evangelist looking to change Church doctrine rather than someone looking to explore Church doctrine as it has been revealed through the course of the Restoration.

Still, Ostler cultivates ambiguity in the book concerning her relationship with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One could finish the entire book unsure as to whether Ostler remains an active member of the Church. A blog post written by Ostler shortly after the publication of Queer Mormon Theology clarifies and reveals her status. She explains that she “could not have written such a faithful, inspiring, and hopeful theology while worshiping in a building that threatened my personhood,” that “leaving the pews was the best thing that ever happened to my testimony,” and that she has “no plans to return to the pews anytime soon.” Ostler renounces any allegiance to what she describes as “flawed institutions, cissexist and heterosexist handbook policies, or discursive theologies predicated on homogenized, white, androcentric, cis-het supremacy.”

In other words, Ostler’s theology is unmoored from any of the foundational pillars and guardrails of orthodoxy that God has given us to ensure that we would not be “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Ephesians 4:14). It is therefore

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9. Ibid.
unsurprising that Ostler’s book can best be summed up as a fine example of the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.

A Distorted Sense of Love

Ostler argues that the foundations of Mormon theology may be identified using five sources: 1) scriptures, 2) tradition (including the teachings of prophets and apostles), 3) reason, 4) experience, and 5) the Holy Spirit (p. 13). A problem, though, is that Ostler greatly diminishes the role and importance of scriptures and tradition. For instance, she dismisses anything that she disagrees with from prophets and apostles by claiming that if a prophet teaches something “that conflicts with the greatest law of love, they are not speaking as a prophet” (p. 107). Reason and the Holy Spirit ultimately play subservient roles as well. Instead, she elevates her feelings and lived experience above everything else.

For Ostler, if something is part of her lived experience it must be affirmed and supported. Ostler briefly recognizes that this reasoning may be flawed by noting that “‘natural’ is not tantamount to ‘moral’” (p. 15). She nevertheless quickly reverts to equating what we experience in this fallen world with what is good and true and eternal.

It is my belief that if you have loved as I have loved, you would see there is no sin in my love. If you shared my gender experience, you would see there is no sin in my gender. If you could experience queerness with us, you would love us the way God loves us. (p. 16)

For Ostler, the ultimate determination of whether a saying or teaching is loving is how it makes the recipient feel. If someone does not “receive … as an expression of love” then our actions “cannot be deemed an act of love — even if love was the intention” (p. 31). Therefore, “if you are ever in doubt about whether or not a request, policy, commandment, talk, or even comment is an act of love, ask the person(s) whom the policy, talk, or comment affects” (p. 31).

Ostler correctly argues that we must do more to love members of the LGBTQ+ communities. However, she repeatedly offers a very simplistic and distorted notion of love. For her, because “God is love, then to the extent we oppress love, we oppress our godly potential” (p. 27). Indeed, according to Ostler “there is no clear distinction between loving God, loving Jesus, loving Christ, and loving your fellow beings” (p. 27). Because “God’s love must be plural” and “God is no respecter of persons,” (p. 28), his love is unconditional and we, too, must “learn to love non-exclusively
and unconditionally” (p. 27). Any “command or request” that conflicts with this unconditional affirmation should be “reworked, reimagined, or discarded” (p. 29). Accordingly, “[h]armful requests, mandates, and policies made under the disguise of love should be resisted through strict obedience to God’s first commandment” to love people unconditionally (p. 30).

This is not consistent with the teachings of our scriptural canon. As King Benjamin explained, “The natural man is an enemy to God” and will remain so unless he “yields to the enticing of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint” (Mosiah 3:19). As Elder D. Todd Christofferson reminds us, the Savior “cannot take any of us into His kingdom just as we are, ‘for no unclean thing can dwell there, or dwell in his presence.’”\textsuperscript{10} Because God and Christ love us, they do not “want to leave [us] ‘just as [we] are.’”\textsuperscript{11} Instead, they call for us to repent and change. This call to change is an act of ultimate divine love even though we may be resentful or not see this necessary correction as loving. As Elder Russell M. Nelson explains, “real love for the sinner may compel courageous confrontation — not acquiescence! Real love does not support self-destructing behavior.”\textsuperscript{12}

**Pantheism/Panentheism vs. Materialism**

Latter-day Saints believe in a Father in Heaven who is material, tangible, and immanent. Joseph Smith emphasized that “[t]he Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also” and dismissed the popular notion that the Father or Son could be said to dwell in our hearts (D&C 130:3, 22). While members of the Godhead are united in purpose, they are distinctly separate beings. As Elder Jeffery R. Holland cogently summed up,

> We believe these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission. We believe Them to be filled with the same godly sense of mercy and love, justice and grace, patience, forgiveness, and redemption. I think it is accurate to say we


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 18.

believe They are one in every significant and eternal aspect imaginable except believing Them to be three persons combined in one substance, a Trinitarian notion never set forth in the scriptures because it is not true.\footnote{\textcite{Holland2007}}

While Ostler refers to God as immanent (p. 22), her description of God’s attributes is actually far closer to a type of pantheism or panentheism\footnote{Pantheism is “a doctrine that equates God with the forces and laws of the universe.” \textcite{MerriamWebsterPantheism}} which equates God with the laws and cosmic forces of the universe. Ostler’s version of deity is “a divine presence among and within us” (p. 22). Moreover, “there is no clear distinction between us and God” because “we are coeternal with God” and “our intelligence is intimately and inextricably bound with God’s intelligence” (p. 22). For Ostler, this means that “we are part of the other, and the other is part of us” (p. 22). Later, she goes even further to describe God as “a community of interconnected, progressing, super-intelligent, free agents” (p. 26).

With this pantheistic/panentheistic backdrop, Ostler distorts the Church’s doctrine that we have Heavenly Parents to argue that there is “no God unless it includes male and female representation” and therefore “God’s materiality and embodiment … is queer encompassing” (p. 24). By collapsing the separateness of God and mankind, Ostler projects our own attributes and traits onto deity. Indeed, Ostler goes so far as to conclude that “there are many more projections of God beyond cisgender, heterosexual assumptions when all gender identities and anatomies are made in the image of God” (p. 24).\footnote{Ostler also asserts that “no matter where a person falls on the gender spectrum, according to the Bible, the image of God is both male and female, not male or female” (p. 57).}

This is a sleight of hand at best and incompatible with revealed truth. Exaltation in Latter-day Saint theology requires complementarity, which is the exact opposite of Ostler’s notion of queerness. As Elder David A. Bednar explained, “For divine purposes, male and female spirits are different, distinctive, and complementary. … The unique combination of spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional capacities of both males and
females were needed to implement the plan of happiness”\textsuperscript{16} This “binary creation is essential to the plan of salvation.”\textsuperscript{17} If males and females must come together for exaltation, then this union is precisely cisgender and heterosexual in nature. As Elder and Sister Renlund expressed, “Male and female spirits were created to complement each other. That is why gender is not fluid in the eternities — because it provides the basis for the ultimate gift Heavenly Father can give, His kind of life.”\textsuperscript{18} For this reason, “throughout eternity, we will not be genderless, as some theologians have suggested.”\textsuperscript{19} It therefore makes no sense to speak of God the Father containing “all gender identities and anatomies” (p. 24).

**Queering the Atonement**

Similarly, Ostler takes true doctrine regarding the atonement and mixes in falsehoods to distort what Christ endured for us. It is true that Christ “suffer[ed] pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind” so that “he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12). This necessarily includes the feelings and temptations experienced by those who identify as LGBTQ+. Ostler takes this a step further, however. Consistent with her pantheistic/panentheistic tendencies, Ostler declares that “a being who has known through personal experience all the world’s suffering, gendered or otherwise, becomes ‘They’” (p. 39). Therefore, Jesus “consciously became both male and female, cisgender and transgender, agender and pangender, black and white, strong and weak, heterosexual and homosexual” (p. 39). She further explains that she is “suggesting Jesus the Christ left Gethsemane queer” and that “the Atonement was a queer experience” (p. 39).

This is a massive logical fallacy. Jesus Christ experienced all of our struggles and pain. But this does not mean he became those things. It would similarly make no sense to call Jesus an alcoholic, a drug addict,  


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 19n7.
or an adulterer even though he likely experienced all of those pains and temptations. Because of his perfect, sinless life and divine nature, Jesus was able to endure and overcome all of these things. As Paul stated in his epistle to the Hebrews, Christ “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland declared, “Jesus held on. He pressed on. The goodness in Him allowed faith to triumph even in a state of complete anguish.” As a result, “Jesus clearly understood what many in our modern culture seem to forget: that there is a crucial difference between the commandment to forgive sin (which He had an infinite capacity to do) and the warning against condoning it (which He never ever did even once).”

The Queer Church

For Ostler every single aspect of Church membership is viewed through the same distorted queer lens. Membership in the “body of Christ” requires us to become “queer in Christ” (p. 44). The sacrament becomes a “promise to take on Jesus’s queer experience in Gethsemane” (p. 44). This means “that we encompass a broad spectrum of genders, orientations, races, abilities, and experiences” and embrace “our collective queerness and peculiarity” (p. 44). Redeeming the dead becomes a call to fully embrace and celebrate individuals in their various proclivities and conditions such as “the trans woman in her fifties when she wears pink ‘Hello Kitty’ rainboots” (p. 48). Indeed, we must “raise them from the dead in all their queer celestial glory” (p. 48).

But this neglects a crucial part of our baptismal and temple covenants. Our covenants include the obligation to serve God and “keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you” (Mosiah 18:10). Membership in the fold of Christ includes obedience to his commandments and abstaining from all manner of sin. It also requires close adherence to the teachings of inspired prophets — even if those prophets tell us things we don’t want to hear or don’t think we need to do. Hence, shortly after baptizing followers in the Waters of Mormon, Alma ordains priests and instructs them to “teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught, and which had been spoken


by the mouth of the holy prophets” (Mosiah 18:19). We do our brothers and sisters no service if we abandon sacred teachings and covenants in an ultimately futile effort to mourn with those who attempt to find happiness in sin. To the contrary, we have a covenantal obligation to offer a voice of warning, because “love demands warning people about what can hurt them.”

Blood Libel

Ostler is open about her disdain for the doctrines of the Church on human sexuality and the family. Indeed, she goes so far as to compare members of the Church to Pontius Pilate who “washed his hands as an innocent queer Jesus was put to death” (p. 40). According to Ostler, faithful members of the Church “have blood on our hands, and we cannot claim our innocence in the narrative when queer people across the globe are dying” (p. 40).

This blood libel is directly contrary to recent data suggesting that LGBTQ adolescents who are members of the Church experience far less suicidality than those who are not members of the Church. And scholars have argued that “talking about suicide in inaccurate or exaggerated ways,” as Ostler does here, “can elevate that risk in vulnerable individuals.”

A Distorted Proclamation

A clear obstacle to Ostler’s vision of establishing a queer theology is The Family: A Proclamation to the World, issued by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1995. When President Hinckley introduced the Family Proclamation, he emphasized that the purpose of


the proclamation was to refute arguments regarding the nature of the family and human sexuality similar to that which Ostler makes:

> With so much of sophistry that is passed off as truth, with so much of deception concerning standards and values, with so much of allurement and enticement to take on the slow stain of the world, we have felt to warn and forewarn. In furtherance of this we of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles now issue a proclamation to the Church and to the world as a declaration and reaffirmation of standards, doctrines, and practices relative to the family which the prophets, seers, and revelators of this church have repeatedly stated throughout its history.\(^{25}\)

How does Ostler reconcile her queer doctrine with the teachings of God’s prophets? Ostler’s take on the Family Proclamation is painful and textually incoherent. Ostler explicitly ignores the “history of its existence” as well as “the intentions of the authors of the document” (p. 52). Instead, she gravitates solely towards language that reads “Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation” (p. 53). She argues that “other circumstances could include a person who is gay” (p. 53) and that “there are many other types of marriages and families which are just as essential to God’s plan, even if they aren’t explicitly stated in the document” (p. 54). Ostler believes that this possibility is left open by the fact that “gay marriage simply isn’t mentioned anywhere in the document” (p. 54).

This argument is deeply flawed on many levels. Most fundamentally, this argument fails on a textual level. “Other circumstances” immediately follows the specific examples of disability and death. This strongly implies that the more generalized language of “other circumstances” is best explained and limited by the preceding specific examples.\(^{26}\) Specifically, these examples suggest an unexpected interruption that comes to an already established marriage. It therefore does not open the door for any and all circumstances one could imagine that fundamentally alter the nature of the relationship.

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Furthermore, this language must be colored by the repeated proclamations that marriage “between a man and a woman is ordained of God” and “essential to His eternal plan.” The proclamation is explicit that “the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife.” Even the “other circumstances” language is found specifically in the context of a discussion of the roles of fathers and mothers “in marriage.” Reading the “other circumstances” language as creating an exception that swallows the whole thrust of the document is deeply problematic and textually illogical.

This reading is even more implausible when you take a step back and consider the “history of its existence” and “the intentions of the authors of the document,” which Ostler admittedly does not do (p. 52). Ostler concedes that she does “not argue that [her] interpretation is what the authors of the document intended” (p. 54). But with a prophetic document — authored and signed by those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators — these types of factors are paramount. After all, the apostle Peter explains that “no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20) When God’s servants speak in unanimity, we should be particularly eager to understand “the intentions of the authors of the document” and the context in which they spoke. Otherwise, we are likely to impose our own biases and desires on the text, as Ostler aptly illustrates.

Looking at the context of the Family Proclamation and the authors’ intentions, it could not be more obvious that it does not support use by Ostler (or others similarly inclined) to adapt it to “other circumstances” by establishing or somehow sanctioning LGBTQ families. In the 15 years leading up to the Family Proclamation, Church leaders spoke out with a single voice against homosexual activity and homosexual marriages in particular. For instance, in 1994, the First Presidency declared “the

27. See e.g., “The Church and the Proposed Equal Rights Amendment: A Moral Issue,” Ensign 10, no. 3 (March 1980), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1980/03/the-church-and-the-proposed-equal-rights-amendment-a-moral-issue. The article warns that the Equal Rights Amendment “would carry with it the risk of extending constitutional protection to immoral same-sex — lesbian and homosexual — marriages” and result in “an increase in the practice of homosexual and lesbian activities, and other concepts which could alter the natural, God-given relationship of men and women.” Elder Boyd K. Packer stated, “The plan of happiness requires the righteous union of male and female, man and woman, husband and wife. … Neither alone nor with other men could Adam progress. Nor could Eve with another woman. It was so then. It is so today.” (Elder Boyd K.
principles of the gospel and the sacred responsibilities given us require that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints oppose any efforts to give legal authorization to marriages between persons of the same gender.”

It is inconceivable that they would have written into the Family Proclamation an exception that would allow gay marriage when they had just “encourage[d] members to appeal to legislators, judges, and other government officials to preserve the purposes and sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, and to reject all efforts to give legal authorization or other official approval or support to marriages between persons of the same gender.”

Ostler’s reading is simply a non-starter on many levels.

Ostler’s arguments regarding gender are even less convincing. The Family Proclamation declares that gender is “an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” This language is quite difficult to get around.

Ostler advances the popular argument that transgender individuals may have eternal genders that do not align with their bodies. This argument runs contrary to President Oaks’s explanation, which has been codified in the most recent Handbook of Instructions, that gender means “biological sex at birth.” It is nevertheless true that “some people


29. Ibid.


31. “General Conference Leadership Meetings Begin,” https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/october-2019-general-conference-first-presidency-leadership-session?cid=HP_NWSRM_10_2_19. As one of the three members of the Quorum of the Twelve who sat on the original drafting committee for the Family Proclamation along with Elders Faust and Nelson, Oaks’s interpretation should be given added interpretive weight. Trevor Holyoak,
experience feelings of incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity” and “the Church does not take a position on the causes of people identifying themselves as transgender.”

Some of this incongruence may theoretically come as a result of living in a fallen world beset by genetic mutations. If so, then this rare condition may be an unusual exception that proves the rule that gender is an immortal characteristic.

Ostler is not content with this argument because she claims that “it does not address the needs of gender-variant and gender-fluid folks” (p. 55). Accordingly, she advances the head-scratching argument that “having an eternal gender does not mean an unchanged or static gender” and that “gender-variant, non-binary, and fluid gender identities are just as legitimate as fixed gender experiences” (p. 56).

But this cannot be squared with the Family Proclamation’s declaration that gender is an “essential characteristic” that gives an individual his “premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” If something repeatedly changes and remains fluid, then it is emphatically not “essential” and part of an “eternal identity.”

Ostler also argues that since Heavenly Father and Mother are united as one, they can best be described as “intersex” or non-binary (p. 57). Indeed, one “cannot become God without embracing God’s diverse morphology, including transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, intersex, gender variant, and especially gender-fluid folks like myself” (p. 58). Therefore, in Ostler’s view, it would be cruel to “limit a person to a particular gender expression when a person may prefer a fluid expression of their gender(s)” (p. 58). Ostler even goes so far as to analogize her own surgery for gender dysphoria to being “transfigured and crowned with glory” (p. 61). I have already responded to similar arguments above,


33. Greg Smith thoroughly discusses how Church leaders in the early twentieth century addressed the question of whether our spirits had a sex in the premortal existence, and all embraced the doctrine that “sex is an eternal principle” that has always existed either as part of our unformed intelligence or at the moment of spiritual creation. (Smith, “Feet of Clay,” 159.)
but it is worth briefly reiterating that Ostler’s argument falls apart if our Heavenly Parents remain separate and distinct beings. This argument also once again fallaciously equates what is natural or feels good with what is ordained of God and inspired by the Spirit.

Confusing the Purpose of Sex

One of Ostler’s last chapters deals with sexuality and creation. So much of this chapter depends on the distortions and errors that Ostler made in earlier chapters. For instance, a question such as “why shouldn’t a woman who was assigned male aspire to motherhood if she decides it is her noblest work?” is not coherent unless one has fully embraced Ostler’s theories and explanations of doctrine (p. 65–66).

The gist of Ostler’s argument in this chapter is that since adaptive technologies now allow for children to be born in a variety of circumstances, there is no reason to assume that the union between man and woman offers any unique procreative value. For Ostler, “transgender folks have shown us that homosexual reproduction is already possible” (p. 67). Furthermore, the viability of adoption shows that “queer families created through adoption are just as godly as families created through biology” (p. 68).

In her effort to show that sex between man and a woman is not necessary, Ostler takes the stories of Adam and Eve and the birth of Jesus and turns them into stories of “queer creation” even going so far as to suggest that Adam may have been a trans man and Eve a trans woman (p. 69).

But none of these examples involve two men or two women independently creating the spirit or the body of another human being without the involvement of the other sex. As renowned Catholic scholars Robert P. George, Sherif Girgis, and Ryan T. Anderson argue,

Marriage is a comprehensive union of two sexually complementary persons who seal (consummate or complete) their relationship by the generative act — by the kind of activity that is by its nature fulfilled by the conception of a child. So marriage itself is oriented to and fulfilled by the bearing, rearing, and education of children. The procreative-type act distinctively seals or completes a procreative-type union.”34

Moreover, the union between man and woman is divinely ordained as set out in the Family Proclamation and the scriptures. When employed between man and woman, “sexual relations are ‘one of the ultimate expressions of our divine nature.’”\(^ {35}\) This union “is not only a symbolic union between a husband and a wife — the very uniting of their souls — but it is also symbolic of a shared relationship between them and their Father in Heaven.”\(^ {36}\) It is “intended to mean the complete merger of a man and a woman — their hearts, hopes, lives, love, family, future, everything” and is “a union of such completeness that we use the word *seal* to convey its eternal promise.”\(^ {37}\) Whether two people of the same sex can use science to have a biological child, there is no reason to believe that the “blessings of eternal increase can be made available to all people if we so choose to embrace a theology” such as the one that Ostler fashions (p. 76). As prophets have made abundantly clear, the blessings of eternal increase are accessible only through the covenantal union of man and woman. Any other type of intimacy, even though it may have some good or positive attributes, does not serve the same purpose and is therefore not ordained as part of God’s plan.

It is similarly true that there are many good and virtuous families led by members of the LGBTQ+ communities and that these families can successfully raise children. But this does not change Church teachings that “a home with a loving and loyal husband and wife is the supreme setting in which children can be reared in love and righteousness and in which the spiritual and physical needs of children can be met.”\(^ {38}\) Nor does it show that these relationships have the same eternal potential. It is true that we do not have all the answers about what exaltation and eternal life will look like. But there is no indication in the scriptures or prophetic teachings that the doctrine that “neither is the woman without the man, nor the man without the woman” (1 Corinthians 11:11) is up for negotiation.

**Queer Polygamy**

Ostler’s final chapter envisions a celestial form of polygamy where “members are given the liberty to engage in plural sealings” with


\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Bednar, “Marriage is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” 84.
partners of their choosing (p. 78). Indeed, Ostler goes so far as to condemn those who advocate for the complete removal and disavowal of polygamy as “simply replacing one oppressive mandate with another” (p. 79). Her model of “Queer Polygamy ... encompasses the spirit of polygamy without mandating any specific marital relations” (p. 81) by allowing for “a potentially infinite number of marital, sexual, romantic, non-romantic, and celestial relationships” (p. 82). For Ostler, this is “the fulfillment of the all-inclusive breadth that Latter-day Saint theology has to offer” (p. 82) and includes the bonds between sisters, friends, and ward members.

Ostler once again mixes truth and falsehood in a way that might be deceptively persuasive. It is true that the Gospel values a wide variety of relationships, including familial and friendly bonds. Indeed, the same sociality that we experience here will exist in heaven (D&C 130:2), and we may sometimes shortchange the importance of these other relationships by focusing on marriage and the family. Nevertheless, there remains something unique about the intimate bond between husband and wife that cannot be replicated in other relationships. Ostler distorts God’s plan by attempting to treat all these different bonds as interchangeable.

As President Dallin H. Oaks teaches, there is much that we do not know “about conditions in the spirit world” and in fact we know “not as much as we often think.” It is therefore especially important that we stick closely to the divine truths that have been revealed, including “the family proclamation, signed by all 15 prophets, seers, and revelators.” Ostler’s speculative vision of eternal polygamy goes far afield from what has been revealed regarding the eternal nature of the bond between a man and a woman.

**Conclusion**

I fear that some people will be seduced by the smooth and popular theology of Ostler’s book and will be moved away from the foundation of orthodoxy as expressed by prophets, seers, and revelators through inspired documents, including the standard works, the Living Christ, the Family Proclamation, and the Restoration Proclamation. Wittingly unmoored from these foundational pillars, Ostler walks “after the image of [her] own god whose image is in the likeliness of the world” (D&C 1:16). Unfortunately, the God she urges readers to follow in her

40. Ibid., 28.
proposed theology is not the loving Heavenly Father manifest in latter-day revelations but is instead a pantheistic/panentheistic “idol … which shall fall” (D&C 1:16).

I have no doubt that *Queer Mormon Theology* will, unfortunately, lead some people away from Christ’s church. The false doctrines contained therein may be pleasing by the world’s standard of sexual morality, but they lead to spiritual death and damnation rather than eternal life and exaltation.

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